

“sexuality” than about the constitution of those categories themselves as a historically located social practice. As with any relationship, it makes sense to think about the history of the parties involved before assessing what the relationship is.

### **Notes**

1. Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).
2. See Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora, 1992), 267–319.
3. Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson, introduction to *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 24.
4. See, e.g., Ken Plummer, “Speaking Its Name: Inventing a Lesbian and Gay Studies,” in *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experiences*, ed. Ken Plummer (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–25; and Gert Hekma, “‘A Female Soul in a Male Body’: Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology,” in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone, 1994), 213–39.
5. For a more developed version of this argument see David Valentine, “‘We’re Not about Gender’: The Uses of ‘Transgender,’” in *Out in Theory: The Emergence of Lesbian and Gay Anthropology*, ed. Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 222–45.

### **The Politics of LGBTQ Scholarship**

#### **Jacqueline Stevens**

In early 2003 I attended a talk at the University of California, Los Angeles, by one of a handful of Israeli academics whose history of Israel’s founding is along the lines of that proffered by Edward W. Said.<sup>1</sup> That afternoon he was speaking about who was where in the Palestinian territories administered by Britain until 1948 and was describing the expulsions by Zionist terrorists and then by the Israeli state.

The audience, numbering about a hundred, was divided and tense; all had flyers in their seats commending Israel for its progressive policies on homosexuality, including the service of gays and lesbians in the military, antidiscrimination laws for employment, and same-sex partner benefits in many sectors. The flyer

also included a list of Arab countries cited by the human rights community for abuses against gays and lesbians.

After the impassioned lecture, which focused on the trials that the speaker himself had suffered for his views advocating a one-state solution for the region, the Jewish American gay man who had distributed the flyers asked the speaker to comment on the friendly legal climate toward lesbians and gays in Israel, in contrast to their harsh treatment in the adjacent Arab countries.

In a patronizing tone dripping with gravitas, the speaker responded: "I am sorry. Maybe I can say this because as a straight man it doesn't affect me, but I am much more concerned about Palestinian children being killed than the right of gays to have sex." The audience exploded in applause, and I felt my face burn in frustration with the two men and with everyone else: the "Most Truly Victimized Pageant" had once again been staged, the apparently obvious winner had been announced, and still neither side clearly understood what was being argued. I raised my hand, but there were others ahead of me to ask questions and the topic was not further addressed.

I mention this encounter because it emblemizes several themes implicit in this *GLQ* forum. For the confrontation between the anti-Zionist and the gay man can be reduced to a question similar to one that we have been asked to address here: is sexuality in itself a significant object of concern? That some will claim—rightly, I think—that there is no such thing as "sexuality in itself" would of course be part of the answer to this question, and this will be explored below, but that the question even needs to be asked calls for further thought. The audience requiring a response to such a question would not be transnational queer feminists, or anyone who has spent more than two seconds in the field of political anthropology, or anyone who has done a bit of comparative work in queer studies, or the numerous scholars influenced by Gayle Rubin's brilliant essay "The Traffic in Women."<sup>2</sup> All their work has proceeded for quite some time on the premise that sexuality and sex are intertwined in what Rubin called the "sex/gender system," and for many of us the point can be pressed further, that sexuality, sex, race, ethnicity, and nationality are interlocking pieces of the same oppressive structure. So one question I wonder about is whether this substantial community of scholars is still regarded as somehow marginal and needs a forum like this to gain recognition. I would not think so, but the fact that this forum is being published suggests that I may be wrong.

The question about the singularity and primacy of sexuality, not directly asked but implicit in the organization of this forum, is one in a chain of many

questions that were asked and that themselves are part of an even longer chain of related questions. It is impossible to provide, much less defend, direct answers to these questions here, but I hope that it is useful to mention them and to discuss in a bit of detail the political and academic contexts of which they are symptomatic.

The queries that flow from the encounter at UCLA and from this forum might include the following: Is the political and research agenda of the LGBTQ community sufficiently engaged with matters of injustice that dominate newspaper headlines? Is the preoccupation with centering sexual politics and sexual aesthetics peculiarly U.S.- or Western-centric? What does the success not only of Israel's LGBTQ communities in some key sectors of the state and civil society but also of LGBTQ social movements in many places worldwide mean for us—that is, for quasi-cosmopolitan elites who nonetheless feel a range of afflictions from having to endure sanctions imposed by heteronormativity? In short, while the overt questions here are about analytic lenses through which to ascertain the truth about sexual and other politics, the underlying query seems to be whether worrying about heteronormativity and its institutions is a privilege, lacking the urgency of, say, analyzing the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

The consensus answer of the audience at UCLA was yes, a focus on sexuality is a privilege, which reveals a troubling failure among LGBTQ scholars to convey beyond their own community the fact that the national project—crystallized in Zionism but animating the *raison d'être* of every country and political society in the history of the world—maintains itself in complicated ways by regulating kinship, that is, by enforcing rules that reproduce the membership of that society and by establishing zones of legitimate sexual relationships. That the audience members did not realize this was not so surprising. Their ignorance was rooted in a common field of intuitions that the anti-Zionist and the gay man, despite their many differences, share: the conviction that nationalism and sexual politics are separate concerns. Falsely dichotomizing their agendas, they both fail to speak on behalf of everyone in even the narrow constituencies they claim to represent.

Curiously, had each man clung more consistently to his own identitarian cause, of Arabs or gays, respectively, they might have realized the common ground between them. It is perfectly reasonable for someone concerned about Palestinians qua Palestinians to protest that it is wrong for their children to face persecution or death because of their sexuality. And if people worry about what happens to gays and lesbians, why should they not worry about Arab gays and lesbians in Israel who face state-sanctioned hardships far grimmer than those endured by gays and

lesbians in Arab countries? Why not make a case for one's fellow Arab Israeli gays and lesbians, whose civil rights are certain to be violated in Israel, since they are, to name the most obvious penalties, unable to build houses in much of the country, unable to join the army, and therefore unable to receive the educational and many other kinds of benefits that Israel ties to military service.

I discussed the opening of this piece with a straight feminist friend I was visiting in southern Turkey, a well-known fiction author and former political prisoner who has no love of the Turkish military but is even more appalled by aspects of its Muslim civil society. When I reached the part about the gay man asking the anti-Zionist about the abuse of gays in Arab countries, she said, "Hooray!" and clapped for the gay man. She was mystified when I arrived at the punch line and told her that the UCLA audience had applauded for the anti-Zionist.

The problem with identity politics is not simply that they are provincial or that certain groups and causes may be ignored because their concerns and members have been falsely universalized.<sup>3</sup> The problem is that such politics rarely understand the dialectical and ultimately universal logic of any cause in a world inhabited by more than one person. It is not the nature of a cause or a subject position but the human condition itself that makes sorting people out along any single dimension a logical and not just a political impossibility.

After all, if one celebrates Israel's civil rights laws on behalf of gay people in particular, because one self-identifies primarily as gay, then why wouldn't one endorse an agenda that aimed to protect the rights of all gay people, including gays who happened to be Arab, and especially Arab Israelis? Likewise, if one cares about Arabs qua Arabs, then why wouldn't one concede that the gay Israeli has a legitimate point to make about an issue that harmed Arabs? You don't have to be a Kantian cosmopolitan sticking to the categorical imperative to get this far. Why couldn't the historian at UCLA have simply acknowledged that some Arabs are tortured and deprived of their civil rights not just because they are not Jewish but because they are queer, and why couldn't he, because he cares about Arabs, oppose this?

These are not rhetorical questions but pressing political ones. The answer to them is similar to the answer as to why decades of scholarly work on how reinforcing kinship structures of political societies creates all sorts of inequalities and exclusions—including those of nationality, ethnicity, race, and family role—has not resonated in the halls of academe, much less elsewhere.

### The Lens That's Hard to Use

While the programs of black studies, then women's studies, and then gay and lesbian studies were established by activist movements on college campuses, the shift of some of these programs to "women's, gender, and sexuality studies" or just to "gender and sexuality studies" occurred from the top down when those running these programs, largely feminists, were trying to come to terms with their discursive, Foucauldian scholarly sensibilities (and when some straight feminist academics, especially those in the social sciences, grew anxious that "their" programs would be taken over by gay men). Unlike the earlier programs, initiated by students galvanized by specific political causes, for instance, feminism and varieties of LGBTQ advocacy, the curricular shifts in the 1990s took place at the behest of the middle-aged faculty running the university.

Though the program administrators could change the curriculum and reach out to cultivate research on the issues that concern a journal like *GLQ*, effectively making the case that identities do not simply exist and intersect but are structured in ways that draw on overlapping rules and discourses that make all sorts of boundaries, these administrators—we—never could circulate this thought as more than one more interesting idea. Like the confused thinking that holds that sex is anatomical and gender is constructed and that still haunts the classroom (and some academic articles), the structuralist critique of identity politics has not become a lens that students easily know how to use once they step outside the classroom in which they have read people such as M. Jacqui Alexander, Veena Das, Anne McClintock, and Ann Stoler, people who, when it comes to the contemporary Bahamas, to India and Pakistan after the partition, and to colonialism in South Africa and Indonesia, respectively, converge in showing how family and national dramas inflict psychic and legal harm in tandem.<sup>4</sup>

While earlier voices were silenced by their exclusion from the curriculum, something else prevents the beliefs expressed above from resonating as they deserve: there is as yet no social movement on behalf of a thoroughgoing cosmopolitanism that would obliterate the kinship networks underlying the harms named by anyone who criticizes nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism, and homophobia. There are social movements decrying the violence done in the name of a certain nation, or of an exclusionary marriage policy, or of brutal restrictions of sexuality, but there is no movement that holds out, as the Communist Party did in the nineteenth century, even the possibility of another future, another way to organize our relations of interdependence. Marx wrote close to nothing about what communism would look like, but imagine if he had written nothing about it at all, if he had written only

that capitalism was terrible and the most one could do would be to march to shorten the working day.

Those on the left need to get over what might be called the “totalitarian syndrome”: political paralysis resulting from the fear that mobilizing in the name of alternative institutions will cause varying degrees of fascist or totalitarian regimes and that the movements in their name will be likewise repressive.

All the peace marches, antiwar coalitions, and struggles against what Richard Falk calls “predatory globalization” will not make possible the subject position that will create a human being,<sup>5</sup> which is what the postmodernists, in what has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, have been saying for a long time. Sadly, the main organizing rubric among those opposing forces of tyranny has been “antiglobalization.” Although the World Trade Organization’s endorsement of globalization has done much to discredit the concept, something along these lines needs to be reclaimed.

Hannah Arendt, when she wrote “We Refugees” in support of establishing Israel as a Jewish state (a position she later renounced), said that there is no such thing as a human being and that advocates of statelessness are living in a fantasy.<sup>6</sup> But assigning citizenship based primarily on the condition of birth and family membership has also been shown to be unworkable, creating a world of mayhem as well as of dislocation and fear.

Those who wonder why I am writing about this in a journal devoted to the intellectual politics of sexuality do not understand that in the final analysis the social movement that will be the vanguard of a revolution against all forms of state boundaries, that could organize on behalf of the unhindered movement and full-fledged development of capacities regardless of one’s birthplace or parentage, is a movement that will be queer, in the sense developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Warner in the early 1990s.<sup>7</sup> But such a sensibility, which critiques the intergenerational structures of identities—be they those of heterosexuality or of the ancestral nation—still needs a home, a primary albeit imaginary place from where it speaks, a “queer planet” serving as an aspirational location where many might one day congregate, and not just a place to be smarter than everyone else right now.

In the meantime, there is nothing better or worse about studying this or that, and there is no inherent limit to the questions scholars should pose in LGBTQ studies, just as there is no limit to the potential aesthetic and substantive complexities posed in any field of study, even inane ones such as alchemy or astrology. Most of what is published in the academy, as Friedrich Nietzsche might have said,

will be boring repetitions in different idioms of the prevailing incoherent ideology, present company included, and to change this calls not for new scholarship but for a new age that we ourselves must author.

### Notes

1. Edward W. Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
2. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.
3. See Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–99.
4. M. Jacqui Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997); Veena Das, "National Honor and Practical Kinship: Unwanted Women and Children," in *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction*, ed. Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ann Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 344–73.
5. Richard Falk, *Predatory Globalization: A Critique* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
6. Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees," in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove, 1978).
7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Michael Warner, introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).