

# **Empire of Desires: History and Queer Theory in an Age of Global Affect**

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## **Abstract**

This paper surveys the current state of queer studies and argues that epistemological historicism be brought back to bear on queer theoretical analyses, particularly in order to address the challenges of accounting for the globalization and transnationalism of sexuality. The paper proposes that this can be done by, first, “giving up” certain intellectual preoccupations, including (1) the interpretation of the nineteenth-century “Great Paradigm Shift” as a historical succession of sexual “acts” by sexual “identities,” (2) the conviction that whatever modes of temporality queer theory argues for ultimately lack coherency or some kind of linear regularity, and (3) the idealist assumption that whatever queer theorists are deconstructing, denormalizing, or denaturalizing can be somehow conceptually sealed from their simultaneous constructions, normalizations, and naturalizations. Allowing history to serve some transformative purposes for queer theory can be accomplished accordingly by “opening up” the parallel doors, such as (1) by bringing epistemological issues back into the theorization of queer subjectivities, (2) by making generalizations more willingly about changes and continuities across not just geographical space but also time, and (3) by being more ethically concerned with the imperialist nature and consequences of queer theoretical critique.

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Queer theorists and their interlocutors have in general become increasingly ambivalent about the notion of temporality—from situating it in their work to situating ways of studying it in relation to their work. The past decade or so witnessed a distinct rearrangement in the interplay between history and queer theory: namely, the shift from a preoccupation with the analytic application of identity categories in the 1980s and early 1990s, to a mode of inquiry in which the past is approached via a framework that does not position heterosexuality as the privileged cultural paradigm of human intimacy. Susan McCabe has termed this evolving process of scholarly endeavor “the rise of queer historicism.”<sup>2</sup>

This transition unfolded in part as historians and other scholars of gender and sexuality find the essentialism-versus-social-constructionism debate increasingly parochial. Subsequently, numerous monographs appeared to reorient, at a fundamental level, the ways in which the significance of erotic desire and its related modes of identification could be assessed for different times and places (yet the focus of which still all too often falls within the Euro-American context). Concrete examples of this trajectory can be traced from the publication of David Halperin’s *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* to the appearance of such recent works as Matt Houlbook’s *Queer London* and Sharon Marcus’s *Between Women*.<sup>3</sup> The evolution of this trajectory, in other words, is marked by a distinct flow of influence from historical considerations to the emergence of queer theory in the beginning,<sup>4</sup> then gradually replaced by a reversed frame of impact—from queer theory to historical scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Susan McCabe, “To Be and to Have: The Rise of Queer Historicism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 1 (2005): 119-134; H. G. Cocks, “Modernity and the Self in the History of Sexuality,” *The Historical Journal* 4 (2006): 1211-1227. Other informative overviews of American queer historiography include Lisa Duggan, “From Instinct to Politics: Writing the History of Sexuality in the U.S.,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 27, no. 1 (1990): 95-109; Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U. S. LGBT Historiography,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 4 (2005): 605-625; and Howard H. Chiang, “Tensions of the Past: Frames of Reference and the Trouble with Modern U.S. Queer Historiography, 1976-2007,” *NeoAmericanist* 4, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2008/09).

<sup>3</sup> David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Matt Halbook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> By “the emergence of queer theory,” I refer to that pivotal moment around the turn of 1990 that witnessed the publication of a cluster of now foundational texts in queer theory/studies: Halperin, *One Hundred Years*; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Dianna Fuss, ed.,

Situated in this trajectory, Euro-American lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer historiography has certainly proliferated to the extent that it now occupies a respectable place in the humanities and social sciences. Although this might suggest that what Lisa Duggan has called “the discipline problem”—the strained relationship between queer theory and gay/lesbian history—has disappeared, I believe its legacy is something that we are still living with.<sup>6</sup> Part of the reason that it persists, though admittedly in a somewhat different guise, has to do with how transnational or global studies has significantly reconfigured the scope of queer studies in recent years. The consequences of this reconfiguration can easily be measured by the growing number of works by scholars who claim queer diasporas, queer post-colonialism, or global queer studies as their area of research specialty.<sup>7</sup>

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*Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991). The list perhaps can be extended to include the immediate subsequent publication of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); and Michael Warner, ed., *Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). For a recent set of essays that reflect on the aftermath of that initial explosion of queer studies, see Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, eds., “After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory,” special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 421-646.

<sup>5</sup>This second phase has been most poignantly characterized as “the queering of history” in McCabe, “To Be and to Have.” Of the many books that exemplify this notion of “queering history,” a particularly interesting attempt that has stirred much debate is Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>Lisa Duggan, “The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History,” in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, co-authored with Nan D. Hunter (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 194-206.

<sup>7</sup>The literature on these topics is growing exponentially. For examples of the early studies that marked the initial upsurge in pushing the field to “go global,” see Yukiko Hanawa, ed., “Circuits of Desire,” special issue, *positions: east asia cultures critique* 2, no. 1 (1994): 1-176; Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey, eds., “Thinking Sexuality Transnationally,” special issue, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 4 (1999); Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Epppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jasbir Kaur Puar, “Global Circuits: Transnational Sexualities and Trinidad,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26 (2001): 1039-1065; Arnoldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV, eds., *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Jon Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality* (London: Sage, 2004); and Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú Jr., eds., *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Although in this essay I make no significant distinction between “global” and “transnational,” other scholars have argued in favor of the latter terminology: see Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality,”

In a special issue volume of *Social Text* published in 2005, sixteen articles interrogate the limits and potentials of the term “queer,” which—through its epistemological and political applicability—unites scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds in perhaps otherwise less compelling ways.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as the field of queer studies continues to “go global,” its participants remain less and less willing to make claims about *broad contours of historical change over time*. Many of them have a prolific corpus of intelligent remarks on such topics as contemporary diasporas, post-colonial subjectivities, and even queer temporalities on a theoretical level drawing on pressing concerns mediated by the current situation of global geopolitics.<sup>9</sup> However, as Anjali Arondekar has observed, even as the turn to globalization represents the most recent force reshaping the contours of queer studies, the field still “navigates through, and sinks uncomfortably in, the very colonial landscape it hopes to exceed and supplant.”<sup>10</sup> This is because “A substantial proportion of the scholarship produced under the rubric of sexuality and/or queer studies still narrates sexuality through the prism of a short-lived history, often relegating the materialities of colonialism and empire to the nominal status of recurring referents, rather than terrains of thick description.”<sup>11</sup> That anthropology is the house of the most current scholarship in global queer studies is a case in point. And even for those who maintain some interests in historical change, many remain contemptuous with just reading into the past through a “queer” window, having less to say about what history can do for queer theory.

Simply put, what it has come down to in recent years is almost a one-way street: historians applying queer theory to their work to show how history can be written differently. If for Duggan, the tension between queer theory and lesbian/gay history that existed more than a decade ago could be resolved by having (1) History departments hiring historians of sexuality, (2) lesbian and gay historians reading queer theory, and (3) queer studies recognizing the importance of empirically grounded work in the social sciences, I think this “discipline problem” has morphed into a situation today where historians could borrow the tools from queer theory to illuminate something unexpected,

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*GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001): 663-679. For a critique of the shortcomings of thinking sexuality in a transnational-historical framework to date, see Tze-lan D. Sang, *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 1-34.

<sup>8</sup> David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, eds., “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now,” special issue, *Social Text* 23, nos. 3-4 84-85 (2005): 1-310.

<sup>9</sup> On queer temporalities specifically, see also Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); and the essays in Elizabeth Freeman, ed., “Queer Temporalities,” special issue, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, nos. 2-3 (2007): 159-421.

<sup>10</sup> Anjali Arondekar, “The Voyage Out: Transacting Sex Under Globalization,” *Feminist Studies* 33, no. 2 (2007): 299-311, on p. 300.

<sup>11</sup> Arondekar, “The Voyage Out,” p. 300.

strange, or “queer” about the past, but history is perceived as if it has nothing refreshing to offer in terms of moving queer theory forward in novel directions. It is as if the only use left of history for queer theory is to further substantiate the latter’s existing function of offering endless modes of analytic interpretation and transgressive possibility without being confined to one linear “grand narrative.” Though valuable, this anti-linear conception of historical temporality, as I will suggest, has restricted the terms under which the field of queer studies has recently “gone global.” In order to reposition the saliency of history for queer theory, there are things that we must be willing to give up and other doors we must open.

## Where to End

The covert tension between historical generalizations and queer theory surfaced as early as when Eve K. Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, criticized Halperin for placing too heavy an emphasis on historical paradigm shifts in following Michel Foucault’s genealogical periodization of sexuality.<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick’s assertion that overlapping and contradictory, universalizing and minoritizing, forms of gender and sexual expression coexist at any given moment in time highlights the anti-linear-progression sentiment of queer theoretical critique. Subsequently, many works in “queer history” have found Sedgwick’s theoretical intervention compelling, and have questioned the underlying assumptions of paradigm shifts or epistemological breaks in the history of sexuality. According to Thomas Foster’s work on male sexuality in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, for example, early Americans “viewed sexual desires and interests as potentially part of an individual’s makeup,” suggesting that the distinction between “acts” and “identities” that has long dominated the analytic frame of historians of sexuality is less stable than has been typically assumed.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, based on his study of twentieth-century Southern American men who desired having sexual encounters with other men, John Howard in his book *Men Like That* echoes Sedgwick’s problematization of historical paradigm shifts:

If, as has been convincingly demonstrated, urbanization and industrialization enabled gay identity and culture formation in the cities during the nineteenth century or perhaps earlier, then the Western world witnessed what has been called the Great Paradigm Shift, the articulation

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<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 44-48; Halperin, *One Hundred Years*; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1976]).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas A. Foster, *Sex and the Eighteenth-Century Man: Massachusetts and the History of Sexuality in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), p. xii.

of a cultural binary undergirding much dualistic thinking: the heterosexual-homosexual split. Homosexuality—and, by inference, heterosexuality—was no longer understood as a set of acts, but as an identity; not as behavior, but a state of being.

*Men Like That* complicates this schism by documenting the experiences both of men like *that*—which is to say, men of that particular type, self-identified gay males—as well as men *who like that*, men who also like queer sex, who also engage in homosexual activity or gender nonconformity, but do not necessarily identify as gay. Though I naturally have greater access as a researcher to the former, my project nonetheless unearths evidence to support my tentative assertion that throughout the twentieth century, queer sexuality continued to be understood as both acts *and* identities, behaviors *and* beings. It was variously comprehended—depending in part on race and place—along multiple axes and continuums as yet unexamined by historians.<sup>14</sup>

Besides using “queer” loosely as a blanket term in documenting non-heterosexual desires among men living in the South, Howard’s analysis intentionally juxtaposes “identities” against “acts,” “behaviors” against “beings,” as the definitive feature of what the “Great Paradigm Shift” supposedly shifted. In this way, the “Great Paradigm Shift” can easily be challenged as long as historians uncover the “evidence” for the centrality of “identities” to one’s erotic definition before the supposed “Shift” (and for that of “acts” after it). This interpretation has fueled a thick historiography—including, most notably, Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Bernadette Brooten’s *Love Between Women*, and the volume *Premodern Sexualities* edited by Louise Fradenberg and Carla Freccero—for which Foucauldian histories of sexuality that tend to emphasize periodizing ruptures rather than historical continuities serve as the primary target of criticism.<sup>15</sup>

Responding to these anti-Foucauldian accusations articulated on both theoretical and empirical grounds, Halperin is quick to acknowledge some of the problems with his earlier formulation of the social constructionist approach at the outset of his book, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*.<sup>16</sup> While still defending his conviction that there

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<sup>14</sup> John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>15</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Response to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Louise Fradenberg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

was no homosexuality, properly speaking, in most pre-modern societies, Halperin goes on to identify some of the major shortcomings of this conviction, including

(1) it does not acknowledge the complex relations between identity and identification in our attitudes to the past; (2) it has been overtaken by a queer political and intellectual movement opposed to all forms of heteronormativity, and which therefore finds important connections between non-heterosexual formations in both the present and the past; (3) it does not reckon with what, from a non-constructionist perspective, appear as continuities within the history of homosexuality; (4) it misleadingly implies a Eurocentric progress narrative, which aligns modernity, Western culture, metropolitan life, bourgeois social forms, and liberal democracies with ‘sexuality’ (both homo- and hetero-), over against pre-modern, non-Western, non-urban, non-white, non-bourgeois, non-industrialized, non-developed societies.<sup>17</sup>

Having stipulated this set of problematics, Halperin still maintains that Foucauldian history of sexuality carries incomparable value for queer studies. The ultimate purpose of adhering to a strong historicism, according to Halperin, is “to accede, through a calculated encounter with the otherness of the past, to an altered understanding of the present—a sense of our own non-identity to ourselves—and thus to a new experience of ourselves as sites of potential transformation.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps more so than anyone else, Halperin has been a prominent figure in promoting the application of an empirically grounded genealogical-historicist approach—an approach that “begins with an analysis of blind spots in our current understanding, or with a problematization of what passes for ‘given’ in contemporary thought”—to queer studies.<sup>19</sup> History is indispensable for queer theoretical thinking, because the potential alterity of the past and the strangeness of its regulatory norms invite us to reconsider our present day assumptions about what is conceivable, possible, and, by extension, transformable.

Above all, through several essays over the course of the book, Halperin shows that the neat distinction between “identities” and “acts” obscures more than what it illuminates. In the chapter “Forgetting Foucault,” after giving two examples, one from ancient Greece (the *kinaidos* figure) and another from an erotic tale told by Apuleius (retold by Giovanni Boccaccio in the fourteenth century), Halperin concludes that

the current doctrine that holds that sexual acts were unconnected to sexual identities in European discourses before the nineteenth century is mistaken

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<sup>17</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, p. 13.

in at least two different respects. First, sexual acts could be interpreted as representative components of an individual's sexual morphology. Second, sexual acts could be interpreted as representative expressions of an individual's sexual subjectivity. A sexual morphology is not the same thing as a sexual subjectivity: the figure of the *kinaidos*, for example, represents an instance of deviant morphology without subjectivity, whereas Boccaccio's Pietro represents an instance of deviant subjectivity without morphology. Thus morphology and subjectivity, as I have been using those terms, describe two different *logics* according to which sexual acts can be connected to some more generalized feature of an individual's identity.<sup>20</sup>

As such, what Halperin clarifies here is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, sexual identity—or modes of sexual identification to be more precise—of course existed well before the emergence of the homosexual-heterosexual duality, for which sexual act continues to remain a decisive conceptual anchor. What Sedgwick and others have called the “Great Paradigm Shift” is anything but a neat historical evolution from a world exclusive of sexual “acts” to one of sexual “identities.” Despite the critique put forth by Sedgwick and her followers, Halperin maintains that his earlier work simply “*wasn't Foucauldian enough.*”<sup>21</sup> By retaining a lesser degree of investment in conventional social history and making a greater use of Foucauldian (or Nietzschean) genealogy, the more engaging task for historians of sexuality should be to “foreground the historicity of desire itself and of human beings as subjects of desire.”<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, what the late-nineteenth-century emergence of the conceptual space of homosexuality shifted was a broader rearrangement of earlier patterns of erotic organization. For men in particular, features such as gender roles, sexual positions, and the asymmetrical hierarchies of social identities articulated in terms of status, age, etc. faded to the background in constituting the erotic subject, as homosexuality—at the unstable conjuncture of orientation, object choice, and behavior—came to the fore in denoting a mutually exclusive form of human subjectivity in opposition to heterosexuality.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the historicism of the “Great Paradigm Shift” implies something more significant than a transition that could be reduced down to a simple succession of sexual “acts” by sexual “identities.”<sup>24</sup> If there is one lesson historians of

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<sup>20</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>21</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, p. 13 (emphasis original).

<sup>22</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, pp. 130-134.

<sup>24</sup> For recent reflections on the historical implications of the “Shift,” see the essays collected in Mathew Kuefler, ed., *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); and Thomas A. Foster, ed.,

sexuality can take away from Foucault's work via Halperin, it is to investigate more carefully the subtle relations between sexual acts and identities before the concluding decades of the nineteenth century, to "pay more (not less) attention to the changing social and discursive conditions in which the desires of historical subjects are constructed."<sup>25</sup> The widely accepted chronological distinction between "acts" and "identities"—the assumed linear progression from the former to the latter—that has been attributed to the "Great Paradigm Shift" is the first thing scholars need to put behind in order for queer theory to make room for transforming itself through the insight of historicism. In fact, the problem with this distinction has less to do with its assumed linear characterization of change over time per se, and more to do with its inadequate recognition of the role of *epistemology* in defining that change in favor of a more superficial reading of what that change entailed.

The compatibility between Sedgwick's insistence on coexisting patterns of gender and erotic historical arrangement and Halperin's defense of historicist thinking is perhaps best brought together by Sharon Marcus in her recent contribution, *Between Women*.<sup>26</sup> For a long time, scholars have debated the most adequate interpretation of nineteenth-century female same-sex relations in the English speaking world. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's 1975 seminal essay published in *Signs*, Adrienne Rich's subsequent manifesto on "compulsory heterosexuality," and Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (among her numerous other studies) are three of the most well known works that argue for a fundamentally different cultural world in which female relations functioned meaningfully before the advent of pathological lesbian deviancy.<sup>27</sup> Subsequent studies by Esther Newton, Lisa Duggan, Terry Castle, and Martha Vicinus provide powerful criticisms of the ways in which Smith-Rosenberg, Rich, and Faderman tend to desexualize lesbianism and universalize women who desired other women.<sup>28</sup> Evidently, the issue of historical continuity versus epistemic rupture lies at

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*Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Marcus, *Between Women*. As Marcus points out in the introduction, the title of her book alludes to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>27</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (1975): 1-25, reprinted in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 53-76; Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660; Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1981).

<sup>28</sup> Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (1984): 557-75; Lisa Duggan, "The Trials of Alice Mitchell: Sensationalism, Sexology, and the Lesbian Subject in

the heart of the entire debate, which connotes no lesser degree of theoretical saliency than its historiographic implication. It is in relation to this debate that Sharon Marcus situates her book most engagingly by bringing history back to bear on queer theory. As Marcus makes clear her own intervention,

*Between Women* makes a historical point about the particular indifference of Victorians to a homo/hetero divide for women; this is also a theoretical claim that can reorient gender and sexuality studies in general. Queer theory often accentuates the subversive dimensions of lesbian, gay, and transgender acts and identities...*Between Women* shows, by contrast, that in Victorian England, female marriage, gender mobility, and women's erotic fantasies about women were at the heart of normative institutions and discourses, even for those who made a religion of the family, marriage, and sexual difference.<sup>29</sup>

In the spirit of Sedgwick's queer theoretical intervention, Marcus shows that there is room for thinking about alternative and coexisting patterns of gender and sexuality in the past, but such task does not need to be executed in ways that would compromise the kind of Foucauldian historicism Halperin advocates.

But do the "postmodernist" implications of queer theory undermine the very developmental linearity captured by conventional historical conceptions of time? When one turns to Judith Halberstam's influential book, *In a Queer Time and Place*, in which she speaks of "queer temporality" and "postmodern geographies," the answer appears not so affirmative. "Queer time," according to Halberstam's definition, refers to "those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance."<sup>30</sup> What Halberstam questions here is not a linear conception of time per se, but those narratives bounded in the temporal frames of cultural heteronormativity, broadly construed. On the same page, Halberstam uses "queer" to refer to "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, she explains that what has made queerness so compelling in the past decade or so "has to do with the way it has the potential to open

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Turn-of-the-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 4 (1993): 791-814; Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*; Martha Vicinus, "Lesbian Perversity and Victorian Marriage: The 1864 Codrington Divorce Trial," *Journal of British Studies* 36 (1997): 70-98; idem, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

<sup>29</sup> Marcus, *Between Women*, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, p. 6.

up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, central to Halberstam’s notion of “queer” are distinctive elements of organizational potentiality, features of narrative desirability, and significant degrees of logical coherency. Despite the multitudes of possibilities that “postmodernism” has opened up for feminist and queer studies, the second thing that needs to be left behind in order for history to find a comfortable place in queer theorization is the conviction that whatever modes of temporality queer theory can articulate for us ultimately lack coherency or some kind of linear regularity. It is rather appropriate to borrow Bruno Latour’s insight here, that postmodernism is perhaps “the most sterile and boring intellectual movement ever to emerge.”<sup>33</sup>

If one takes the larger aim of queer theory—the issue of social transformation<sup>34</sup>—seriously, the recourse to a formal (re)definition of “queer temporality” proves unnecessary for appreciating the intrinsic *temporally-normative*, if not merely unidirectional, dimension of queer political understanding. In a roundtable discussion on “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” Lee Edelman insists that “critical negativity, self-negativity, can never become orthodoxy.” Meanwhile, for him, a rigorous notion of “queer temporality” allows us “to consider that you *don’t* get ‘from here to somewhere else,’” as if this statement itself is already an orthodoxy. “What makes queerness intolerable,” according to Edelman, is “a nonteleological negativity that refuses the leavening of piety and with it the dollop of sweetness afforded by messianic hope.”<sup>35</sup> Although Edelman’s “nonteleological negativity” is forcefully persuasive, it leaves little room for moments of social *transformation* to be recognizable, especially given the absence of any positive notion of temporal movement in its mode of comprehension. Other scholars have more convincingly suggested that at least some appreciation of origins, movements, destinations in the vectors of time is indispensable for queer politics. A good example that immediately springs to mind is what Elizabeth Freeman has recently called “erotohistoriography,” which “insists that various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce form(s) of time consciousness, even *historical consciousness*, that can intervene upon the

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<sup>32</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Bruno Latour, “Postmodern? No, Simply Amodern! Steps towards an Anthropology of Science,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 21, no. 1 (1990): 145-171, on p. 147.

<sup>34</sup> See Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 223-242; and idem, “On the Question of Social Transformation,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 204-231.

<sup>35</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang, “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, nos. 2-3 (2007): 177-195, on p. 195 (emphasis original). See also Lee Edelman, “Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 469-476.

material damage done in the name of development.”<sup>36</sup> According to this logic, “time consciousness” or even “historical consciousness” is a necessary condition under which queer interventions find their contribution most meaningful.

Indeed, the central aim of contemporary queer political critique has come to be defined through two inter-related themes: the endless search for *alternative and novel possibilities* and the persistent emphasis on the *transformative* prospect of these possibilities. In his work on the public sphere, for example, Michael Warner develops the notion of queer counterpublics to “supply *different ways of imagining* stranger sociability and its reflexivity,” but this is done in “spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be *transformative*, not replicative merely.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Donna Haraway’s project of cyborg imagery is meant to suggest “*a way out* of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves,” while seeking “a powerful infidel heteroglossia” that could transcend “a dream of common language.”<sup>38</sup> Even Judith Butler’s recent exposition on queer existentialism conveys an explicit recognition of the implicit boundaries of queer transformation—that each move queer intervention makes invokes some sort of linear historical trajectory by which its anti-normative sentimentality becomes its very own self-governing apparatus.<sup>39</sup> This is another way to ask, rhetorically, what ultimate purpose does queer theory serve if its utopist visions inherently subscribe to self-destructive dystopia outcomes?<sup>40</sup> If each radical transformation instantiated by a queer political effort actually requires a move *towards*, and not just *away from*, normativity, the emphasis of queer theory, then, should not be on the search for the infinite possibilities of transformation per se, but on the *condition of possibility* for this kind of search.

Therefore, insofar as the current trend of “going global” in both history and queer studies could potentially benefit one another, one of the most important things that need to be put to rest is the idealist assumption that whatever queer theorists are deconstructing, denormalizing, or denaturalizing can be somehow conceptually sealed from their simultaneous constructions, normalizations, and naturalizations. The subjectivity of queer theorists is inherently constitutive of what they take as their object

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, “Time Binds, or, Erotohistoriography,” *Social Text* 23, nos. 3-4 84-85 (2005): 57-68, on p. 59 (emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 121-122 (emphasis added).

<sup>38</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simions, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 181.

<sup>39</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>40</sup> For critical studies on queer utopia, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); and José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Performance and Politics of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).

of critical intervention. In other words, this process of the *subjectivation* of queer theorists is foundational to the condition of possibility for the *objectivation* of any kind of queer theoretical contestation. If the production of scientific knowledge, for example, has been a process denaturalized relentlessly by queer theorists to a point of self-evidency, the self-reflexive trajectory of queer theory has yet to gain sufficient attention.<sup>41</sup> An unfortunate consequence of the lack of this notion of self-reflexivity, as Steven Angelides has demonstrated, is the constant epistemic erasure of bisexuality in the effort to denaturalize and deconstruct the hetero/homosexual structure (and its concomitant understandings of identity) so foundational to queer theory.<sup>42</sup> In a word, queer theory and queer theorists are co-produced historically in real time. In this regard, not only has there always been a place for historical intervention in queer theory, but queer theory itself has always already subscribed to a linear modality of historical actualization.

## Where to Begin

Because history, as Paul Ricoeur tells us, is the human response to making sense of temporality, as the field of queer studies continues to extend its geo-spatial sovereignty by “going global,” historical investigation should present itself as one of the most exciting opportunities through which queer theory can expand its empire along the temporal axis.<sup>43</sup> To bring history back to queer theory requires, first, bringing epistemological issues back into the theorization of queer subjectivities.<sup>44</sup> This

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<sup>41</sup> On the (historical) deconstruction of scientific knowledge, see, for example, Nelly Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archeology of Sex Hormones* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Siobhan Somerville, “Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (1994): 243-266; Vernon Rosario, ed., *Science and Homosexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Alice Domurat Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); and Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Steven Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975); and idem, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> For a brief discussion of queer epistemology, see David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” *Social Text*

complements the first point made above concerning leaving behind the chronological distinction between sexual “acts” and “identities” as the primary organizing principal for studying sexuality historically. Again, the difference between the pre-twentieth century “sodomite” and the twentieth-century “homosexual” subject positions is *not* a mere difference between “behaviors” and “beings,” “acts” and “identities,” but one between the realm of possibilities to which each subject position belongs, governed by two fundamentally distinct deep epistemological structures.

As the growing body of scholarship on non-Western parts of the world makes clear, homosexuality as an independent conceptual blueprint was absent before its implementation in societies outside the Euro-American context before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kaled El-Rouayheb’s study on Arab-Islamic cultures from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Dror Ze’evi’s book on Ottoman Middle East between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, Afsaneh Najmabadi’s study of the changing configurations of gender and sexuality in modern Iran, Gregory Pflugfelder’s work on “cartographies of desire” in Japan since the seventeenth century, Matthew Sommer’s study of late imperial Chinese legal history, and my own contribution on the emergence of homosexuality in twentieth-century China all attest to the kind of Foucauldian project Halperin calls for in historicizing desire itself and humans as its *subjects*, not just representing sexuality as a timeless and ahistorical dimension of human reality.<sup>45</sup> All of these works take as their framing premise that sexuality is the product of systems of knowledge and modalities of power that bears striking similarities to other forms of human experience, such as madness, illness, and delinquency.<sup>46</sup> They do not deny, of course, that same-sex relations, erotic or not, had existed around the

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23, nos. 3-4 84-85 (2005): 1-17. See also David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Dror Ze’evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Gregory M. Pflugfelder, *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Howard H. Chiang, “Epistemic Modernity and the Emergence of Homosexuality in China” (forthcoming); and idem, “Rethinking ‘Style’ for Historians and Philosophers of Science: Converging Lessons from Sexuality, Translation, and East Asian Studies,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* (2009): in press.

<sup>46</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988 [1961]); idem, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage Books, 1994 [1963]); idem, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1975]).

world for centuries.<sup>47</sup> However, what was decisively absent before the “arrival” of homosexuality as a fundamental epistemological rubric in these non-Western societies, were (1) the possibility for subjects of desire to be defined exclusively in terms of same-sex object choice irrespective of other social variables, and (2) the “conceptual space” for homosexuality to be singled out as an independent problem.<sup>48</sup>

Bringing historical epistemology back to queer studies, however, requires a second point of departure that asks queer scholars to commit to making generalizations more willingly about changes and continuities across not just geographical space, but also time. This complements the second point made above regarding putting to rest the conviction that any model of “queer temporality” developed by queer theorists—e.g., Judith Halberstam’s definition of “queer time”—ultimately strives for some kind of decentered incoherency and irregularity. The desirability of and the initial utopist driving force behind queer theory precisely rest upon the underlying assumption that alternative visions of life can be *comprehensibly foreseeable and articulable*. The incessant refusal of queer theory to admit its essentializing presumptions and its continual effort to locate resistance, contestations, and ruptures may in fact conceal the ways in which larger forces of homogenization may be at work in ways no less important than other more subtle challenges to normativity. To cite Diana Fuss’s remark in a different context for feminist politics, “essentialism is *essential* to social constructionism.”<sup>49</sup> And, of course, the willingness to generalize about broad configurations of change over time served as the key impetus behind the kind of projects undertaken by Foucault, whose writings have proven to be indispensable for the emergence and proliferation of queer theory since the 1980s.<sup>50</sup>

To take just one of the most telling examples in recent years that clearly illustrate the unwillingness among queer scholars to generalize, consider the publication of Dennis Altman’s *Global Sex* and the subsequent forceful criticisms it received.<sup>51</sup> In the book, Altman tackles the important topic of “globalization” and assesses its

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Leila J. Rupp, “Toward a Global History of Same-Sex Sexuality,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 287-302; Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Robert Aldrich, ed., *Gay Life and Culture: A World History* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> I understand “conceptual space” in the way Arnold Davidson defines it—as a space that “determines what statements can and cannot be made with the concepts.” Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 136.

<sup>49</sup> Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> See David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory* (New York: Totem Books, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> Dennis Altman, *Global Sex*.

significance for sexuality studies. One of the central premises of his argument is that Western models of sexuality, under the force of globalization in political economy, has been packaged, distributed, and exported to other parts of the world in the last three decades or so. As far as China is concerned, anthropologist Lisa Rofel immediately responded with an article first published in *GLQ*, and subsequently included in her recent book *Desiring China*, that explicitly sets up as its target of attack what Altman called “the emergence of a western-style politicized homosexuality in Asia.”<sup>52</sup> Refuting this interpretation, Rofel instead argues that “the emergence of gay identities in China occurs in a complex cultural field representing neither a wholly global culture nor simply a radical difference from the West.”<sup>53</sup> “Global gayness,” Rofel continues,

with its assumptions about the similitude of identity, the homogeneity of values, and a sliding scale of identity development, fails to capture the intricate complexity...of gay life in Beijing. The insistence on identities that do not break down and on categories that are self-contained ignores the discursive processes of exclusion and differentiation. While the visions of many Chinese gay men in China about what it means to be gay are certainly connected to the knowledge that gay people exist all over the world, these men do not simply imagine a global community of horizontal comradeship. If the models of what it means to be gay emanate from outside China, they nonetheless construct a transcultural space by opening up a process of working them out in China.<sup>54</sup>

Given Rofel’s nuanced analysis, it is difficult to criticize the much more subtle picture of “the emergence of gay identities in China” that she describes in comparison to Altman’s much simpler model of “global sex.” However, the kind of queer theoretical critique substantiated by Rofel, despite its indisputable value on both intellectual and political grounds, overemphasizes the forces of local resistance working against globalization in ways that under-appreciates the epistemic homogenizing power of globalization itself. It is certainly more than plausible that, as Rofel argues, the articulation of gay identities in China is situated at the intersections “between Chinese

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<sup>52</sup> Lisa Rofel, “Qualities of Desire: Imagining Gay Identities in China,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5 (1999): 451-474, reprinted in *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 85-110. This statement coming from Altman has been the subject of intense debate among numerous scholars in queer studies. See also the essays in John C. Hawley, ed., *Postcolonial and Queer Theories: Intersections and Essays* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001); and idem, ed., *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (State University of New York Press: 2001), esp. Jarrod Hayes, “Queer Resistance to (Neo-)Colonialism in Algeria,” pp. 79-122.

<sup>53</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>54</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, pp. 109-110.

gay men's desires for cultural belonging in China and transcultural gay identifications."<sup>55</sup> Still, to highlight just one problem with this argument, some kind of pre-given ontological status of sexual identity is still being presumed when Rofel speaks of "Chinese gay men" and in relating it to "desires for cultural belonging in China." Rofel makes no effort to reconcile her under-specificity of the conceptual origins of what she calls "Chinese gay men." To be sure, it would be unconvincing to suggest that Chinese men who self-identify as gay have no agency whatsoever in reworking the global model of sexual identity. But this does not exhaust what the globalization thesis has to offer. Part of what is so compelling about the globalization thesis has to do with its explicit attempt at charting the *epistemological* trajectories of, to borrow Rofel's own words, "what it means to be gay" on a level that transcends the boundaries of nation-states.

If one is willing to entertain the plausibility of the globalization thesis, even if only strategically, one can begin to appreciate the deeper *historical* roots of the kinds of claim about epistemology it enables. In the case of China, I have explored elsewhere the process by which "homosexuality" emerged as an organizing concept in the Republican period (1912-1949).<sup>56</sup> By delving into the works of modernizing public intellectuals of the time such as Zhang Jingsheng and Pan Guangdan, I show that the translation of the Western sexological category of homosexuality into Chinese as *tongxing lian'ai* produced a key epistemological rearrangement in the social significance and cultural meaning of Chinese same-sex desire and relations. What got translated during the aftermath of the New Culture Movement was not just purely the medical category of "homosexuality" itself, but an entirely foreign *style of reasoning* descending from Western psychiatric thought about sexual perversion and psychopathology. From this process of transcultural appropriation, the Republican Chinese sexologists had essentially established for China what Michel Foucault calls *scientia sexualis* that first distinguished itself in nineteenth-century Europe: a new regime of truth that relocated the discursive technology of the sexual self from the theological sphere to the discourse of science and medicine. Therefore, the conceptual space for articulating a Western-derived homosexual identity grounded in some notion of personhood *did* emerge in twentieth-century China as a consequence of the establishment of this new regime of truth, facilitated by the arrival of European sexological discourse.

Both the problems and the historical implications of Altman and Rofel's studies are significant, but cannot be fully evaluated on the grounds of their empirical data, which only focus on the changes that took place in China during the last two to three decades. Whereas Altman has failed to appreciate the historical-epistemological contextualization of his globalization thesis, Rofel has under-acknowledged the deeper historical roots of what she calls "the emergence of gay identity in China" and under-

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<sup>55</sup> Rofel, *Desiring China*, p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> Chiang, "Epistemic Modernity."

estimated the global dynamics of its relevant processes of historical configuration. By bringing historical epistemology back to queer theory, we can begin to appreciate the “big picture” in ways similar to what Foucault and his followers (such as Halperin, Arnold Davidson, etc.) have aimed for in their effort to periodize the past. But in order to bring epistemological issues back to the theorization of queer subjectivities, we need to be more willing to draw broader insights concerning continuities/discontinuities across not just *space*, but their synchronic relation to stabilities/changes over *time*. In order to move forward, queer theory must be willing to abandon its self-proclamation against “grand narratives” and consider the productive nature and analytic advantages of “thinking big” across time, especially in light of the sophisticated set of vocabularies it has already developed via queer diasporas studies, queer postcolonial studies, etc.

This brings me to my final point related to the title of this paper, “Empire of Desires.” In one respect, this title signifies my recognition that desire—along with its related modalities of human expression, such as love, sexuality, reproduction, sociality, intimacy, etc.—has recently been a topic of critical investigation taken up in several admirable works in empire studies. Ann Laura Stoler has addressed Foucault’s blind spot on the imperial framing of his conception of biopower, shown that the management of affective arrangements was central to the implementation of colonial power, and highlighted the kind of lessons that comparative North American historiography could learn from postcolonial studies; Elizabeth Povinelli’s comparative anthropological fieldwork has exposed the pivotal sites of intimacy as a contested locale where issues of freedom, constraints, governance, and value meet; Laura Briggs has narrativized the traces of violence inflicted by the expansion of American imperialism on the global connections between Puerto Rico and the mainland United States through inter-related sexual, racial, and gender ideologies.<sup>57</sup> These works together suggest that the realm of desire is marked by political geographies that are inflected upon historical processes of empire making and undoing. Their general emphasis on North America should inspire future scholars to probe similar issues with a focus outside that geopolitical context.

To bring queer theory back into the picture, my naming of this paper “Empire of Desires” also suggests that I wish to address something on a completely different terrain. Namely, the desire among practitioners of queer theory to expand its horizon—in terms of intellectual operation, geographical coverage, etc.—can also be considered as a form

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<sup>57</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); idem, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); idem, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). See also Matt K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

of imperialism, a process of building the empire of such desire. For if what I have been arguing for thus far is to use history as a more powerful tool to strengthen this kind of empire-building project, my most immediate aim is to emphasize how history—or epistemological historicism, to be more precise—could still serve some transformative purposes for queer theory. Other important thinkers, including David Halperin in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* and Valerie Traub in her recent essay “The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography,” have continued to ask the reverse question: how could history be improved given the theoretical inflections from queer studies?<sup>58</sup> Certainly, one of the most notable consequences of this influence is the rising popularity of the practice of “queer history” among scholars interested in the history of sexuality. And I can’t agree more with both Halperin that “There is more than one strategy for entering into a queerer future,”<sup>59</sup> and Traub that “the future of [queer] historiography will require a more ambitious and capacious response to our growing historical knowledge.”<sup>60</sup>

But if history has something called “historiography,” what does queer theory have? By engaging with historiography, historians actively reflect on the trends, patterns, consequences, methodologies, theoretical implications of their scholarship. This kind of active self-reflection could thus lead the historian Prasenjit Duara to defend the indispensable role of theory in historical scholarship:

Theory is useful to me not because it illumines a hidden truth fixed by the death of the past. Theory illumines the object because it provokes the historian as subject. Because we ask new questions, because we question and reconceive our narratives, because we see new relationships, the field of historical investigation breathes life in the dead. That is, the awareness and acknowledgement that we have been constituting the historical object (for the sake of the nation or some other power) should allow us to be able to reconstitute it responsibly.<sup>61</sup>

In queer studies, new questions are certainly being asked, and existing narratives continue to be questioned and reconceived, as is the case with Rofel’s revision of Altman’s framework on Chinese sexuality. However, we tend to overlook that queer theory illumines its object of study by provoking the queer theorist as a subject of intellectual imperialism. This is why we need to suspend the deceptive assumption that

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<sup>58</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*; Valerie Traub, “The Present Future Lesbian historiography,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Blackwell, 2007), chap. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Halperin, *How to Do*, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Traub, “The Present Future,” p. 137.

<sup>61</sup> Prasenjit Duara, “Why is History Antitheoretical?” *Modern China* 24, no. 2 (1998): 105-120, on p. 110.

whatever queer theorists are deconstructing, denormalizing, or denaturalizing can be conceptually sealed from their simultaneous constructions, normalizations, and naturalizations. For instance, each time Halberstam provides an example of “queer subcultural practice” or “queer way of life” in *In a Queer Time and Place*, she does not merely illuminate eccentric logics of temporality and geography that lie outside the norms of paradigmatic life experience (such as birth, marriage, reproduction, and death).<sup>62</sup> In so doing, her intellectual project actually establishes a new set of norms that make implicit determinative claims about what count as “queer” and what does not. One could probably even go as far as arguing that Rofel’s idea of there being a transcultural interstitial space where post-socialist Chinese gay identities emerge is no less her own intellectual construction than Altman’s claim about the globalization of sexual identities being his. The point is that what in *fact* count as queer for queer theorists is, after all, mediated through their own authoritative discourse of legitimacy. In queer studies, the “queer” registers of subcultural resistance, counterpublic contestation, and subaltern challenge emerge at the moment when their articulations, normalizations, and naturalizations are made apparent through the analytical labor of queer scholars. To a certain degree, my reflections here on these *conditions of validity* of the queer theoretical object thus echo Latour’s earlier remark that “the critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a *stubbornly realist attitude*,” an attitude that is preoccupied with “*matters of concern*, not *matters of fact*.”<sup>63</sup>

The constructive, normalizing, and naturalizing (as opposed to deconstructive, denormalizing, and denaturalizing) functionality of queer theoretical critique also highlights another element of queer theorization that is no less significant: namely, its epistemological slippages and oversights. When scholars resist making universalizing assumptions, in doing so they often fail to theorize the very *conditions of possibility* for the local or the particular to be taken as significant. For example, in Rofel’s attempt to articulate a “transcultural” space in which the global and the local intersect and gay identities emerge in post-socialist China, her effort demonstrates how that space is *only made possible* by its mutually constitutive relationship with both the global and the local. In other words, universalism is already working in the service of particularism, but this is going unnoticed or under-theorized—in ways similar to Rofel’s under-specification of the presumed ontological status of “Chinese gay men” whenever she invokes the concept in her analysis. So just as queer scholars need to acknowledge and attend to their normalizing assumptions and investments, they, too, need to acknowledge and attend to the way forms of universalism, or universalizing assumptions, are making possible their focus on the specific and the particular. If we

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<sup>62</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*.

<sup>63</sup> Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-248, on p. 231 (emphases original).

wish to go global yet maintain particularistic in our argumentation, we need to at least demonstrate our awareness of the larger epistemological structure that allows us to relate the particular to the universal, the local to the global.<sup>64</sup>

If we are willing to reflect more seriously and subscribe to this crude methodological reality more fully, perhaps we can begin to bring epistemological issues back to queer theory by also being more willing to draw broader conclusions about continuities and discontinuities across not just *space* but also *time*. The globalization of queer studies has certainly encouraged many scholars to expand the empire of queer theory along the axis of geographical space, is it asking too much to do something similar simultaneously along the horizon of historical temporality? Being informed by historical epistemology would allow *theorists* to argue about the “present” in relation to the “past” in a self-conscious way that is grounded in empirical historicist research, at the same time going far beyond the current preoccupations among those who identify themselves as “queer historians,” or those who just “apply” queer theory to history or interpret the past “through” a queer prism without making much refreshing theoretical claims.

Questions such as “why queer theory needs China?” become clear indications of queer theory’s claim to intellectual sovereignty according to some implicit assumption about the value of the metaphoric invocation of geophysicality.<sup>65</sup> In addition to suggesting that temporality could serve equally salient functions, my larger point is not to invite scholars working in queer studies to consider whether such a question is valid (or more valid than the statement “why queer theory doesn’t need China”). I think what is more urgent is to inquire carefully about the very *conditions of validity and possibility* for these kinds of questions to be posed from the outset. I therefore share Latour’s concern that “our critical equipment deserves as much critical scrutiny as the Pentagon budget.”<sup>66</sup> Making explicit the imperialist “tense and tender ties” we share with the object of our theoretical intervention seems to be where queer studies has fallen short over the course since its inception.<sup>67</sup> Hence, to paraphrase Duara, a heightened

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<sup>64</sup> I thank Steven Angelides for pointing out how this connection between universalism/particularism and essentialism/constructionism works well with respect to my larger point about brining epistemology back to queer theory.

<sup>65</sup> On this question, see Petrus Liu, “*Paper Marriage and Transnational Queer Politics*” (paper presented at the *Same-Sex Desire and Union in China: Interdisciplinary and Historical Perspectives* conference, organized by Matthew H. Sommer, Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford University, May 17, 2008). See also the essays collected in Petrus Liu and Lisa Rofel, eds., “Beyond the Strai(gh)ts: Transnationalism and Queer Chinese Politics,” special issue, *positions: east asia cultures critique* 18 (forthcoming 2010).

<sup>66</sup> Latour, “Why Has Critique,” p. 231.

<sup>67</sup> A possible exception might be Halberstam’s argument that a “new generation of queer theorists” has emerged to shape a “new queer cultural studies [that] feeds off of and back into subcultural production.” Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, p. 163. However, the idea that there

awareness that we have been constituting the theoretical object affectively and intentionally should allow us to be able to reconstitute it more responsibly and perhaps even more *ethically*.<sup>68</sup> In addition to being a realm of geopolitical entanglement upon which empires have been built historically, desire also denotes our motivation and ensuing effort in an age of global affect to ground an empire in a normative ethics of theoretical critique.

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is a new generation of queer theorists who are better characterized as active participants of the subculture they study precisely reveal an effort to prioritize an epistemological lens grounded in *contemporary* culture rather than historicism. Based on Halberstam's definition of "subcultural historiography," for instance, the task of the historian is relegated to the mere uncovering of "disorderly narratives" of the past that "falls outside the neat models of narrative history." (In this sense, "history" is subsumed under "queer theory.") Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, p. 187. My aim in this paper has been to suggest that acknowledging the productive nature of linear narration opens up the possibility for queer theorization to be (re)informed by epistemological historicism.

<sup>68</sup> On the question of ethics for intellectuals, and the moral-philosophical implications of its historical overlap with style of life, as primarily understood through the works of Foucault, see Arnold I. Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 123-148.