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“Je ne suis pas de la famille”: Queerness as Exception in Gide’s *L’immoraliste* and Genet’s *Journal du Voleur*

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In a 1991 interview with François Ewald, Derrida speaks of a book “appris [...] par cœur,” Gide’s *Les Nourritures Terrestres*: “j’ai toujours dû traduire le ‘je haïssais les foyers, les familles, tout lieu où l’homme pense trouver un repos’ en un simple ‘je ne suis pas de la famille’” (3). “Je ne suis pas de la famille”: A queer thing to say. And here, I employ “queer” in its emptiest sense, as openly as possible considering its unknown etymology. As the O.E.D. has it, “queer” is a word “of doubtful origin.” Throughout this paper, I use the term “queer” in direct reference to homosexuality. This first reference is primarily linked to acts orchestrated by and performed within a certain⁶⁰ desire; as such, it is highly contextual and can only be evoked by the taking place of the space of desire (a space that institutes nothing more than space, desire, but is nonetheless politically charged). The term “queer” will also refer against the institution⁶¹ against origins, and against a certain “familial” recuperation of language. This second reference occurs without referent¹, simply by taking place in the place of definitional crisis, as an exception that does not prove the rule.

“Je ne suis pas de la famille.” If the family is taken precisely as the place of origin (or as the institution that keeps an origin intact) then that which is without certain origin might be regarded as being without family. And if community is considered to be a kind of family – as a “lieu où l’homme pense trouver un repos (Gide)” – then that which is without origin might even be viewed as being without community. In many of its articulations, the term “queer” borders a vast political significance, both implicitly and explicitly. Its family might generally be read as a community with particular political goals, and there are a variety of practices (reading practices, political practice etc.) that have been taken up precisely in the name of a “queer” family or community. However valid and useful these

practices may be, a certain space should be allowed for the “doubtful origin” of the term “queer,” for its contextual referencing – its link to a specific act of sexual desire – and for its “reference-less-ness.”⁶² The exception of “queerness” – an exception that does not prove the rule – is maintained only in desire and in the strange space that queerness creates while referring to no-thing (to no stable, mastered, or thematic meaning).

If the claims that I take on here do not prove the rule, even by their exception, then they leave my reader without ground and without community, particularly if one thinks of community as a state in which something common (for example, a definition) is possessed. This groundless-ness is, in fact, necessary, if one is to allow for a certain incoherence and for a political productivity that takes place at a distance from the family and its various institutions. If, as I will put forward below via Leo Bersani’s book *Homos*,⁶³ there is an “anticommunitarian” tendency in homosexuality, then “queerness” can be related to groundless-ness and to a kind of voluntary – even pleasurable – dispossession⁶⁴ (7). My present interest lies in the concept of the “queer” in relation to a linguistic dispossession that can be aligned with Bersani’s critique of solidarity. According to Derrida, it is not possible to possess language: “Parce qu’il n’y a pas de propriété naturelle de la langue, celle-ci ne donne lieu qu’à de la rage appropriatrice, à de la jalousie sans appropriation” (*Monolinguisme de l’autre* 46).

The dispossession that is language promotes groundless-ness, promotes a politics that is “pas de la famille.” The particularity of Bersani’s text – a particularity that relies on and works within *homosexual* desire – serves as the pivot of my paper, around which I turn in the implication that language itself is already “queered” and “of doubtful origin,” a citation without a father (like Genet) and without a mother tongue (like Derrida). Gide *L’immoraliste* and Genet’s *Journal du Voleur* will serve as the stage of my explorations and as a further queering of my considerations. In reading these texts, I will be looking,

primarily, for connections between a disregard for possession – an impropriety – and a disjuncture from the community or family.

“Je ne suis pas de la famille”: a queer thing to say in relation to politics in particular and perhaps a nearly impossible thing to say in relationship to the nation as community, which uses the exception to prove its rule and plays, even in its most liberal manifestations, as if it could recuperate all things. In *Homos*, Bersani presents the reader with an outsider’s politics, or at least with an objection to what might be called the politics of belonging: “[...] the homo-ness that I will be exploring in gay desire is a redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality⁶⁵ itself” (7). Published in 1995, *Homos* executes a critique of the contemporary gay community’s particular movement towards identification. It is simultaneously a critique of queer theory’s own “definitional crisis” (Bersani 2). In reference to the championing of the identifying term “queer,” Bersani writes, “[...] these reformulations should be both welcomed and resisted”: welcomed because they interrogate the ease of “self-identifying moves,” and questioned in turn because a hyper-awareness of ‘de-naturalized construction’ in the gay community is not necessarily a deterrent to normalization and assimilation in general: “having de-gayed themselves, gays melt into the culture they like to think of themselves as undermining” (Bersani 2, 5). Here, the term “queer” is neither valorized nor demonized, but regarded with critical distance, with an awareness that a certain “rage” or dispossession (“la jalousie sans appropriation”) can result from the attempt to recuperate a term.

The line between the “definitional crisis” that Bersani cautions against and the definitional crisis that I advocate is fine, and pleasurable dispossession might be simultaneous with a political dispossession that simply repeats institutionalized deprivations under the guise of a “new name.” As Bersani writes, “Since deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire, it might be more profitable to test the

resistance of the identity from *within* the desire [...] Perhaps inherent in gay desire is a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality" (6-7). Although there is no foolproof means of arresting political deprivations (just as there is no means of "[erasing the habit of desire]"), an emphasis on gay desire might serve as means of revealing certain structures of deprivation, of looking behind the "new name" in order to resist that name's assimilation. This emphasis on homosexual desire is intended as a guard (perhaps dehiscent) against the recuperation of the term "queer" by hetero- and familial institutions. Homosexual desire can then be regarded as genuinely queer, and not simply as an alternative to the institution of heterosexuality that repeats this institution's gestures.

My reading and re-writing of Bersani's critique of a particular use of the term "queer" can be explored and illustrated with a Derridean theory of reading. The definitional crisis that I advocate – against the "definitional crisis" that promotes "de-gaying" – relies precisely on a deconstructionist reading, although this reading must maintain its presence *within* desire. Again, it cannot approach the "queer" from the standpoint of the institution of the family; it cannot bring queerness under the thematic banner of the family or of the defined political community. It must take place as paradox, occurring counter-intuitively, and, in addition to maintaining its presence within homosexual desire, it must remain "queer" in the second sense: as a reference without referent.

Above and throughout this paper, I am mimicking Derrida's essay, "La Double Séance," in order to evoke a reading practice that puts the rule and the theme in question. In "La Double Séance," Derrida resists a particular reading of Mallarmé, one that relies upon 'mastered meaning' or theme, upon constructing a rule that can recuperate and prove itself by all its exceptions. Derrida resists this reading, performing an alternative reading in favor of the "blanc" and the "pli," figures that do not recuperate, cannot be mastered and thus mark "les limites mêmes de la critique thématique" ("La Double Séance"

300-301).⁶⁶ Considering a certain mimesis, a Mallarméan mimesis that he regards as beyond “l’interprétation platonicienne ou métaphysique,” Derrida writes,,

[...] c’est une différence sans référence, ou plutôt *une référence sans référent*, sans unité première ou dernière, fantôme qui n’est le fantôme d’aucune chair, errant, sans passé, sans mort, sans naissance ni présence” (my italics 254).

The second referencing of the term “queer” – a referencing without referent that, importantly, is not in symmetrical opposition to the first reference – is like the ‘blank’ and the ‘fold’ in that it cannot be mastered; it is without birth, without presence and without death. To be without birth and without death (without progeny, if children mark one’s death) is to be without family; to be a reference without referent is to be “queer,” to have no known origin and no institution.

Although the term that I use herein differs from the terms used by Derrida – queer “taking the place” of “blanc” and “pli” – the reading practice is similar in that it seeks to avoid master themes in favor of that which cannot be recuperated⁶⁷¹. The price of this reading is a certain voiding (or emptying, *vider*) of “proper” meaning. Admittedly, a terminological landslide happens, and this landslide may risk the “proper” identity or identification of its subject, the “homosexual.” However and significantly, this risk occurs in favor of a desire that remains at a distance from the master themes, political and otherwise, of “heteroized sociality.” This deconstructive reading does not and cannot, as Bersani notes, erase desire, habitual or otherwise; it encourages the space made by desire rather than filling that space with thematic clarifications. The “anti-communitarian” – that which I am regarding also as non-familial – both finds itself and loses itself in this space, thus promoting a desire that cannot be assimilated or commonly held.

In “Gay Outlaw,” the final chapter of *Homos*, Bersani performs a literary analysis of works by Gide, Proust and Genet in order to persuade his readers of this “anticommunitarian” tendency in homosexuality and to demonstrate this tendency through gay characters removed from contemporary debates on queer political action. He writes,

This difficult project will be ventured in chapter 4 [...] not as a more or less enjoyable addendum of literary criticism to the arguments made in the rest of the book, but, instead, as absolutely crucial to the persuasiveness of those arguments. The writers that I discuss are – in sharp contrast to contemporary gay and lesbian theorists – drawn to the *anticommunitarian* impulses they discover in homosexual desire. (Bersani 7)

Gide’s *L’immoraliste* and Genet’s *Journal du Voleur* approach a certain notion of “queerness” as exception. My reading of these works serves as an articulation, extension and complication of Bersani’s propositions. Again, I will be looking for connections between a disregard for possession, or impropriety, and a disjuncture from the community or family. According to Bersani, Gide’s Michel and Genet can be seen as “[blocking] the cultural discipline of identification” (Bersani 124-125). I am translating this “blocking” into an obscuring or decentering of the line between *French* and *foreigner*, and into a dispossession of the rule of locatable identity (Bersani 124-125). At odds with the state, constantly crossing borders and undermining or ignoring systems of “propriété,” Genet and Michel find something of the outside on the inside, an exception to exception that does not prove the rule.

This endeavor hosts two simultaneous logics: In resistance to erasure or “de-gaying,” I accept Bersani’s definition of the male homosexual as one for whom “the penis [is] a conscious source of erotic stimulation” (Bersani 9). Simultaneously, I proceed with a second illustration of the term

“queer” – including the non-definitional reference without referent – welcoming this stumbling block to identification and thereby remaining in the precarious place of definitional crisis. Like the two logics addressed by Derrida in *Monolinguisme de l’autre* – logics that I will address in my conclusion: “celle de l’exemplarité et celle de l’hôte comme otage” – these logics of queerness do not oppose nor perfectly promote one another; rather, they entangle and intersect, simultaneously propping up, producing, rerouting and even impeding one another (41).

L’immoraliste opens onto its conclusion with a letter from Michel’s friend and chronicler, who has come to Algeria with the aim of recovering him from his dispossession. He asks, “En quoi Michel peut-il servir l’État? J’avoue que je l’ignore ... Il lui faut une occupation. La haute position que t’ont value tes grands mérites, le pouvoir que tu tiens, permettront-ils de la trouver? Hâte-toi. Michel est dévoué : il l’est encore : il ne le sera bientôt plus qu’à lui-même” (Gide 12). Bersani opens his discussion of Gide in “Gay Outlaw” with a similar question: “How can a man like Michel serve the state?” (114). For Bersani, this question can be aligned with another, more contemporary and distinctly defiant question: “Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” (113). He writes, “It would be difficult to imagine a less gay-affirmative question at a time when gay men and lesbians have been strenuously trying to persuade society that they can be good parents, good soldiers, good priests” (113). This is the significance of Michel’s character for Bersani’s argument: his particular sexuality, perhaps a homosexuality, perhaps pederasty, is definitely queer. Michel keeps a distance from the assimilating, hetero-promoting machinery of the state. What is it, specifically, that is swiftly placing Michel beyond the reach of the state? In *L’immoraliste*, the connection between disregard for possession and disjuncture from the community is rather explicit. It is not clear (either to the reader or to Michel himself) how one would define a “man like Michel” (114). In other words, it is a general impropriety,

including a lack of self-possession, which places Michel at a remove from the reach of the state.

Curiously, Michel's crucial diagnosis comes some time after his recovery from tuberculosis. Upon returning to Paris, an acquaintance shows up to his first lecture, informing him of his missing *sens*: le sens "de la propriété" (Gide 111). Michel participates in activities that undermine his ability to retain and adequately care for his property. He consorts with and funds the poachers on his farm and seeks the company of criminals and beggars: "Je m'attachais aux plus frustes natures, comme si, de leur obscurité, j'attendais, pour m'éclairer, quelque lumière" (Gide 134). He spends money without bounds, and, finally, he neglects the possession that he has in his wife. After Marceline falls ill, Michel drags her back to Algeria, but there is no cure there for Marceline. In Algeria, there is only a return to those who gave Michel the will to live: the 'golden' boys who presented him with the picture of health, with the desire to be beautiful and to expose himself to the sun.

Significantly, Michel is driven to be near and to share space with a certain figure of desire, but he does not make this figure his object; that is, Michel makes no attempt to possess the boys that he admires. In his admiration, Michel appears to confuse having with being, making no explicit demands on the bodies of these boys other than through an endeavor to resemble them. Bersani calls this "a sexual preference without sex," and it is precisely this configuration that evades the hetero system, a system that depends upon possession, upon propriety (118). In practicing a "sexual preference without sex," Michel's serviceability remains in question, since one must possess and be possessed in order to serve the state.

Unlike the 'golden' boys of Algeria, a wife has the definite status of a possession, but like the rest of Michel's property, Marceline is neglected and eventually dispossessed. Michel moves through Marceline on the way to his own dispossession, which is just coming into full bloom as the book begins and as his friend and chronicler is writing for help. Perceptive and

conscious of Michel’s desires, Marceline remarks, “Je vois bien [...] je vois bien votre ... doctrine – car c’est une doctrine à présent. Elle est belle, peut-être [...] mais elle supprime les faibles” (Gide 162). As Marceline knows, Michel’s pursuit of a certain aesthetic pleasure, his *belle doctrine*, will fail to preserve the institution of the family. It will fail to keep a certain system intact and losses will be suffered in the dissolution of this system. In response to Marceline’s critique of Michel’s “doctrine,” Bersani writes, “But the way we live already eliminates the weak, and the familiar piety she expresses serves to perpetuate their oppression. Nothing could be more different from the strength of Michel’s self-divestiture, from the risks he takes in loving the other as same, in homo-ness [...] If Michel’s immoralism defies disciplinary intentions, it also gives up that protection. And this should help us to see what is at stake in Michel’s timid sexuality” (129). For some readers, Bersani’s critique of Marceline’s propriety – his valorization of Michel’s impropriety – might be cold comfort. In her book, *André Gide and the Codes of Homotextuality*, Emily Apter offers a feminist reading of Marceline’s character. She writes,

The transfixed expression of Marceline’s cavernous eyes is harrowingly transcribed [...] a moment before her death (“mais ses yeux restent grands ouverts”) as if to punctuate the end-point in the abyssal chain stretching from the dark patches of discoloration on her body, to the blank space in dialogue, to the black orifices of her nose and eyes. Without imputing a vulgar misogyny to Michel, or for that matter to Gide, we arenonetheless left with the dilemma of how to interpret this censorship of the feminine – of the woman’s body and the woman’s “parole.” Has Marceline simply been sublated, interred and inscribed in the homotextual “inquiétude” that reverberates in each of the *récit*’s elisions? Or can her negation, her disappearance into the “abîme” be read as a protofeminist fable in which

masculine and feminine “jouissance” are presented as mutually exclusive? (124)

Apter’s mention of a “protofeminist fable in which masculine and feminine “jouissance” are presented as mutually exclusive” introduces an intriguing model for an analysis of Marceline’s character. However, in the context of this paper, it would be difficult to employ this model without “imputing” just such a “vulgar misogyny” to Bersani. Although there is a gap in Bersani’s text, which might call for a feminist reading, the ‘mutual exclusivity’ of such a reading depends heavily on the structures of the hetero. Marceline’s need for care and protection – her dependence on her husband – is the flipside of the coin of “disciplinary intentions,” and, as such, makes her unintentionally and perhaps unavoidable complicit with another kind of system: a system that plays at difference under the “new name” of “queer” in order to promote itself as whole.

Instead, Michel’s sexual preference resists the family and its obligations with purposeful neglect. His sexual preference is rapidly turning him in on himself, placing him, as the book is closing, beyond the grasp of the state. As a literal reminder of Michel’s nude sunbathing – a scene that Bersani calls “the high point in the process of [Michel’s] recovery” – and in reference to the way in which the narrative strips the character bare, Bersani writes: “The only *demuded* figure in [*L’immoraliste*] is Michel, and if homosexuality is in some way linked to that denudation, to his longing for “the delectable company” of “the dregs of society” and his anxious need to get rid of his fortune, then we must look closely at this curious sexual preference, which seems to require the repudiation of property and the renunciation of society” (Bersani 118). Bersani’s emphasis on erotics, his insistence on the radical political potential of homosexual desire, is precisely the point at which Paul de Man questions Gide’s political value. In his essay, “Whatever happened to André Gide?”, de Man describes Gide as “socially irresponsible,” with “[highly inconsistent

political attitudes],” never “justified objectively” (de Man 130). Although he reads Gide as a writer genuinely concerned with the social, for de Man, Gide’s fixation on Eros is, in the end, “a radical rejection of others” (130). This rejection, which can be read as a movement away from the institution of “relationality,” is a dispossession – an impropriety, if my reader will (Bersani 7). It is produced by a certain desire, and it produces, in its turn, a non-serviceable and wayward self.

Michel is at odds with the state and the community because he is at odds with the system of propriety that supports these constructions. Jean Genet, whose sexuality would be difficult to describe as “timid,” is at odds with no system, since he himself composes and decomposes systems at will, a kind of god without a father. Neither French nor foreigner, Genet sets himself up as both exception and rule, at a distance from the family and the state. Genet’s voluntary and pleasurable dispossession takes place in a non-place, since he is, in effect, an outlaw who writes the law. Like the term “queer” (and like language as such), Genet’s recuperation is always incomplete; he suspends categories and doubles logic. Bersani describes Genet’s “fundamental project” as a “*declining to participate in any sociality at all*” and calls him “the least ‘gay-affirmative’ writer [he knows]” (160-161, 168). In Genet, the reader truly encounters a figure at odds with the notion of a “queer” family in the contemporary political sense. He is radically “unethical” because ethics tend to revolve around the preservation of heterosexual institutions such as the family, army and church (“gay men and lesbians have been strenuously trying to persuade society that they can be good parents, good soldiers, good priests” (Bersani 113)). He does not demand the right to assimilate.

In *Pompes Funebres*, the novel that Bersani is reading in “Gay Outlaw,” Genet writes:

J’ai suivi le discours de curé– et ...ce sacrifice
n’est pas perdu. Le petit Jean est mort pour la France

...Si l'on me disait que je risque la mort en refusant de crier «Vive la France», je le crierais pour sauver ma peau, mais je le crierais doucement. S'il le fallait crier très fort, je le ferais, mais en riant, sans y croire. Et s'il fallait que j'y croie, j'y croirais, puis aussitôt je mourrais de honte. *Il est sans importance de savoir si elle est due au fait que je suis un enfant abandonné qui ne sait rien de sa famille ni de son pays, une telle attitude existe, intransigeante [...]* (my italics, *Pompes Funebres* 25).

Genet's patriotism goes only as far as is necessary to save his own skin. And he will save his own skin even if it leads, paradoxically, to death by shame. Bersani's reading of *Pompes Funebres* glorifies the "anti-monumental, anti-redemptive aesthetic at odds with [Genet's] apparent pursuit of gestural beauty" (162). What I would be tempted to call the "queer" (as in strange or dubious) ethics of mourning that Genet sets up in *Pompes Funebres* – the beautiful and dramatic stand that he takes in order to resist stereotypical codes of mourning – is of less interest to Bersani than the particular relation that this betrayal has to homosexuality (157). Bersani regards Genet's movement through betrayal and evil as a movement away from "relationality" (or solidarity, union) and towards "solitude" (163). If, for example, Judith Butler suggests hetero-normative practices can be critiqued through citation in order to re-write such institutions as the family, then "Genet can perhaps contribute to the critical rigor of this project [the "queer project"] by providing a perversely alien perspective. He is basically uninterested in any redeployment or resignification of dominant terms that would address the dominant culture" (Bersani 152). The skin that Genet would be willing to save is a skin without certain origin, and it is due to this very fact that it is the only skin truly worth saving. In Genet's vast and highly homoerotic solitude, he is kept company by a certain expansion of a certain self, by an intransigent attitude whose source is insignificant

(perhaps because the source of this attitude, like the source of the term “queer,” is “doubtful”).

Journal du Voleur is Genet’s account of his early travels through Europe: “Presque toujours seul, mais aidé d’un idéal compagnon, je traversai d’autres frontières” (126). In the following passage, he introduces his own “doubtful origins”:

Je suis né à Paris le 19 décembre 1910. Pupille de l’Assistance Publique, il me fut impossible de connaître autre chose de mon état civil. Quand j’eus vingt et un, j’obtins un acte de naissance. Ma mère s’appelait Gabrielle Genet. Mon père reste inconnu [...]

Je fus élevé dans le Morvan par des paysans. Quand je rencontre dans la lande [...] des fleurs de genêt, j’éprouve à leur égard une sympathie profonde. Je les considère gravement, avec tendresse. Mon trouble semble commandé par toute la nature. Je suis seul au monde, et je ne suis pas sûr de n’être pas le roi – peut-être la fée de ces fleurs [...] Elles sont mon emblème naturel, mais j’ai des racines, par elles, dans ce sol de France nourri des os en poudre des enfants, des adolescents enfilés, massacrés par Gilles de Rais (49).

Genet’s distaste for “vive la France” is nuanced here. He has roots in the French soil (nourished by violence and betrayal), but he has little relation to the state as a citizen. There is pleasure in this particular dispossession from citizenship, since it allows him to play quite possibly every role through the double negative: ‘I am not sure that I am not . . .’. This particular phrasing entangles the speaker (and the reader) in a kind of excess that bonds Genet to flowers, marking him as king, “seul au monde.” Explicitly “pas de la famille,” Genet has a mother in the form of a proper name and no known father, but his outlaw status goes beyond these origins: “Il est sans importance de savoir si elle est due au fait que je suis un enfant abandonné qui ne sait rien de sa famille

ni de son pays, une telle attitude existe, intransigeante [...]” (*Pompes Funebres* 25).

Eventually, Genet intensifies the darkness of his treachery by crossing the border back into France: “Voleur dans mon pays, pour le devenir et me justifier de l’être utilisant la langues des volés – qui sont moi-même à cause de l’importance du langage – c’était à cette qualité de voleur donner la chance d’être unique. Je devenais étranger” (Genet 128). Genet unravels his French identity, becoming more foreign at home than in Spain precisely through what is supposed to be familiar: the mother-tongue. In robbing those that speak his language, he robs himself, not extracting his exception to the nation but finding the outside in. Genet takes from others and Michel gives everything away, but both figures find themselves dispossessed, made foreign. Genet and Michel articulate a disregard for possessions that is, simultaneously, a disregard for the family and the institution.

The resisting and welcoming that Bersani advocates, a resisting and welcoming that I court via the term “queer,” finally leads to the very dispossession that is language. The two logics hosted in this paper – the logic of the queer in reference to homosexual desire and the logic of the queer as reference without referent – must be allowed their own dispossession; they must be allowed to entangle and intersect, all at once sustaining and voiding (or emptying) each other. Coincidentally, both Genet and Gide employ “je” (in this case, an “improper” pronoun) in their novels, offering to their readers yet another kind of linguistic denudation. This pronoun is the uncanny subject of Derrida’s short text, *Monolinguisme de l’autre ou la prothèse d’origine*, in which he speaks of a “trouble de l’identité”: “Il se serait alors *formé*, ce *je*, dans le site d’une *situation* introuvable, renvoyant toujours ailleurs, à autre chose, à une autre langue, à l’autre en général. Il se serait *situé* dans une expérience insituable de la *langue*, de la langue au sens large, donc, de ce mot” (55).

Michael Lucey, in *Gide's Bent*, tells of Wilde and Proust's response (as remembered by Gide in his journals) to Gide's use of "I" in *Les Nourritures Terrestres*. Wilde says to Gide, "Listen, dear, now you must make me a promise. Your *Nourritures Terrestres* is fine ... very fine even ... But dear, from now on never again write 'I'" (Lucey 9). Proust, responding in a similar vein, says "You can relate anything [...] but on condition that you never say: I" (Lucey 9). This dangerous "I" that both Wilde and Proust warn against is the "I" of outing; it is an "I" that appears to mark out and identify the "queer." This is the "I" of homosexual desire, and it wields a certain power of revelation, a certain subversive potential (but is frequently mistaken for a stable reference). What other danger (or promise) lies in the "I," in addition to this risk of denudation or outing? The "I" or *je* that Derrida refers to in *Monolinguisme de l'autre* "troubles" the process of identification, leading always to a crisis of definition. This unlocatable (*insituable*) "I" takes place, or references, without referent. In allusion to the testifier who is "at once" singular and exemplary (that is, in allusion to the "I" that will fail to refer to its referent), Derrida writes: "Seuls dans un genre qui, ce qui ajoute encore à l'incroyable, devient à son tour exemple universel, croissant et accumulant ainsi les deux logiques, celle de l'exemplarité et celle de l'hôte comme otage" (41). The first logic of exemplarity and universality might uphold the rule by its exception (even in its subversion), but simultaneity – the logic of "at once," the logic of host *and* hostage – dis-possesses even the certain individual "alone in his genre" (Derrida 20). The two logics of queerness and the two "I"'s considered herein are not equal opposites. The "I" or "je" that cannot be situated *is* situated in a situation that cannot be found. And a place that cannot be found is a queer place; it is "of doubtful origin," "situé" mais "insituable" (Derrida 29).

Although he is suspicious of the term "queer," Leo Bersani sees a potential in homosexuality for practices that the family and the state cannot recuperate, just as they cannot fully recuperate language. In a certain sense then, he sees a potential

extension of doubled logic (a “queer” logic after all) in homosexuality and reads the works of Gide and Genet as approaching and performing this potential. Can the elsewhere of the “I” and the deconstruction of identity remain within the radical potential of homosexual desire, or will the definitional crisis always undermine the homo in favor of the hetero? Ultimately, distance from the institution is sustained only in the deconstructive and queer space of “à la fois” (“La Double Séance” 294). This is why Bersani must advocate *both* resistance and welcoming: homosexual desire and “queerness” must entangle and intersect continually so that homosexual desire is not erased by an institutionalized and recuperated “queerness.” In this way, the example will take place, but will prove no rule, since it will take place in the place of its own dispossession. In their novels, Gide and Genet – having nothing in common with what they nonetheless exemplify – articulate their exception queerly and in the first person: “en un simple, ‘je ne suis pas de la famille.’”

Notes

⁶⁰ The word “certain” is used throughout in a doubled sense (matching the doubled logic which will be addressed presently). It indicates the concrete, sure and assured – for example, the very real occurrence of gay acts of desire – as well the *marked but unspecified*, that which is set apart yet remains unidentified

⁶¹ Because the second referencing occurs without referent, the normal grammatical structure of ‘referring to’ has been altered. In this instance, there is no stable object or being (no instituted thing) for the term “queer” to refer “to.” Thus, the term queer refers “against” the institution.

⁶² As will be further discussed below (on pages 4 and 5), the notion of a reference without referent is borrowed from Derrida’s “La Double Séance.” In his reading of Mallarmé,

Derrida theorizes a mimesis beyond “l’interprétation platonicienne ou métaphysique” (254). Derrida writes, “[...] c’est une différence sans référence, ou plutôt *une référence sans référent*, sans unité première ou dernière, fantôme qui n’est le fantôme d’aucune chair, errant, sans passé, sans mort, sans naissance ni présence” (my italics 254). In Derrida’s reading, the “référence sans référent” is dependent on the specificity of Mallarmé’s syntax, not because this syntax is specifically “meaningful,” but because it takes up space without producing meaning “proper.” In other words, its production of meaning is equally its “voiding” (or emptying; in the French the verb is *vider*) because it cannot be thematically mastered in any unity or in any referent; its meaning is not multiplied in such a way that it results in a “proving of the rule.” A similar conceptualization can be addressed to the term “queer” because, under this interpretation, queer acts of desire “take place” without being recuperated into heteroized and meaningful standards of “relationality” (Bersani’s term, see footnote *vi*). In this endeavor, I am describing this non-recuperation as the “place of definitional crisis.”

⁶³ Leo Bersani’s work focuses on nineteenth and twentieth century French literature, psychoanalysis and anti-redemptive aesthetics. In *Homos*, he takes a critical stance with regard to gay politics in America. Although he is cautious of gay, group identification, he is equally cautious of the desire to assimilate to “ethical” (generally heterosexual) institutions. *Homos* is both a polemical work and a subtle reading/critique of contemporary politics via literature; against the call – frequent in queer studies – to dissolve identification in a complex awareness of the constructed-ness of selfhood, *Homos* advocates a stronger identification for gays, based precisely on sexual preference. The term “queer” can be associated with an institutionalization of homosexuality that actually results in the dissolution of homosexuality’s specificity – a sexuality in which “the penis [is] a conscious source of erotic stimulation” (Bersani 9) – and of the

identification dependent on that specificity. My use of the term might be viewed as politically problematic with regard to Bersani's project. I stretch the referencing of "queer" away from sexuality "proper" and towards the ((hetero)sexualized) category of language, and this "stretching" results in an emptying out of the term's specific "meaningful-ness" (again, I am referencing Derrida's "La Double Séance"). However, an attempt is being made to maintain the specificity of desire precisely through the loss of a certain kind of meaning, because this "certain" meaning will always be "brought back" to the institution and to standardized, mastered themes of relationality (intelligible, imaginable relationships). Although the projects differ, I think that my position is ultimately similar to Bersani's; the stance that I take maintains a space "in between" identification and loss by focusing on that which, according to Derrida, resists appropriation: language, and, in particular, the "queer" (or perhaps gay) language of Gide and Genet..

⁶⁴ Although the adjective "dispossessed" can be used to indicate a kind of powerlessness (a deprivation of that which grants subjecthood and enables the use of power), in this instance the term is used to indicate a movement: a dislodging or expelling from the stable and definite and a promotion of groundlessness. Definitional crisis takes the form or follows the structure of this movement, dislodging the subject "proper" and offering a "perverse" pleasure of excess (because the 'improper' subject exceeds the definition and the name). Because, as Derrida writes, there is no "propriété naturelle de la langue," language gives way to dispossession; rage and jealousy seek a recuperation of terms. Against this attempt at recuperation (which can only produce more jealousy and rage), I advocate a continual dis-lodging in relation to desire (a space in which crisis gives way to crisis, rather than a management (recuperation) of terms that would simply amount to (hypocritical) stasis and assimilation. Exile could serve as an interesting and useful "synonym" for "dispossessed" here, because the nation state of

France is itself dispossessed (dislodged from its seat at the heart of the citizen) in Gide and Genet; dispossession as exorcism (as a freeing from demons) could serve as an excellent non sequitur and free-associative “synonym,” and as a dispossession or invalidation of my own term. (See footnote 8 for further discussion of terminology and dispossession.)

⁶⁵ In *Homos* “relationality” (the very “it-ness” of relations) is currently built upon notions of difference that give way to antagonism, such as that between the “sexes.” Bersani writes, “New reflection on homo-ness could lead us to a salutary devalorizing of difference – or, more exactly, to a notion of difference not as a trauma to be overcome [. . .] but rather as a non-threatening supplement to sameness” (7). The presence of the term “provisional” is significant, especially since Bersani’s text does, in fact, advocate a kind of community – a “we” “whose membership is always shifting” (9). But this anti-assimilative community, which will “bring out “the homo” in all of us,” is highly paradoxical, going against the grain of normative standards of relationships and political groupings (Bersani 10).

⁶⁶ Derrida’s consideration of Mallarméan critics has something in common with Bersani’s consideration of the same subject in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*. In his introduction, Bersani writes about the massive body of Mallarméan criticism, citing, I think, the type of critique that Derrida is *not* doing: “For several decades, a group of unreproachably intelligent and resourceful readers from several countries performed an annihilating *elucidation* of Mallarmé’s writing. Specifically, this has meant that the critic of Mallarmé generally substitutes syntactic and narrative coherence for the syntactic and narrative ‘puzzles’ of a poem or essay by Mallarmé. The Mallarméan text is treated as if it were sick, as if it were *deficient in narrativity*” (vii). Derrida’s reading in “La Double Séance” takes place *not as, but at* the limits of thematic critique. Although themes are certainly

present in this reading of Gide and Genet, an emptying of terms is sought, rather than a thematic solidification.

⁶⁷ The notion of the non-recuperable is highly significant for this project, and a multitude of references and connotations are welcome: irreparable, incurable, impossible, inoperable, lost, wayward, dis-oriented, dispossessed, futile, useless, forfeit, hard-up, (ironically, but fittingly) unwelcome . . . The meaninglessness of the term is also welcome, because the connotations given above do not "add up" to the non-recuperable, but rather "empty it out," setting it up as a kind of space-holder (or wild card), at a distance from the strictly intelligible. That is, these "synonyms" (if that is, indeed what they are) do not offer a depth or thickness to the term; they function, rather, as the term's dispossession.

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L'exception française
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French National Imagery

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	
L'Exception française: Exploring the notion of Nation Elizabeth Vitanza and Bob Hudson, Editors	3
Selected Presentations	
Le nationalisme de Barrès : Moi, la terre et les morts Maud Hilaire Schenker	5
Contested Nationalism: Naturalism & Agrarian Tropes in French Films of the Occupation Nicole Casi	27
In Defense of <i>Civilisation</i> : Modernism, Anti-Americanism and the Struggle for Cultural Identity in French Art (1953-1968) Rhiannon Vogl	51
Je ne suis pas de la famille": Queerness as Exception in Gide's <i>L'immoraliste</i> and Genet's <i>Journal du Voleur</i> Olivia Gunn	71
Laïcité in the French public school system: an <i>exception française</i> ? Mireille le Breton	93
L'Antiaméricanisme intellectuel français : l'exception culturelle par excellence? (Revisited) Maria Manuella Coelho Glaziou Tavares	113
