

A sex-critical reading of the homosexual sex acts depicted in *Inxeba*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to analyse the homosexual sex acts depicted in the film, *Inxeba* (Tregove 2017). The analysis is informed by Lisa Downing's 'sex-critical' approach that deems that 'all forms of sexuality should be equally susceptible to critical thinking about the normative or otherwise ideologies they uphold' (Downing 2013:95). The findings of the analysis underscore that the film displays a phallogentric scripting of the sex act: the practices and sequence of sexual acts that privilege the erect, penetrating penis. In cognisance of this point, the sex scenes under discussion can be critiqued for perpetuating a narrow phallogentric ideal of sex that runs parallel to hetero-patriarchal norms. To offer an alternative expression of homosexual sex acts, Alphonso Lingis's writings on sexuality and sexual desire provide a springboard to explore erotic caresses and couplings that encompass the entire male body. To this end, Lingis's work is presented as a means to queer homosexual sex from hetero-patriarchal and phallogentric scriptings. The paper concludes by using Lingis's theories to imagine an alternative sex scene in *Inxeba* that illuminates queer eroticism and pleasure outside of penile penetrative sex.

Keywords: Erogenous zones, homosexuality, *Inxeba* (Tregove 2017), Alphonso Lingis, sexuality, sexual desire.

I

In this paper, I aim to analyse the homosexual sex acts depicted in the film, *Inxeba* (Tregove 2017). The analysis is informed by Lisa Downing's 'sex-critical' approach, which deems that 'all forms of sexuality should be equally susceptible to critical thinking about the normative or otherwise ideologies they uphold' (Downing 2013:95).¹ To this end, the sexual acts portrayed in *Inxeba* are interrogated to reveal the presence of normative practices and beliefs that contribute to 'silencing and making invisible' (Downing 2013:95) the acts, expressions and pleasures of non-genital sex.

In the first sex scene of the film, Xolani and Vija are alone in an abandoned and derelict building. Xolani lies on his stomach on the cold cement floor of the building; he is fully clothed with the exception of his trousers that are pulled down to expose his buttocks. Vija straddles Xolani, spits on his hand before using it to lubricate Xolani's anus. Vija penetrates Xolani while tightly coiling his arm around Xolani's neck. Vija thrusts with brute force while coiling ever tighter around Xolani's neck. Vija's heavy grunting is matched by Xolani's guttural attempts to inhale. Xolani's facial expressions are ensnared in pain and displeasure. Vija's climax and cessation of rasped pounding is met by Xolani fiercely uncoiling himself from Vija's grip.

The second sex scene takes place after Xolani and Vija travel a distance into the veld in the growing darkness of the early evening and are thus safeguarded from being visible to any other people. The silhouetted figures of Xolani and Vija face each other (Figure 1). Xolani stretches out his hand to Vija, strokes his neck, and attempts to entice his head forward for an intimate kiss. As Xolani's head reaches in for the intended kiss, Vija pushes him away in a bellicose manner. Xolani returns for a second attempt at a kiss. This is a thwarted attempt, as Vija responds by forcing Xolani to his knees to perform a blowjob. Vija's arm is at the back of Xolani's head, restraining him to his knees while robustly controlling his movements as fellatio is performed. Vija vigorously thrusts into Xolani's mouth while the audience hears the muffled sounds of Xolani gasping to breathe. After Vija climaxes, he forcefully throws Xolani to the ground. Once Xolani sits up, his head pans across the veld to search for Vija, who has vanished into the darkness. Xolani stumbles alone across the veld.

In both scenes, there is a phallogentric scripting of the sex act: sexual acts and practices are limited to penile erections and penetrations (du Plessis 2010, 2015; Hite 2005; Tiefer 2004). The film shines a spotlight on the phallogentric sex acts by showcasing 'deep, forceful penile thrusting' (Lehman & Hunt 2010:6), which Peter Lehman and Susan Hunt (2010:6) term 'pound-cubed sex' and Susan Faludi (cited by Lehman & Hunt 2010:138) calls 'jackhammer sex'. Sex in this scripting is synonymous with and spotlights hetero-patriarchal standards represented in Hollywood films that serenade the deep thrusting of the erect penis as the 'very essence of making love' (Lehman & Hunt 2010:138).

Queer, according to David Halperin (1995:80), can be conceptualised as a 'positive and creative construction of different ways of life' that are divorced from standard norms, conventions and practices. In cognisance of this point, the sex scenes under discussion can be critiqued for perpetuating a narrow phallogentric ideal of sex that runs parallel to hetero-patriarchal standards, rather than exploring alternative and expansive expressions of homosexual sex acts. One form that this exploration may

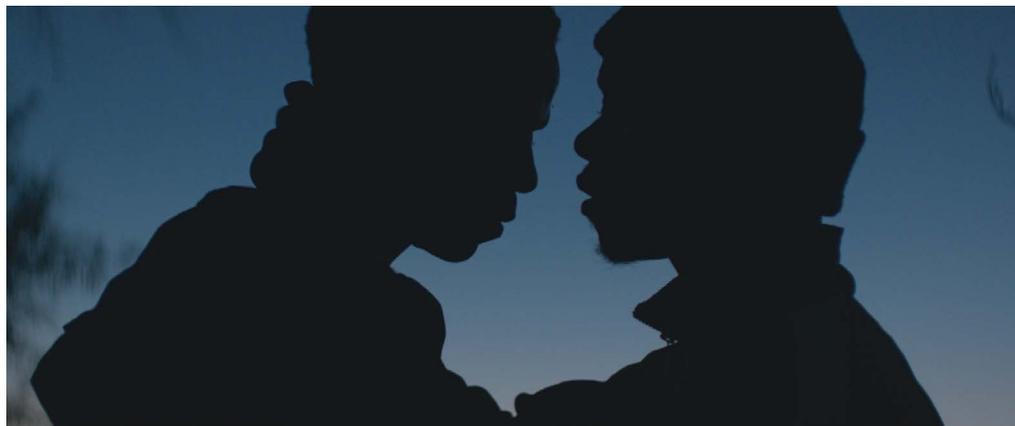


FIGURE **Nº 1**



The commencement of the second sex scene in *Inxeba* (Tregrove 2017) © Urucu Media.

take is affirming modes of male erotic pleasure that are derived from non-genital erogenous zones of the body. To pursue such an undertaking holds the potential to “queer” homosexual sex acts from the version of sex peddled by hetero-patriarchal and phallogentric ideologies. In particular, I pursue this end over the course of the paper by exploring how Alphonso Lingis’s work offers a means to queer homosexual sex from the aforementioned ideologies.

The third sex scene in the film offers a glimpse of sex acts that encompass non-genital erogenous zones. Just after the first hour of the film, we observe Vija in a pool of water below a rushing waterfall, and in the foreground, Xolani wades through the water to meet up with him. They embrace and share an outpouring of emotion that is seen, but rendered inaudible by the gushing torrents of the waterfall (Figure 2). In the next scene, the viewer sees Vija lying on his back as Xolani progresses from planting kisses on his mouth down to his torso. As Xolani moves down Vija’s body with tender kisses, Vija is engulfed by raptures of pleasure. Thereafter, we see Xolani lying on his back, his arms wrapped around Vija’s body while Vija, in slow rhythmic movements, thrusts into Xolani’s body. Unlike the previous two sex scenes, we hear mutual outbreaths of pleasure. In the subsequent scene, we see the tightly cocooned bodies of Xolani and Vija sleeping on the forest floor.

On the one hand, this third sex scene indicates a greater mutuality developing in their relationship and can be extolled for representing pleasurable anal sex between two men. This is in stark contrast to the dominant trope in films, where anal sex between



FIGURE **Nº 2**



The embracing couple (Tregrove 2017) © Urucu Media.

men is delimited to scripts and representations of 'pain and humiliation' (Williams 2008:237). Thus, the third sex scene of *Inxeba* may be argued to make a significant addition to a databank of film scenes that accentuate the pleasure, delight and mutual satisfaction of anal sex within homosexual couplings.

On the other hand, the third sex scene can also be argued to relegate the exploration of non-genital erogenous zones as foreplay. To substantiate, while the film offers a glimpse of pleasure derived from the non-genital erogenous zones – the kisses planted on Vija's body by Xolani – this is followed by penetrative anal sex. Linda Williams (2008:6) calls attention to the way that 'we become habituated to various spectacles of sex', and in this sense, the third sex scene can be said to follow the fairly predictable Hollywood scenario of heterosexual lovemaking in which 'a little foreplay [is] followed by intercourse in various positions ... followed by everyone being perfectly exhausted and sated' (Lehman & Hunt 2010:138). Put differently, the third sex scene of *Inxeba* follows a hetero-patriarchal sequence: non-genital acts inaugurate the sexual performance; they are coded as foreplay, and are followed by penile penetrative acts. In this way, the third sex scene misses an opportunity to represent "lovemaking" beyond the 'fixed and limited' (Lehman & Hunt 2010:138) version peddled by Hollywood, to envisage an erotic exploration of non-genital zones that does not follow the linear pattern, sequence or scenario of hetero-patriarchal sex.

By following a sex-critical approach of the three sex scenes, rather than interpreting the scenes in the context of the film narrative, the findings of the analysis are delimited

to how the film's representation of homosexual sex prioritises a penetrative phallogentric scripting that is unnervingly synonymous with hetero-patriarchal norms. For Breanne Fahs and Sara McClelland (2016:407), a central challenge for scholars working in sexuality studies is to critique the primacy of penetrative sex in literary, cultural and filmic imaginings, as well as in scientific research:

While penetrative sex may be a site of pleasure, a site of violence, a site of risk, and many other important aspects of sexuality, critical sexuality research does not assign priority to this particular behavior above all others. Assuming that it is the most important sexual behaviour reinforces heterosexist assumptions about sexuality and severely obfuscates and undermines the reality of people's sexual lives, especially women's sexual lives. Nonpenetrative sexual activities inform and underlie nearly all aspects of sexuality, from how we understand "first sex" to how we imagine "having sex" (or not) to how we understand embodiment, sexual subjectivity, pleasure, sexual activity, and agency. The emphasis on penetration (and the insistence on defining sexuality around penetrative intercourse) highlights risk and vulnerability, minimizes women's pleasure and orgasm, overemphasizes heterosexist notions of sex (or violence) "having occurred," foregrounds male ejaculation, and insults the way actual humans experience moving through their sexual lives (with other bodies, alone, in their imaginations, and as cultural text). We see the overemphasis on penetration as, at best, unimaginative and, at worst, as troublesome, devastating, and even violent, particularly to young women, lesbians, and gay men.

The exploration of the richness and variability of sexual practices outside of penetrative sex is, for Lehman and Hunt (2010:136), an act of '[u]nmaking love'. In the following section, I consider Alphonso Lingis's writings on sexuality and sexual desire as a springboard to queer or 'unmake love'. In broad outline, Lingis's work vividly illuminates the entire surface of the body to be an erotogenic zone while conceptualising the 'sexual embrace and penetrations' (Lingis 2000:140) to encompass couplings of body regions, zones or organs that are not restricted to the penis.²

II

Lingis (1979, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1994, 1996, 2000) seeks to develop a framework for understanding sexuality and sexual desire as distinct from the discourses of copulation that focus on the 'genital apparatus' (Lingis 1985:104).³ By divesting sexual desire and sexuality from privileging the genital zone (Lingis 1985:106), Lingis conceptualises a 'libido without norms' (Lingis 1979:87) that is detached from 'phallogentric and reproductive normativity' (Lingis 1979:87) as well as exorcised from 'essentially heterosexual' (Lingis 1985:20) configurations and comprehensions.⁴

Lingis articulates sexuality and sexual desire in terms of the body's erotogenic surface, the skin. In mapping out this erotogenic surface, Lingis (1979:90) conceives of it as a 'Möbius band, where by following the outer face one finds oneself on the inner face, where one everywhere finds oneself on a surface and never in an inwardness'.⁵ In so doing, Lingis rejects engaging with the 'inwardness' of sexual desire – consciousness and the psyche (see Grosz 1995:287) – in favour of charting a cartography of the libido's 'surface':

This libidinal life should not be pictured, topographically, as a depth of inward life. It is superficial, all surface. It is the slippery effervescence at the conjuncture of mouth with breast, anus and exterior, urethra at the point where the urine surfaces, thumb with lips, finger with nostril. Couplings, for the sake of the surface effects – that is the machinery of the libido. The libidinal zone in the body is the skin – skin and the mucus orifices that prolong it inward, but where the finger, tongue or penis will make contact with more skin (Lingis 1983:27).⁶

Every surface area of the body, every body part and organ, 'becomes the locus of a production of excitations' (Lingis 1981:59) that spreads and produces a 'surplus force, of surface effects consumed in pleasure' (Lingis 1981:59). In this formation, sexual desire and the coupling of bodies are not understood in terms of domination, penetration or violence (Lingis 1985:113), but rather by a 'compulsion to discharge the excess of one's forces in another, in the other one has in one's arms, around one's mouth, under one's skin' (Lingis 1981:62). Such a conception of sexual desire in terms of 'expropriation' (Lingis 1981:62)⁷ envisages the entire body of the other to be an erotic object that induces responses in the body of the one who 'witnesses it' (Lingis 1985:x):

It gives rise to a longing to pour all we have of kisses and caresses, the energies of our throbbing blood, the flash-fires of our hyperexcited nervous tissues, the heat and phosphorescence of our carnal substance, into the other. [...] An erotic object functions as the open gate toward which the shock waves of our energies rush, to be compressed and intensified and inflamed there, and to break forth into the dazzling darkness beyond. It can happen that erotic excitement is fastened on a whole human body. Apart from the pattern of lips, breasts, hands, and genital zone accentuated for sexual contact, beauty organizes the entire body into another pattern, linking up its contours, colors, and movements into a snare for the eye (Lingis 2000:142–143).⁸

Lingis (1985:22) comprehends the 'movements of sexual desire' to be composed of 'caresses'. Such an assertion opens up the possibility of re-scripting all body parts to be 'organs for caressing':

The hand, which is not only an apparatus for grasping and taking, an instrument for discovering and feeling, a sense organ, and a contrivance for gesturing, an expressive organ, is also an organ for caressing, a sex organ. [...] Even the least dexterous and blindest parts of the body – belly, thighs, breasts, buttocks – are organs for caressing; they are indeed especially so (Lingis 1985:22).

In enshrining the caresses shared between coupled subjects, Lingis (1981:62) proffers that ‘one feels oneself existing as a voluptuous subject afflicted with phantasmal identities, under the pressure of another’s touch, tongue, breasts, penis, and this alien presence is not distinguishable from the intensity of one’s own feeling’. Here, Lingis foregrounds that kisses and caresses produce excitement, pleasure and intensity for both the receiver and the giver. Thus, the hands and lips of the giver seek to induce pleasure in the other and, in doing so, simultaneously unleashes pleasure and excitement for the giver. Accordingly, the choreography of the giver’s caresses are ‘moved by the movements they provoke in the other. They are agitated by the ripples of aching pleasure that surface in the nakedness they touch’ (Lingis 1983:10).⁹ Both subjects in the carnal coupling thus seek to explore the surface of the other’s skin to, like a divining-rod, seek the ‘fields of radiation’ (Lingis 1981:59) – the intensities, shivers and spasms of body parts enlivened by ecstasy. The caressing hands of the carnal coupling hunt for the ‘torments and pleasures that surface in the other’ (Lingis 1996:63) and crave the mutual intensity that it unleashes.

Building upon the remarkable formulation of how the carnal couple simultaneously gives and receives pleasures, Lingis (2000:140) proceeds to discuss how they in the

sexual embrace and penetrations find contentment in the opaque flesh filling [their] orifices and engulfing [their] probings. Each one feels the eddies and ripples of pleasure that intensify the sensual contentment, a spiraling pleasure arousing and aroused by the pleasure of the other.

In this scenario, Lingis figures both parties of the carnal couple to engage and experience forms of penetration, while concurrently participating in acts of penetration. To explain, the erotogenic surface of the body allows for the inscription of non-genital zones, regions, parts and organs to be fastened with excitement and to move in ‘voluptuous patterns of torment’ (Lingis 1981:59). In this regard, one’s body parts, such as the hands, feet and tongue, can penetrate the body of the other to ‘make contact with more skin’ (Lingis 1983:27) while one’s skin is also being penetrated by the probing fingers, tongue and feet of the other.¹⁰ Apart from these convex and concave body parts, sexual desire, eroticism, lust and orgasmic arousal transform the physiological body to be a torrent of permutations, engorged protuberances and regions that ‘phosphoresce at the points of maximum intensity’ (Lingis 1981:60):

The mouth loosens the chain of its sentences; it babbles, giggles; the tongue spreads its wet over the lips. [...] The posture becomes dissolute; the bones turn into gum. The eyes cloud and becoming wet and spongy; hair turn into webs and gleams. The sinews and muscles become glands – lips blotting out their muscular enervations and becoming loose and wet as labia, torso becoming belly, thighs lying there like more penises, stroked like penises, fingers becoming tongues, wet glands in orifices, knees fingered like *montes veneris*. Glands stiffen and harden, becoming bones and rods; the body tenses up, hardens, gropes and grapples (Lingis 1994:31).¹¹

The bodies of carnal couplings are therefore transformed into a labyrinth of hard and soft ‘phantasmal diagrams’ (Lingis 1981:59) that engage in acts of penetrating and being penetrated.

Lingis’s work, by offering a model of eroticism and desire that is anchored to the whole body, stands in sharp contrast to standard phallogocentric scripts of the sex act, which showcase and privilege the erect penis engaged in penetrative sex. Lingis provides a novel conception of sexual practices and acts whereby the penetrator cannot be distinguished from the penetrated. The body surface of the carnal coupling is a tumultuous terrain of parts that are receptive to penetration, while other parts seek to trace and probe the orifices and convex shapes of the other’s body. Through caresses and kisses, pleasure is given to the other while simultaneously being produced in the surface of the giver’s body. The bodies of the carnal coupling are a panorama open to pleasure production through the touch, caress and connections of different regions, parts and zones.

III

Lust is the posture become dissolute, the bones turning into gum. The sinews and muscles lose their contractions to fill up with heat and susceptibility, the sweaty limbs quivering like exposed glands, the fingers spreading sweat and oils and secretions like aimless invertebrates. The torso loses its architectonic solidity to become a mass of ducts heavy with stagnant fluids and sludges. The eyes cloud and become wet and spongy, the mouth loosens the chain of its sentences, babbles, giggles, the tongue spreads its wet over the lips blotting out their muscular enervations. In the heat of this meltdown a mushrooming surge of sexual excitement tenses and hardens the body that gropes and grapples; then it collapses, melts, gelatinizes, runs in strange and impersonal pleasures. There is left the coursing of the trapped blood, the flush of heat, the spirit vaporizing in exhalations. Lust is the dissolute ecstasy by which the body’s ligneous, ferric, coral state casts itself into a gelatinous, curdling, dissolving, liquefying, vaporizing, radioactive, solar and nocturnal state (Lingis 1996:63).

In the above quote and over the course of this paper, it is evident that Lingis's texts open up new ways to reclaim, reorder and refigure sexual acts and practices beyond penile penetrative sex. Along these lines, I consider Lingis's work as holding the potential to queer homosexual sex from hetero-patriarchal and phallogocentric scriptings.¹² I now move to imagine a queer alternative to the third sex scene in *Inxeba* that is underwritten by Lingis's theories.¹³

The alternative scenario unfolds with the bodies of Xolani and Vija entwined in an embrace. We see four arms roam like tentacles over the surface of both bodies. The arms are directed by the rapid shudders and precipitous palpitations produced in the body they touch. The movements of the arms resemble shooting stars across the night sky, they dart across the surface of the body seeking to ignite the contours of the lips, tingle the back of the neck, encircle the bellybutton with featherlike caresses, while bobbing the ass cheeks with rhythmic beatings conducted by the palms of the hand. The intensity builds, but so do the 'cries of jealousy' (Lingis 1979:91)¹⁴ from the excluded body parts that crave to be set ablaze with pleasure. The feet and legs now fan out like the tail of a peacock, demanding the attention of a caress that curves into the grooves between each toe, that fingers the sole of the foot, that bombards the ankle and Achilles heel with light pulsations, that strokes, in a wave-like motion, the leg hairs to engulf the entire body in tingles, quivers and quakes. The thighs of one lover rotate, like the hands of a clock, over the other's belly to transform it into an organ 'quivering with receptivity' (Lingis 1985:24). The surfaces of the bodies dazzle in aching torments.

The couple's mouths are minesweepers: with every kiss planted, the other's body bursts with intoxicating bliss. The tongues extend like the beak of a hummingbird, they search the partner's body for the swellings of lust and the wellsprings of sweat that gush from the entire body as it pants in exhilarating pleasure. The orifices of the body become an extravaganza of taste and touch for the tongue. The two bodies shimmer and are splendidly swathed in the sweat and saliva of one another.

The bodies are now scorched with arousal and their surfaces are transfigured into a moonscape of crevices and protrusions. The earlobes, nipples, thighs, calves and cheeks blossom into piercing peaks and pikes of titillation, while the spinal column mutates into deep ravines and sweeping gorges of molten euphoria. Xolani and Vija's bodies are contiguous with one another while simultaneously interpenetrable, and engaged in forms of penetrations. Their bodies surge with an orgasmic rush, spasms and contractions that release hollering incantations of groans and sighs.

IV

Lehman and Hunt (2010:181) underscore that

[c]ontrary to the way we were acculturated, much eroticism and sexual pleasure has nothing to do with norms about the penis, sexual positions, or how long penetration lasts (or even if it takes place at all). [...] But learning to unmake love is much more complex than just throwing away the ruler and the stopwatch and the formula of progressing from foreplay to the predetermined sexual positions. It requires an ability to see the male body, the penis, the mind, and masculinity in a fresh, new light.

This paper has offered Alphonso Lingis's theorisation of sex and libido as a resource to 'unmake love' – to refigure the male body as an erotogenic surface while re-scripting sexual acts, practices and desire in terms of the caresses of a carnal coupling that vacillate over every region, part and organ of the body. More specifically, Lingis offers a framework to imagine a queer version of the third sex scene in *Inxeba*: a movement away from a hetero-patriarchal scripting to imbue the carnal coupling of Vija and Xolani to be both givers and receivers of pleasure, interpenetrable and interpenetrating.

Notes

1. Downing's approach can be framed in terms of the larger field of critical sexuality studies that recognises that 'all sexualities, however normative or nonnormative, should be subjected to critical attention, examination, and scrutiny, that no sexualities and their attendant scripts should proceed uncritically, whether asexual, polynormative, sexuonormative, or homonormative' (emphasis in original) (Fahs & McClelland 2016:405).
2. For a general introduction and theoretical overview of Lingis's work, see Sparrow (2007). Lingis provides a compelling and compendious examination of sexual desire, lust and the libido that is effervescently detailed and portrayed in his work. In an attempt to capture Lingis's exceptionally vivid and impassioned discourse, I have sought to make extensive use of direct quotes from his work.
3. Lingis's understanding of sexual desire is informed by the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (see Lingis 1985).
4. See Elizabeth Grosz (1995) for a discussion of how Lingis's work is relevant for challenging 'masculinist and Freudian conceptions of sexuality' (Grosz 1995:293). For the limitations thereof, see note 12.
5. The Möbius band, a surface with one continuous side, is a concept that Lingis adopted and developed from Lyotard. For further discussion of Lyotard's contribution to Lingis's work, see Lingis (1979, 1985).
6. See also Lingis (1985:75).
7. Lingis's (1985:29; 38) understanding of sexual desire as 'expropriative' can be regarded as a countervail to Sartre's model of sexual desire as 'appropriative' – a lust to vanquish the subjectivity of the other by making them exist only for oneself. Lingis (1985:27) cogently enumerates that an appropriative model

of sexual desire can only culminate in the 'abolition of the other; the hands of lust are those of an assassin'.

8. See also Lingis (1994:33).
9. See also Lingis (1985:65).
10. The envisaging of the libidinal body as a Möbius band transforms the body surface of the carnal coupling to 'convexities and concavities, probing fingers, facial contours, and orifices, swelling thighs and mouths, everywhere glands surfacing, and what was protuberance and tumescence on the last contact can now be fold, cavity, squeezed breasts, soles of feet forming still another mouth' (Lingis 1985:76). See also Lingis (1979:90).
11. See also Lingis (2000:147-148).
12. Though I consider Lingis's work as a means to queer homosexual sex from hetero-patriarchal and phallogocentric scriptings, Elizabeth Grosz (1994:156) foregrounds how his work holds limited scope for transforming heterosexual sex. To substantiate, Lingis's work certainly offers heterosexuality an alternative to phallogocentric norms, however, his formation of sexuality fails to foreground the corporeal specificity of the female body and its erogenous zones. In contrast to the 'neuter' (Grosz 1994:156) model of sexuality presented by Lingis, Luce Irigaray (1985a, 1985b, 1993) aims to articulate the specificity of female sexuality by expressing it as "two lips". This expression implies the plurality and multiplicity of female sexual pleasure, which is a counterpoint to the model of hetero-patriarchal sex that prizes the penile penetration of the vagina. To this end, by envisaging the entire female body as holding erotic potential, Irigaray's expression of "two lips" disrupts the standards, models and imperatives of hetero-patriarchal sex. Irigaray's work has informed a substantial body of feminist scholarship (see Grosz 1994; Potts 2002) on transforming the models and paradigms of heterosexual sexuality to account for the specificities of the female body while also articulating sexual pleasures and experiences that are unique to women.
13. This approach is inspired and informed by Lehman and Hunt (2010:154-156) who use a sample of sexual scenes in films to imagine an 'alternative erotic scenario' (Lehman & Hunt 2010:155) that scripts the entire body as a site of sexual pleasure.
14. Lingis (1985:77) argues that the 'force that intensifies at any point impresses the surrounding forces, pumps off their energy, and tears from the environs exhalations and intensifications. Every intensity induces intensities – jealousy of the vulva for the mouth, jealousy of the nipple for the fondled testicles'.

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