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Resonances and Disjunctions: Matrixial Subjectivity and Queer theory

Sudeep Dasgupta

In this brief essay I place Bracha Ettinger's development of matrixial subjectivity and certain arguments in queer theory around the rectum alongside each other to explore their resonances, particularly around the theme of relationality. Both share a reformulation of subjectivity beyond an enclosed, essentialized subject, and suggest a breaking of the boundaries which have circumscribed theories of the subject based primarily on a focus on the phallus and lack.

Ettinger has theorised metamorphosis as a 'creative principle' whose 'affects index a transformation and an exchange' inducing 'instances of co-emergence of meaning'¹ that are not predicated on the model of an I versus an Other. Metamorphosis thus effects changes in the I and the non-I, while undermining any clear border that separates the two. These encounters also produce meaning. Encounters with art-works, art-working, for example, instantiate a fluid co-becoming of the subject with its outside. Recasting the 'matrix' as 'uterus, womb' echoing 'Freud's phantasy of intrauterine existence in the maternal womb', Ettinger develops a conception of 'a dynamic borderspace of active/passive co-emergence *with-in* and *with-out* the uncognized other'². She dynamizes the womb, not as 'a symbol for an invisible, unintelligible, originary, *passive receptacle* onto which traces are engraved by the originary and primary processes'. Rather, the matrix 'is a concept for a *transforming borderspace of encounter* of the *co-emerging I* and *the neither fused nor rejected uncognized non-I*'³. The originary fusion of the subject with the (M)Other in the womb is theorized alongside the Lacanian tripartite division of the Imaginary/ Symbolic and the Real, as the condition of possibility for a dynamic process of the development of the I in relational mode. Her theorization emphasizes change, non-appropriative exchange and encounters and development together between multiple selves-in-formation.

By developing an other conception of the *objet a* (beyond the Lacanian model) as 'belonging-together to several co-emerging partial-subjects'⁴, Ettinger offers an understanding of dynamic subjectivity-in-process as co-emergence. Further, this reliance

on the *symbol* of the matrix is not essentialist, as Griselda Pollock has argued.⁵ Matrixial subjectivity thus figures the womb as a condition of possibility for subject-destabilization beyond an essentialist understanding based on separation, non-knowledge and lack. It shares with queer theory a dynamic understanding of subjectivity and sexual identity, though as I will indicate below, it emphasizes a relationality that is far more muted in recent formulations in queer theory around the rectum.

In queer theory, the rectum has also been theorized as a way of thinking beyond a self-enclosed subject, destabilizing it, though the relational mode through which the subject is set in process is not the same as in Ettinger's formulation. In an essay on the figuration of sodomy, Lee Edelman has argued for the centrality of ambivalence in the pre-genital phase of sexual development in Freud, an ambivalence which undermines an understanding of stable subjective identity based on sexual acts and their visibility.⁶ In his reading of sodomy, homosexual identity is destabilized by the ambivalences which mark Freud's 'primal scene'.⁷

In the work of Leo Bersani and Tim Dean, the rectum becomes the space where subjective solidity and sexual identity get destabilized through male sodomy.⁸ Particularly through the practice of barebacking, Tim Dean argues that the rectum becomes the space which undermines subjective stability based on sexual identity⁹. The *jouissance* experienced in sex 'overwhelms the ego or coherent self'¹⁰. Dean links sexual *jouissance* to danger arguing that 'the capacity inherent in sexual *jouissance* to undo the coherent self means that there is something *psychically* dangerous about sex as such.'¹¹ Echoing Bersani, he argues that the rectum becomes the space where sexual practice 'is understood in terms of what shatters the self.'¹²

In *intimacies* (2008, with Adam Phillips), Leo Bersani argues that barebacking, instead of instantiating social intelligibility, plunges the self into non-meaning and a self-shattering. The impersonality of unsafe groupsex with strangers turns the rectum into the place for 'conceiving death',¹³ that is, a womb for breeding not life but the very unviability of life in its normative, ego-consolidating futurity. The rectum is seen as a receptacle (unlike Ettinger's womb) which shatters the self. While there is a relationality to sodomy, in the sense that it is an act which involves more than one self, the emphasis is not on the co-development of multiple selves through the encounter of sodomy. Rather, the rectum becomes the space in acts of sodomy which undermines the self.

The rectum, like the womb, then resonates with the general aim of theorizing the porosity of the borders of the subject. For Ettinger, the matrix helps establish a relationality, the intra-uterine cavity is understood as ‘already shaping phantasmatic modes and opening specific channels of meaning. This cavity is a passage.’¹⁴ Matrixial subjectivity thus helps formulate thinking in terms of the forging of relations, passages which produce encounters and establish multiple forms of Is with non-Is, that is, different forms of intimacies between evolving and dissolving selves. The rectum, on the other hand, is less a passage than a receptacle that instantiates the death-drive and the shattering of the self. As Bersani argues, the ‘barebacking bottom enters into an impersonal intimacy’, not only with the tops who penetrate him, ‘but also with all those unknown partners, perhaps now dead, with whom he has never had any physical contact’¹⁵. Through the rectum, the barebacking bottom’s ‘subjecthood is...absorbed into the nameless and faceless crowd that exists only as viral traces circulating in his blood and perhaps fatally infecting him’¹⁶.

Here, the resonances between the two formulations begin to show disjunctions. Unlike the womb figured as a passage that enables thinking relationality between selves, the rectum in queer theory is a receptacle, dissolving the subject by receiving the ‘viral traces’ which fatally infect it. Ettinger’s formulation of the matrix emphasizes less subject-dissolution, fatality and anonymity than *relationality* and emergent socialities where the border links rather than cuts – ‘When the matrixial cavity of passage becomes an acoustic resonance *camera obscura*, partial-objects and partial-subjects are not separated by a cut but are *borderlinked* by resonance and vibrations’¹⁷. Copoiesis, coemergence, the wit(h)ness that Ettinger thinks through, is strikingly absent in the work of Bersani, Dean and others, the latter instead developing much more in the direction of self-dissolution, self-shattering and *jouissance* in and through the self. Queer theory, one could argue, remains caught ‘inside the boundaries of the individual’, seeking to break these boundaries through thinking practices like barebacking, and theorizations of the rectum, while ‘a matrixial weaving is borderlinking *between several individuals*’.¹⁸ As Ettinger argues, through matrixial affect ‘[T]he I is a pulsating pole of co-poiesis. The I and non-I are pulsating poles of co-poiesis’¹⁹. One could simplify the distinction between the two as that between a continual co/de-centering of the self *with* the other in Ettinger’s understanding of matrixial subjectivity on the one hand, and a de-centering/ destruction of the self *through* the Other in Queer theory on the other hand.

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In closing, I am tempted to suggest that the focus on relationality in Ettinger's theorization of matrixial subjectivity might help re-direct the focus on deconstructing subjectivity in queer theory, broadening out the latter's emphasis on self-shattering toward a politics based on forging alliances²⁰ and a being-together between several selves rather than individual dissolution and dissipation.

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¹ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 65.

² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.65.

⁵ Griselda Pollock, 'Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metamorphosis', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21:1 (2004), p. 26.

⁶ Lee Edelman, 'Seeing things: Representation, the Scene of Surveillance and the Spectacle of Gay Male Sex', *Homographesis: Essays in Gay literary and cultural theory* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 190.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), pp.197-222.

⁹ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *intimacies* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 45.

¹⁴ Bracha Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event', *Theory, Culture & Society* 21:1 (2004), p. 80.

¹⁵ Bersani, *intimacies*, p.53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ettinger, 'Weaving a Woman Artist', p.80. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.87.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), especially pp. 1-16.