

## ON BIOPOLITICS IN QUEER THEORY

I am entering this, and any, conversation about Foucault from the angle of feminist queer theory – as well as the overwhelmingly Anglo-North American angle from which queer theory has been largely generated – and so I want to talk a little today about how his work influenced and continues to inform this field. Certainly from the time that queer theory was consolidating into what would become known as a field, Foucault was central.<sup>1</sup> In 1990 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published *Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble* which, along with Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, published three years earlier, have become grounding texts in the early canon of queer theory<sup>2</sup> – texts which each engage from different places the relationship between sex and biopower. Indeed, these early works might be the best way to introduce what becomes a sort of cleavage in queer theory’s engagement with Foucault – between a focus on the productive effects of power in the emergence and regulation of the category of ‘sex’ and ‘sexual identity’ and, on the other hand, a focus on the production and regulation of populations, race and state racism. In *Gender Trouble* Butler asked us to recognize that power produced the apparent stability or originality of sex through a deployment of disciplinary norms of hetero-gender, but in what might be cast as a departure from Foucault, Butler leaned on Freudian psychoanalysis to thematize the sort of agential (though mostly unconscious) subversion of power effected through the redeployment, denaturalization and rematerializa-

tion of these norms – in an effort to disrupt the ease with which gay death was being accepted and administered by the state. At this time Sedgwick was also working through the discursive constellations of desire, gender, intimacy, class, sex and sexuality generated by the repressive hypothesis, or the closet, and the volatile codependency of homo- and hetero-sexuality that would lead to the killing disregard for those lives which threatened to reveal the instability of that divide. Anzaldúa’s work set a slightly different course by situating sex and sexuality firmly within the biopolitical generation of racialised, ethnicized and nationalized populations – the dangerous discursive and geopolitical territories she chronicled (and occupied) were indeed between genders and sexualities, but inseparable from that “thin edge of barbwire” (13) between “Indian,” Mexican and U.S. American.

In 1994 when Siobhan Somerville published a little article called “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body,” and then especially in 1995 when Ann Stoler published *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, the field of queer theory shifted its treatment of Foucault to better recognize that any discussion of the disciplinary production of sex, subjects and populations is also necessarily about the production of racialised sex, subjects and populations.<sup>3</sup> That is, queer theory came to account for the means by which power works through the deployment of sexuality to produce racially and nationally demarcated subjects and populations whose life will be *fostered* or *disallowed* to the point of death. Somerville explained that it was no coincidence that the “invention of the homosexual occurred at roughly the same time that racial questions were

being reformulated, especially in the US” (244) through the 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* Supreme Court ruling that “black” and “white” races were “separate but equal,” enabling the US apartheid structure that remained legally sanctioned for nearly a century (and as Michelle Alexander’s work reminds us, has picked up and accelerated through US incarceration policies starting just after Jim Crow was struck down).<sup>4</sup> Somerville pointed out that the sciences producing the ‘truth’ of sex were often the same generating the ‘truth’ of race, leading queer theory to retune its attention to the racializing norms of sexuality. And of course Stoler’s work on *Race and the Education of Desire* participates in the fundamental reorientation much of queer theory by tracing the colonial history of Foucault’s biopower. Stoler demonstrated that what Foucault identified as the European biopolitical mechanism of sex – or the convergence of the “anatomy-politics of the human body” (HS 139) and the regulatory control over the life of the species – was exercised and perfected not only or even first on the European bourgeois family but in the French, Dutch and British colonies as a means to regulate colonial populations. This work opened the door for queer theory to begin thinking seriously about the disciplinary function of sex on a global scale in colonial modernity more broadly – in the ongoing work of settler colonialism, military operations of empire and processes of decolonization.

It seems to me that Stoler’s work set the stage for the most recent and most influential ground-shift in queer theory, which has been Jasbir Puar’s analysis of contemporary biopower in the form of “homonationalism” – the process by which certain gay, lesbian and queer subjects are folded into the national body by aligning themselves with U.S. imperial interests and the exter-

mination of illegitimate queerness.<sup>5</sup> This work is certainly not ‘beyond’ thinking power with Foucault, but succeeds in bringing the two generally separate strains of research on Foucault and power together – one that foregrounds race and state racism and the other that treats the ramification of the emergence of the category of ‘sex’. Building on Lisa Duggan’s work on the neoliberal generation of ‘homonormativity’<sup>6</sup> – or the depoliticized gay and lesbian who aspires to rather than challenges the privatization and unequal distribution of life resources and chances<sup>7</sup> – Puar charts the emergence of homonationalism in the U.S. (and gives us the tools to see its functioning elsewhere) as a sort of sexual exceptionalism which is complicit with U.S. exceptionalism. As she explains, “[t]here is a commitment to the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness that is implicated in the propagation of the U.S. as empire as well as the alliance between this propagation and this brand of homosexuality” (2).

Puar’s work has generated, since 2007 when she published her book, a massive paradigm shift in queer theory (and a massive amount of work around homonationalism, as well as “pink washing” around the world) and its treatment of the operations of power and sexuality. I want to signal Scott Morgensen’s work on “Settler Colonial Homonationalism” as among my favorite in this field, for his reminder that while U.S. global and racialised violence is predicated in part on US sexual exceptionalism, this sexual exceptional was built first on sexualized colonial terror in the Americas.<sup>8</sup> Building as much on Stoler as Puar, Morgensen reminds us that “[t]he terrorizing sexual colonization of Native peoples was a historical root of the biopolitics of modern sexuality in the United States” (105-6) and

so situates “homonationalism as an effect of U.S. queer modernities forming amid the conquest of Native peoples and the settling of Native land” (105).

I want to end with a very brief sketch of my own attempts to think with (not beyond) Foucaultian conceptions of power in early twentieth century architecture and domestic interior design in France and England. My book *Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity: Staying In*, attends to the architectural and design work of Gray and several of her female contemporaries in the context of European architectural modernity’s biopolitics – its investment in designing healthy bodies – to show that Gray was among many who worked with the materials and discourses of architecture and interior design to resist both the civilizing whiteness of colonial modernity and the deployments of homo and heterosexuality by which these were regulated.<sup>9</sup> Gray’s rejection, for example, of the materials, technologies and theories of clarity and clear communication, which were coming to reduce the exciting possibilities of female sexual dissidence and designs for alternative forms of dwelling into the fixed formation of modern sexual identity and modern architecture, might be seen as a disturbance of the “regime of power-knowledge-pleasure” (HS 11) driving the proliferation of modern discourses of sex. That is, Gray created living spaces designed to resist what Foucault calls the liberatory discourses of sexuality – and attending to early twentieth century strategies to resist the liberation of sexuality, to disturb its communicability and publicity, strikes me as a particularly important project in the contemporary climate that scholars like Stoler, Puar and Morgensen trace for us so thoroughly.

Notes

- 1 Specifically, Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).
- 2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (University of California Press, 1990); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).
- 3 Ann L. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Siobhan Somerville, "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (1994): 243–266.
- 4 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).
- 5 Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 6 Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2003). Mass.: Beacon Press, 2003
- 7 For more on biopolitics as the maldistribution of life chances, see Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2011).
- 8 Scott Lauria Morgensen, "Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism Within Queer Modernities," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 105–131.
- 9 Jasmine Rault, *Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity: Staying In* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011). For more on this, see Rault, "Designing Sapphic Modernity," *Interiors: Design, Architecture and Culture* 1, no. 1–2 (2010): 1–2; and Rault, "Losing Feelings: Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux and Her Affective Archive of Sapphic Modernity," *Archives of American Art Journal* 48, no. 1–2 (2009): 56–65.