

ARTICLE

Altering absence: From race to empire in readings of Foucault.¹

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ABSTRACT. This article will address sexuality as a medium of empire, approaching this question through the *absence* of empire in Foucault's history of sexuality. This absence of empire is all the more enigmatic given that it coincides with the omnipresence of race. To that extent, I argue for an "alteration of absence" in the reading of Foucault. Acknowledging the paradoxical presence of race--perhaps even its centrality--in Foucault's analysis of sexuality and liberalism is a necessary step to reveal the depth of another absence, that of empire and coloniality. The article discusses this blind spot in Foucault's work, arguing that a form of racial distinction operates through sexuality. It attempts to assess how influential this "imperial absence" is to the genealogy of sexuality and race. Lastly, it also sketches some possible reconfigurations of Foucault's theses when read in colonial or postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: sexuality; liberalism; coloniality; race; empire; Foucault

FROM RACE TO EMPIRE

Many students of colonialism and postcolonialism have shed light on the centrality of sexualization in both forging and maintaining colonial, postcolonial and imperial hierarchies.² They have shown how sexual domination works to construct and categorize

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² Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995); Edward Wadie Said, *Orientalism* (1978); Ann Laura Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th Century Colonial Cultures," in *Imperial Monkey Business: Racial Supremacy in Social Darwinist Theory and Colonial Practice*, by Jane Breman (1990), 35–70; Ann Laura Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusions in Colonial Southeast Asia," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34:03 (1992), 514–51; Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of*

the colonial and postcolonial subjects, while sexual progressiveness is often cast as a feature of white distinction.³ Following Doyle, Said⁴ and Steinmetz,⁵ I take empire as an overarching concept, inclusive of both imperialism and colonialism as distinct political strategies. While colonialism refers to “the implanting of settlements on distant territory”, imperialism “means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.”⁶ Empire refers, here, to the relationship which results from colonialism and imperialism.

The abundance of said research raises important questions for the reading of Foucault’s own analysis of sexuality. Empire is indeed largely absent from Foucault’s history of sexuality. This absence of empire is all the more enigmatic given that, as Ann Laura Stoler⁷ has famously argued, it does not stem from an absence of race. On the contrary, race is almost omnipresent in those writings on sexuality, but also in Foucault’s analyses of liberalism.

In fact, the omnipresence of race in Foucault’s writings on sexuality and liberalism displaces a critical problem: namely, can one elaborate a critical thinking of race, in the context of Western Europe, without accounting for its imbrication with and production through the conditions of coloniality? Can one think productively about race in the absence of empire? The history of race, as a category of universal classification of people and populations, is not easily singled out, neither from that of colonialism, nor from the contemporary implications of coloniality. Quijano, for instance, argues that race was produced as a technology of domination through the colonization of the Americas, and was then unraveled as an operating cog within the world, Euro-centered, division of work and exchanges.⁸

To that extent, I argue for an “alteration of absence” in the reading of Foucault. Acknowledging the paradoxical presence of race--perhaps even its centrality--in Foucault’s analysis of sexuality and liberalism is a necessary step to reveal the depth of another absence, that of empire and coloniality.

I will first briefly discuss this blind spot in Foucault’s work, arguing that a form of racial distinction operates through sexuality. I will attempt to assess how influential this

Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things (1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002).

³ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007); Miriam Ticktin, “Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control: Where French Feminist and Anti-immigrant Rhetoric Meet,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33:4 (June 2008), 863–889.

⁴ Edward Wadie Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

⁵ George Steinmetz, “The Sociology of Empires, Colonies, and Postcolonialism,” in *Annual Review of Sociology* 40:1 (2014), 77–103.

⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 9.

⁷ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*

⁸ “La colonialidad es uno de los elementos constitutivos y específicos del patrón mundial de poder capitalista. Se funda en la imposición de una clasificación racial/étnica de la población del mundo como piedra angular de dicho patrón de poder y opera en cada uno de los planos, ámbitos y dimensiones, materiales y subjetivas, de la existencia social cotidiana y a escala societal.” Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad Del Poder y Clasificación Social,” in *Journal of World-Systems Research* VI, 2 (Summer/Fall 2000), 342.

“imperial absence” is to the genealogy of sexuality and race. Lastly, I will sketch some possible reconfigurations of Foucault’s theses when read in colonial or postcolonial contexts.

IMPERIAL ABSENCE

Given the scope of anticolonial movements when Foucault lived and wrote and his proximity to these movements (Tunisia is one example)⁹, his lack of academic attention to both colonialism and imperialism seems paradoxical at the very least. Foucault uses the term “colonizing genocide” only once to deal, in passing, even somewhat nonchalantly, with the part played by colonization in the origins of racism. Yet the regimes of power that Foucault analyzes were dependent on and forged through colonial economies, politics, and the long reach of empire. This paradoxical absence thus exists as a serious shortcoming in his work, and is made all the more intriguing given that Foucault’s theoretical legacy has impregnated the field of colonial and postcolonial studies. According to Stoler, he has provided one of the most recurrent analytical schemes in the field.

More generally, Foucault’s writings are characterized by a striking disparity of temporalization and spatialization: although Foucault adopts a historical approach, often criticized by historians, as he strives to identify periods, temporal ruptures and continuities, he does not bring the same care to situate spatially the historical material he relies on (though he make great use of spatial metaphors). In not attending to the specificity of space and location, Foucault runs the risk of producing a rather undifferentiated theory of modernity.¹⁰ In an interview published in *Hérodote* in 1976 (n°1, janvier-mars 1976, pp. 71-85)¹¹, geographers remark on this potential weakness in Foucault’s work (“one finds in your work a rigorous concern with periodization that contrasts with the vagueness and relative indeterminacy of your spatial demarcations”; “You accord a de facto privilege to the factor of time, at the cost of nebulous or nomadic spatial demarcations whose uncertainty is in contrast with your care in marking off sections of time, periods and ages.”).

Though Foucault accepts criticism, he attempts to justify his chosen methodologies:

I don’t specify the space of reference more narrowly than that since it would be as warranted to say that I was speaking of France alone as to say I was talking about the whole of Europe. There is indeed a task to be done of making the space in question precise, saying where a certain process stops, what are the limits beyond which something different happens – though this would have to be a collective undertaking.

⁹ Robert Young has dedicated a chapter of his introduction to postcolonial studies to “Foucault in Tunisia,” see Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism. A Historical Introduction*. (2001).

¹⁰ Ranabir Samaddar makes a similar observation regarding Foucault’s writings on Kant, see Ranabir Samaddar, ‘Lire Foucault à l’ère Post-Coloniale’, *Actuel Marx* 47, 1 (2010), 165.

¹¹ Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (1983), 63–77.

This exchange is notable, both in what it reveals and the partiality it makes plain. On the one hand, the neglect of space is made obvious; Foucault is almost eager in his acceptance of this critique. On the other hand, the discussion does not make room for all the stakes that “space,” as an analytical dimension, encompasses. Space is rarely “flat.” On the contrary, it is precisely made analytically crucial by its “relief,” by the power turbulences disordering its flatness. In other words, the problem is not so much geographical, but rather geopolitical. It is not merely about some form of spatial distance, but primarily about the hierarchization of spaces, about subordinating of certain spaces to other ones. Specifically, it is about the question, the “relief”, of coloniality. In that sense, Foucault’s reply, in so far as it in any way satisfies *Herodote’s* initial question, evades a large part of the problem. It is one thing to acknowledge the need to specify the field of a given process, but it is quite another to consider that the neglect of space, and particularly what it implies regarding power and coloniality, could call into question, redeploy, reformulate, a set of historical analyses. Thus, the question of space has the potential not only to shift Foucault’s analysis, but to reconstruct it entirely. It follows from this general assessment of Foucault’s work that it could probably, in its *entirety*, be critically confronted by coloniality. Within this paper, however, I will limit myself to his work on sexuality, and more marginally, liberalism, following the lead of a series of pioneering debates that began in the 1990s.

SEXUALITY AS RACIAL DISTINCTION

Race is most obviously central in Foucault’s writings on liberalism and sexuality¹². It becomes blatant as soon as sexuality and liberalism are read together, that is, when one reconciles the exploration of both books and lectures.

Sexuality within the liberal technology

1976 is a pivotal year. It marks a shift between two components of Foucault’s analyses of power. This shift, discernible even in *The Will to Knowledge*, is more pronounced in the lectures he gave at the Collège de France. In 1972-1973 (*La Société Punitiv*e), 1973-1974 (*Le Pouvoir psychiatrique*), and 1974-1975 (*Les Anormaux*), Foucault lectured on the theme of *disciplines*. In 1977-1978 (*Sécurité, Territoire et Population*) and 1978-1979 (*Naissance de la biopolitique*), and during the first half of his 1979-1980 lectures (*Du gouvernement des vivants*), he is more concerned with the joint themes of biopower and governmentality. In his 1976 lectures (*Il faut défendre la société*), Foucault articulates these two theoretical phases. In his introductory lecture, he reiterates several components of his analysis of

¹² Its entanglement with sexuality and liberalism is in itself a wide topic, which I will not cover in its entirety here.

disciplinary power, which he had laid out in years prior. By the end of the series, he uses the word “biopower,¹³” a neologism that appears in *The Will to Knowledge* as well.

The genealogy of biopower – the shift from a sovereign power, characterized by a right to “make die,” to a power enacted through the management of life – leads to the elaboration of the notion of governmentality. While disciplinary power was the first tenet of biopower, governmentality was theorized as the second one. In actuality, the concept of biopower is short-lived. Foucault does not conceptualize biopower before he sketches its second component, and he thereafter shortly drops this concept altogether as he moves toward a singular focus on governmentality. Nevertheless, it is because of its capacity to bind together these two analyses of power that biopower is conceptually rich. Biopower is a two-dimensional form, encompassing both *disciplinary* and *regulatory* dimensions. The disciplinary pole is referred to as an “anatomy-politics of the human body.” The individual body, apprehended as a machine, is surveyed, worked, punished, and disciplined. The regulatory pole is a “biopolitics of the population,” which approaches the body not as a machine, but at the level of the species.¹⁴

The advent of statistics, an instrument that conceptualizes measurement at the level of the species, enables biological intervention to exist as a *population-wide* regulatory mode.¹⁵ In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault schematizes biopower as a set of two series:

So we have two series: the body-organism-discipline-institutions series, and the population-biological processes-regulatory mechanisms-State. An organic institutional set, or the organo-discipline of the institution, if you like, and, on the other hand, a biological and Statist set, or bioregulation by the State.¹⁶

Hence, biopower is morphologically heterogeneous, even “explosive.”¹⁷ Yet its coherence is enforced by sexuality through the notion of “population.” Population performs more than the mere transition from a single individual to a group of individuals. Indeed, Foucault argues that the concept of population crystallizes a set of regularities attached to this set of individuals and to the environment they inhabit. Yet these regularities are seized from the standpoint of sexuality: in that sense, population can be said to be an outpost of sexuality within the regulatory order. It is through sexuality that the passage from a single individual to a set of individuals is carried out, in so far as sexuality

¹³ As opposed to the sovereign power to kill, Foucault defines biopower as “the right to ‘make’ live and to ‘let’ die.” Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976.*, ed. Mauro Bertani et al., trans. David Macey (2003), 241.

¹⁴ As Fiaccadori points out, however, the distinction between bio-politics and biopower in Foucault is debated among his exegetes. “Some theorists, however, have suggested that this distinction is not of paramount importance for Foucault on the basis that at other times he uses the terms interchangeably. Others instead insist that this distinction is fundamental to understand the workings of power for Foucault. While others still have taken it up and developed it in original, but not always faithful, ways.” Elisa Fiaccadori, ‘State Racism and the Paradox of Biopower’, *Foucault Studies* 19 (June 2015), 155.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I. An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978), 139.

¹⁶ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, 250.

¹⁷ “There was an *explosion* of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of “biopower.” Ibid., 140, emphasis mine.

encompasses the reproductive field, from the brute fact of reproduction, in its anatomic and biological understanding, to the regularities of a population's growth (the regulation of sexual health favors *or* jeopardizes reproduction, to the medical practices which supervise that reproduction and assess its quality through grids of racialization). The child's clandestine onanism suggests the risk of degeneration, and thus becomes the progenitor of tremendous middle-class anxiety. It is one of these gestures which articulate, in practical terms, both the disciplinary and the regulatory. As Foucault makes clear in his lecture of March 17th, 1976, sexuality is a crossroads of power.

Take the very different—though it is not altogether that different—take a different axis, something like sexuality. Basically, why did sexuality become a field of vital strategic importance in the nineteenth century? I think that sexuality was important for a whole host of reasons, and for these reasons in particular. On the one hand, sexuality, being an eminently corporeal mode of behavior, is a matter for individualizing disciplinary controls that take the form of permanent surveillance (and the famous controls that were, from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century, placed both at home and at school on children who masturbated represent precisely this aspect of the disciplinary control of sexuality. But because it also has procreative effects, sexuality is also inscribed, takes effect, in broad biological processes that concern not the bodies of individuals but the element, the multiple unity of the population. Sexuality exists at the point where body and population meet. And so it is a matter for discipline, but also a matter for regularization. It is, I think, the privileged position it occupies between organism and population, between the body and general phenomena, that explains the extreme emphasis placed upon sexuality in the nineteenth century. Hence too the medical idea that when it is undisciplined and irregular, sexuality also has effects at two levels. At the level of the body, of the undisciplined body that is immediately sanctioned by all the individual diseases that the sexual debauchee brings down upon himself. A child who masturbates too much will be a lifelong invalid: disciplinary sanction at the level of the body. But at the same time, debauched, perverted sexuality has effects at the level of the population, as anyone who has been sexually debauched is assumed to have a heredity. Their descendants also will be affected for generations, unto the seventh generation and unto the seventh of the seventh and so on. This is the theory of degeneracy: given that it is the source of individual diseases and that it is the nucleus of degeneracy, sexuality represents the precise point where the disciplinary and the regulatory, the body and the population, are articulated.¹⁸

Two themes arise in this passage. First is the affiliation of sex to blood as well as race through the fear of hereditary effects or the theory of degeneracy. Second is the medical nature of the valorization of sexuality, which introduces a scientific pretension in the arrangement that binds disciplinary power and population-level regulation together. Again, within *The Will to Knowledge*, the vast theoretical articulation between discipline and regulation is mainly accomplished through the thematization of sexuality.

In point of fact, however, they [disciplines and population regulations] were not to be joined at the level of a speculative discourse, but in the form of concrete arrangements

¹⁸ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 251–252.

(*agencements concrets*) that would go to make up the great technology of power in the nineteenth century: the deployment of sexuality would be one of them, and one of the most important.¹⁹

Sexuality is a decisive machinery in the layout of liberal technologies of power. Yet, despite the final insistence in this presentation of the *dispositif* of sexuality as an articulation of two axes of power, *The Will to Knowledge* has been preferentially invested in studies of sexual identity and/or gender identity.²⁰ Hence, if the insights on the individualizing forces of discipline have been explored at length, those on the regulatory, “specifying” force of biopolitics have been silenced, as students of Foucault’s biopolitics were focusing on others components of his work.

Race, racism and biopower

The encounter between sexuality and liberalism in Foucault’s work is not coincidental. This convergence in his work functions as a productive site in which to investigate his thinking about both race and racism. The fact that the articulation of the main two poles of power analyzed by Foucault is carried out in the concrete field of sexuality brings about certain implications. For Foucault, sexuality is intimately bound up with race, which is why sexuality often foreshadows the presence of race in his work. Race is thus present in a number of Foucault’s works. The first hint of an interest in race can be found in *The Birth of the Clinic* and in Foucault’s 1973-1974 lectures. It is through the notion of degeneration and the analyses of heredity that we can see how psychiatry could tap into, or rather give rise to, a racism that was very different in this period from what could be called traditional, historical racism. The racism that psychiatry gave birth to in this period is racism against the abnormal, against individuals who, as carriers of a condition or “defect,” may transmit unpredictable consequences (which they carry within them) to their heirs. It is a racism, therefore, whose function is not so much the prejudice or defense of one group against another as the detection of all those within a group who may be the carriers of a threat to it.²¹

Although the perspective at play here is only one of disciplinary power, we should note that the idea of racism as a form of self-assertion and self-cultivation is also resonant in this first articulation. The following year, in *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault begins to consider race in its entanglement with the problem of population, as he explicitly lays out a genealogy of state racism. However, in the *Abnormal* lectures, he sticks to a “negative” conception of racism, that is, a “thanato-political” conceptualization of racism. Indeed, he explains that the first function of racism is to forge the duality on which social bellicism proliferates through hierarchization of life. As he begins elaborating the concept of biopower in these lectures, he assigns to racism the exteriority of biopower, as if racism was performing the death function necessary for the management of life. “Thanato-

¹⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I. An Introduction*, 140.

²⁰ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, 19-26.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1974-1975.*, ed. Valerio Marchetti et al., trans. Graham Burchell (2003).

politics" thus comes to exist as an underside of the biopolitical.²² Foucault maps out a series of paradoxes produced through the coincident emergence of biopower and retreat of sovereignty.

If it is true that the power of sovereignty is increasingly on the retreat and that disciplinary or regulatory disciplinary power is on the advance, how will the power to kill and the function of murder operate in this technology of power, which takes life as both its object and its objective? How can such a power kill, if it is true that its most important function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances? How, under these conditions, is it possible for a political power to kill, to demand death, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death? Given that this power's objective is essentially to make live, how can it let die? How can the power of death, the function of death, be exercised in a political system centered upon biopower? Foucault explains, writing:

It is, I think, at this point that racism intervenes. I am certainly not saying that racism was invented at this time. It had already been in existence for a very long time. But I think it functioned elsewhere. It is indeed the emergence of this biopower that inscribes it in the mechanisms of the State. It is at this moment that racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States. As a result, the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point, within certain limits and subject to certain conditions.²³

He then positions racism as the key to what we could sum up as the mystery of death within biopower regimes. Without arguing that racism and biopower appeared simultaneously, he implies that racism underwent a significant reconfiguration when biopower overturned the hegemony of sovereignty. Through this reconfiguration, racism became essentially "inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States,"²⁴ so that modern States would be structurally racist. According to Foucault, racism is a technique of fragmentation required for biopower to be exerted. Its first function is to create "caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower," which in turn allows biopower to treat population as "a mixture of races."²⁵ Racism's second function is to establish, on both sides of this division, a "positive relation":

Racism also has a second function. Its role is, if you like, to allow the establishment of a positive relation of this type: "The more you kill, the more deaths you will cause" or "The very fact that you let more die will allow you to live more." I would say that this relation ("If you want to live, you must take lives, you must be able to kill") was not invented by either racism or the modern State. It is the relationship of war: "In order to live, you must destroy your enemies." But racism does make the relationship of war—"If you want to

²² Jeanine Hortonéda, "Sécurité, territoire, population et Naissance de la biopolitique de Michel Foucault Contrechamp," *Empan* 59:3 (1 September 2005), 61–70.

²³ *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, 254.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 254–255.

live, the other must die"—function in a way that is completely new and that is quite compatible with the exercise of biopower. On the one hand, racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship: "The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate." The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer.²⁶

Racism, expressed here in the language of biology, is actually more what allows the bellicose relation than the bellicose relation itself. It is the biologization of the right to kill. Here, racism inverts the relationship between the right to kill and the power over life. Biopower supplants the sovereign right to kill in so far as the right of death has to undergo *positive* biological normalization, namely, racism, so as to be accepted. In the French academy (particularly among philosophers), this theme has been drawn out only in the last fifteen or so years. The first series of articles on this topic, *Foucault: de la guerre des races au biopouvoir*, was published in 2000. In the mid-nineties, however, Stoler had brilliantly argued that seeing race in Foucault's work was not a "presentist" distortion. As she notes, the sixth volume of *History of Sexuality*, announced in the first edition of *The Will to Knowledge*, was to be entitled *Population and Races*. Stoler insists that race and racism are already textually underlying Foucault's thinking on both biopower and State. Following Stoler, I argue that sexuality, when resituated not only in its "disciplinary" constitution but also in its investment within regulatory strategies of liberalism, can be understood as a mechanism of "racial distinction." Sexuality then works as a racial frontier, whether for the body as a machine or the body-as-species, through bourgeois self and population. Nevertheless, this thesis, which I will unpack for the remainder of this essay, is not easily articulated with Foucault's account of racism in "*Society Must Be Defended*," as it goes far beyond his initial conceptualization of the thanato-political.

First, racial relations are set out in the disciplines, or anatomo-politics. Foucault documents a sexual self-affirmation of the bourgeoisie through the transition from a "symbolics of blood" to an "analytics of sex." In 1978, he writes "the bourgeoisie's 'blood' was its sex." In substance, the grammar of the distinction remains unchanged: its origin is racial, its principle remains so. Indeed, this distinction engages a knowledge and a culture of heredity.²⁷ With the appearance of a new set of discourses and techniques of life maximization, the racial dimension is preserved, though redeployed. Following this lead, one realizes that racism takes a very different form from the merely negative distinction, the mere underside of biopower, as can be read in *Society Must Be Defended*. This racism is

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Foucault had planned to dedicate some of his research to this "knowledge of heredity"; he mentions this intention in his application to the Collège de France. See Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 842–846.

anatomo-political: it is positive, expansive, self-centered rather than externally referential. Against accounts of racism as an ideological refusal of the “Other,” racism is here defined first as a technology of power thoroughly connected to biopower, and decisively situated within a culture of the self.

Secondly, racial relations are bound up within the concept of “population.” Foucault narrates the history of the term as a history of technology of power. He explains how, in the 18th century, the Physiocrats transform its apprehension to integrate population within a regime of naturalness – that is, population as regulated by natural rules, and relative to other natural phenomena. Yet the naturalization of population within the liberal “regime of verediction,” implies the existence of a border, one that distinguishes an “us” from a “them.” At the end of his lecture given on January 18th, 1978, Foucault quotes Abeille to document the emergence of “population” as a collective subject. The distinction between “population” and “people” is made blatant.

The people comprises those who conduct themselves in relation to the management of the population, at the level of the population, as if they were not part of the population as a collective subject-object, as if they put themselves outside of it, and consequently the people is those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system. (...) Here too, in this sketch that begins to outline the notion of population, we see a division being made in which the people are generally speaking those who resist the regulation of the population, who try to elude the apparatus by which the population exists, is preserved, subsists, and subsists at an optimal level.²⁸

Here, population, as an object of regulation, becomes the medium of economic xenophobia. This economic xenophobia stems from the right-yet-wrong naturalization of population within liberal thought. Population is always relative to other components of reality. It is natural, or given, only in so far as it confirms the posited – and desired – naturalness of liberal law. It is natural, or given, only to the extent that it accepts its management, so as to grease the wheels of free play between components of reality. Consequently, the economic behavior of the population itself is naturalized, framed between frontiers which validate it, which introduce it to the realm of reality. This troublesome zone of the right-yet-wrong in liberal naturalness is a necessary space for economic xenophobia, or, rather, for self-contradiction within liberal philosophical frameworks. Indeed, the exclusion of certain elements – in this case, of certain individuals or series of individuals – outside of realness, so that they do not disturb the good (and natural) procession of reality, makes clear that liberal governmentality actively shapes the contours of reality which it claims to be a mere response. More than strictly economic xenophobia, these contradictions crystallize a racial implication. This implication appears most clearly during the discussion of the “*débloccage*” (unlocking) of the liberal art of government, which occurs through the axis of sexuality, through family as a segment of intervention on population, that is, through the site of intersection between disciplinary, anatomo-political racism, liberal governmentality, and population management. In

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978.*, ed. Michel Senellart et al., trans. Graham Burchell (2009), 66.

Security, Territory, Population, population is racially constituted through disciplines: the naturalizing norm which supports the dictate of realness, notably of economic behavior, proceeds from a disciplinary form; and the natural right-yet-wrong zone depends upon the disciplinary constitution of the population, which preferentially takes place within the family, which has been newly apprehended as an instrument rather than as a model. This examination of the place of sexuality, via its diffusion in the notion of population, within the pattern of governmentality, suggests that liberal reason relies on a racial distinction: sexuality and population reintroduce, to a certain extent, the binary violence that was lodged in the heart of the pattern of war, first modeled in *Society Must Be Defended*.

CONFRONTING THE PRESENCE OF RACE AND THE ABSENCE OF EMPIRE

Race was born from and gave birth to colonialism, binding capitalism to a second axis of domination and exploitation – namely, racial domination. Yet, if race is indeed present in Foucault, and if this late emphasis on race has more to do with the way Foucault was read rather than with the way he wrote his books and lectures, empire is remarkably absent. How does this imperial absence affect Foucault's thoughts on race? For Homi Bhabha, Foucault's obliviousness regarding coloniality dovetails with his final analysis of race as a "historical retroversion."

In Foucault's *Introduction to the History of Sexuality*, racism emerges in the nineteenth century in the form of an historical retroversion that Foucault finally disavows. In the 'modern' shift of power from the juridical politics of death to the biopolitics of life, race produces a historical temporality of interference, overlapping, and the displacement of sexuality. It is, for Foucault, the great historical irony of modernity that the Hitlerite annihilation of the Jews was carried out in the name of the archaic, premodern signs of race and sanguinity - the oneiric exaltation of blood, death, skin - rather than through the politics of sexuality. What is profoundly revealing is Foucault's complicity with the logic of the 'contemporaneous' within Western modernity. Characterizing the 'symbolics of blood' as being retroverse, Foucault disavows the time-lag of race as the sign of cultural difference and its mode of repetition. The *temporal* disjunction that the 'modern' question of race would introduce into the discourse of disciplinary and pastoral power is disallowed because of Foucault's spatial critique: 'we must conceptualize the deployment of sexuality on the basis of the techniques of power that are *contemporary* with it' (my emphasis)." However subversive 'blood' and race may be they are in the last analysis merely an 'historical retroversion'. Elsewhere Foucault directly links the 'flamboyant rationality' of Social Darwinism to Nazi ideology, entirely ignoring colonial societies which were the proving grounds for Social Darwinist administrative discourses all through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁹

Discussing race and the oblivion of coloniality, Bhabha rightly points out here that it might be too simple a reading to emphasize the discrepancy between the thanato-political framing of race, in *Society Must Be Defended*, and its bio-political account in *The Will to*

²⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994), 247–248.

Knowledge. The examples Foucault illustrates his thesis with are indeed confusing. Why does he attempt to explain racism in the USSR (in *Society Must Be Defended*), or in the Nazi regime (in *The Will to Knowledge*), as instances of massive “contemporary” racism, while he shows no intention of extending his research on race toward an analysis of ongoing processes of colonization, South African apartheid, or, as Stoler suggests, US racial segregation? In his neglect of then-contemporary processes of racial management, he situates Nazism as an anachronism. Race-as-thanato-politics is thus reasserted in his recapitulation of biopolitics in *The Will to Knowledge*.

Rose and Rabinow minimize the potential scope of this example, since Foucault frames it as an exception, “a paroxysmal development.”³⁰ However, his return to sovereign instances of racism allows a first supposition: if Foucault is forced to go back to instances of sovereign racism, it might be because sovereignty plays an important part in the genesis of racism, much like it played a central role in processes of colonialism. It is therefore significant that, as Fiaccadori recounts, his articulation of sovereignty and biopower is erratic.³¹ Although Foucault never explicitly dismisses the sovereign as an antiquated form of power, he treats it nonchalantly, as if it were, in substance, anachronistic. Yet one could rightly ask if the relevance of sovereignty might be *increased* by the reconsideration of coloniality. Indeed, the sovereign seems inescapable when one is concerned with the articulation of biopower and postcolonial geopolitics, and when one attempts to understand how the macro-hierarchization of States impacts the micro-unfolding of power. In this regard, the debate between Ranabir Samaddar and Partha Chatterjee is very telling.³²

Samaddar argues that Chatterjee’s celebrated use of governmentality in postcolonial studies fails to account for (and perhaps deliberately avoids) the violence of social relations in a number of postcolonial contexts, notably in India. If Chatterjee is accused of softening the degree of social violence at play in postcolonial contexts, he is also explicitly reproached for resorting to Foucault’s model of governmentality, rather than to the model of war Foucault outlines in his 1976 lectures. Through this critique, Samaddar deepens the temptation to return to the trope of war in Foucault’s analysis of race and power since postcolonial states of social war are undergirded by the reanimation of material practices that work to subordinate the (post)colonies to their (former) western metropolises. This temptation is evident in the fact that Foucault’s model of war haunts the failed venture of governmentality within postcolonial studies. The reintroduction of racial violence is too fragile, too implicit, or perhaps inadequate. For instance, Foucault simply ignores how imperialism externalizes the familial metaphor in his portrayal of liberalism. Foucault argues indeed that one of liberalism’s key gestures is to move from family as a model to family as a unit of intervention. However, Alison Brysk, Craig Parsons and Wayne Sandholtz’s remarks on the use of the language of family to qualify ties with “ex-colonies”, or on the role of the family metaphor in the reproduction of postcolonial

³⁰ Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, “Biopower Today,” in *BioSocieties* 1 (2006), 195–217.

³¹ Fiaccadori, “State Racism and the Paradox of Biopower,” 167.

³² Samaddar, “Lire Foucault à l’ère Post-Coloniale”.

hierarchies,³³ indicate that the colonial metropolis' – etymologically, and so meaningfully here, the mother-city – overall set of paternalistic discourses and practices could be interpreted as a shift of the familial model rather than its replacement by a radically incompatible liberal governmentality. What is left to question, then, is whether the displacement of these familial schemes is peripheral and thus antecedent to the advent of liberalism, or constitutive of it. The latter of which would both imply and necessitate a radical re-reading of Foucault's genealogy of sexuality.

FOUR STRATEGIC ENSEMBLES

I identify two more critical sites which create the conditions of possibility for a decolonial alteration of Foucault's work. First are his theses on the four strategic ensembles, and the distinction he draws between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. The four strategic unities that he identifies in *The Will to Knowledge* are the "hysterization of women's bodies," the "pedagogization of children's sex," the "socialization of procreative behavior," and the "psychiatrization of perverse pleasure." The signification of these four strategies is actually redeployed as tactics of colonialism, which works to reinforce their racial grammar. Reading Stoler's anthropology (which I occasionally extend in directions that are not always explicitly hers), I realized that it is mainly along these four lines that the dichotomy between colonizer and colonized was blurred, that racial duality was challenged, and that the homogeneity that was supposed to reign in each side of the frontier was thoroughly muddled. In other words, in the colonial context studied by Stoler, it appears that these four lines, supposed battlelines in the struggle for racial distinction, in fact function as sites of profound racial instability. One is white – that is, one is truly considered white – when remaining on the "good" side of the frontier. Race here is never prior to its delimitation through sexuality.

For instance, the character of the perverted adult is also a figure haunted by racial peril. Colonized men were perceived as sexual rivals by white women, signifying potential temptation attracting their – white – men towards an aboriginal homosexuality. Yet male homosexuality threatens white racial prestige. Here, whiteness and homosexuality are cast as mutually exclusive.³⁴

Regarding the sexual saturation of women's bodies, a series of historical researches let us reasonably make the following hypothesis: if the sexualization of women's bodies is indeed a line of racial distinction in colonial contexts, this line does not function as what Foucault describes, but rather proceeds from a logic of racially differentiated sexualization. Hence, multiple observations made by Stoler support this hypothesis. Stoler notes an absence of sexualization in the representations of colonizers' wives. On the contrary, there are numerous accusations of rape against colonized men getting too (geographically) close to these white women in the archive. Deemed both vulnerable and

³³ Alison Brysk, Craig Parsons, and Wayne Sandholtz, "After Empire: National Identity and Post-Colonial Families of Nations," in *European Journal of International Relations* 8:2 (6 January 2002), 267–305.

³⁴ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*.

fragile, female colonizers are housed in separate quarters. This anxiety, though, stems at least as much from their husbands' desire to preserve their own racial privilege as from the desires and anxieties of white women themselves. Said's insights on the oriental woman, and the relations he highlights between sexualization, feminization and racial othering, are also consistent with this thesis.³⁵ Hoelscher identifies the "Southern Lady, empowered by an image of weakness" as a key site ensuring continuity in the racial order.³⁶ As opposed to the sexually promiscuous jezebel, whose relevance in contemporary racial stereotyping has been documented by Brown Givens and Monahan,³⁷ the Southern Belle is pure, delicate and virtuous.

No less a New South fiction than the myth of the Old South, the "Southern Lady" was a construct that depended on passivity, male protection, and a life on a pedestal. The Southern Lady, empowered by an image of weakness, became a key trope in the creation of a memory display made to appear part of the natural course of the past.³⁸

Again, it appears here that it is the body of the racially other which becomes a receptacle of sexual saturation. White women, on the contrary, are represented and at least partially treated, in several colonial contexts, as paragons of virtue and fragility, as if they were *beyond sex*.

When it comes to the onanist children, Stoler's anthropology of the Dutch Indies shows another location of racial anxiety. It appears that it is not so much masturbatory contact with the child's own body but rather contact with prohibited bodies that can endanger the child's racial identity. Stoler stresses how this anxiety crystallized around the bodies of wet nurses. Indonesian wet nurses were not to let their sweat touch the child's skin, and were ordered to follow a Dutch diet so as to produce milk befitting Dutch progeny. If the child here is, once again, at the center of sexual and racial transgression, onanism is not the first fearful cause of racial degeneration anymore. A new ingredient of the sexual dispositive becomes obvious here. What is at stake is the sexual temptation to change sides, namely, to betray one's race.

More generally, Stoler nuances an important aspect of Foucault's account of bourgeois neo-racism. According to Foucault, this neo-racism works through self-assertion: the bourgeoisie operates as the primary subject of the dispositive of sexuality, while proletariat bodies managed to avoid these norms for a long time after this initial encounter.

It was in the "bourgeois" or "aristocratic" family that the sexuality of children and adolescents was first problematized, and feminine sexuality medicalized; it was the first to be alerted to the potential pathology of sex, the urgent need to keep it under close

³⁵ Said, *Orientalism*.

³⁶ Steven Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93:3 (1 September 2003), 657–686.

³⁷ Sonja M. Brown Givens and Jennifer L. Monahan, "Priming Mammies, Jezebels, and Other Controlling Images: An Examination of the Influence of Mediated Stereotypes on Perceptions of an African American Woman," in *Media Psychology* 7:1 (1 February 2005), 87–106.

³⁸ Hoelscher, "Making Place, Making Race," 666.

watch and to devise a rational technology of correction. (...) For their part, the working classes managed for a long time to escape the deployment of "sexuality."³⁹

Without calling into question the self-asserting, auto-referential character of racism, Stoler makes an insightful remark which could give some clues regarding the genealogical weakness of Foucault's explanation of disciplinary racism. Making use both of her historical anthropology of the Dutch Indies and her study of interracial intimacy, Stoler argues that Foucault neglects the subaltern bodies that the bourgeoisie relies upon to assert itself as a class. She recalls that the cultivation of the European bourgeois self "required other bodies that would perform those nurturing services, provide the leisure for such self-absorbed administerings and self-bolstering acts."⁴⁰ He thus neglects those bodies whose labor is used to cater to the bourgeoisie, whose domestic services enable a bourgeois care of the self. Simply put, in forgetting these subjected bodies that the bourgeois distinction is constructed upon and *through*, Foucault obscures the deeply intimate location of racial distinction.

The division between *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*

Foucault draws a civilizational divide between "two great procedures for producing the truth of sex,"⁴¹ namely, *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. The latter is associated with "numerous" societies: "China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies."⁴² Foucault defines this *ars erotica* as a *practice*, in which "truth is drawn from pleasure itself".⁴³ *Ars erotica* is depicted as a secret relationship between master and disciple, in exalted terms: it leads potentially to "an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and its threats."⁴⁴ Foucault resorts to much terser terms when he proceeds to describe *scientia sexualis*:

On the face of it at least, our civilization possesses no *ars erotica*. In return, it is undoubtedly the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession.⁴⁵

Hence, in establishing a distinction between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*, Foucault opposes artistic mastery to scientific procedure, an embodied truth to a confessional one, the mysticism of the master to an individualizing avowal. According to Foucault, avowal is an essential cog in the production of truth, a pivot between truth and individual subjects

³⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I. An Introduction.*, 120–121.

⁴⁰ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, 111.

⁴¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I. An Introduction.*, 57–58.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

in “our” civilization. He goes on: “The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.”⁴⁶

This civilizational line strangely converges with Said’s account of orientalism. In particular, the designation of an “erotic art” very much resembles the romanticization of so-called “oriental” sexuality, which is stereotypically categorized by secrecy, pleasure, and mystery. Said studies the “Oriental” as a system of representations articulated by an interplay of political forces. These political forces have constituted the “Oriental” as an object of “occidental” knowledge, a component of western self-consciousness, or, better, of western empire. The Oriental is then instituted in its relation to the “Occidental,” symbolized as its prime *Other*. It exemplifies what is foreign and inferior. Orientalism, as recounted by Said, can be understood as the systematization of the Oriental, as its expression in an overall system of thought and erudition. Orientalism is a way of seeing, writing, and understanding that is produced by -- and works to produce -- a set of imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases applied to the Oriental. Using Raymond Williams’ concept of “structure of feeling,” Said views orientalism as “a structure of attitude and reference.”⁴⁷ This overall structure implies the construction of the “Oriental” as a character within its play. Said pays close attention to the sexual constitution of this character, who lines up closely, and strangely, with Foucault’s *ars erotica*. This proximity suggests that Foucault might be indebted to a cultural unconscious, and might have uncritically reproduced colonial stereotypes. Damningly, Foucault had not studied any of the countries he classifies on the side of “*ars erotica*.” Yet Foucault’s theorizations of a civilizational cleavage were never criticized by Said himself. Although Said criticized Foucault many times for his eurocentrism and his politics, he never critiqued Foucault’s writing on sexuality, perhaps because he had drawn on elements of Foucault’s writing to elaborate his own work.⁴⁸

Contemporary students of supposedly the zone of “*ars erotica*”, such as Jocelyne Dakhli, Walter Andrews, Mehmet Kalpakli, Khaled El-Rouayheb, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Dror Ze’evi, and Joseph Massad, undermine Foucault’s somewhat rigid divide.⁴⁹ They stress the highly dynamic character of cultural frontiers, particularly as they relate to sexuality and gender. Additionally, these scholars often stress the role played by colonial systems over the establishment of these frontiers.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

⁴⁷ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxiii.

⁴⁸ “The most striking of his blind spots was, for example, his insouciance about the discrepancies between his basically limited French evidence and his ostensibly universal conclusions. ... his Eurocentrism was almost total, as if ‘history’ itself took place only among a group of French and German thinkers.” Edward Wadie Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (2000), 196–197.

⁴⁹ Jocelyne Dakhli, “Homoérotismes et trames historiographiques du monde islamique,” in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 62:5 (1 September 2007), 1097–1120; W. Andrews and M. Kalpakli, *The Age of Beloveds. Love and the Beloved in Early Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (2004); K. El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800* (2005); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (2005); Dror Ze’evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (2005); Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (2007).

The study of interactions *with* Europe is crucially important for the critique of the bifurcation of *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* and for the critique of orientalism more broadly. The work of these theorists both attends to Europe's colonial entanglements, but also allows for an accounting of countries, such as Iran, that have never been subject to direct colonial rule.

On the whole, these historical endeavors reveal important exchanges across a dividing line that is not unique. Rather, this line of demarcation has been reconstructed by a complex political interplay of memory and historiography, and does not always appear where it is expected to. They also attest that the enforcement of a more radical heteronormative regime is not to be interpreted as the effect of a western imposition of a new set of sexual norms. They incite us to resist the Eurocentrism of the historical pattern of the invention of the homosexual, which is a corollary of *scientia sexualis*, through the stigmatization of homoeroticism. They also warn us about the linearity of this model, which brings about a linearization of colonial history, particularly Islamic history. Although the European impact is certainly far from null, what matters is that it does not necessarily unfold through a direct, frontal confrontation. What is more, Europe is not the sole source of influence over its own imperial sphere, and colonialism is not strictly unidirectional: we must attend to the ways in which colonialism directly impacted metropolises across Europe. Andrews and Kalpakli bring to light the simultaneity between mutations of gender and sexual categories in Europe and its confrontation to the Muslim-majority countries in the nineteenth century.

They also question the anteriority of instances of indistinction between Western Europe and the Islamic world. Dakhliya argues that the renewed visibility of tribadism and lesbianism, in Europe, would have come from the Ottoman world, or more broadly from the Islamic world. These authors therefore not only question the categorization of the "West" and the "East" as discreet, but further incite us to contend with the ways in which the latter has *directly* influenced the former.

These works also bear witness to the highly variable nature of gender and sexual regimes. In particular, they epitomize the fact that social and discursive constructions of homoeroticism fluctuate, and that the categories delineating the identity of the homosexual are fashioned in a way that the Foucauldian division does not and, furthermore, *cannot* contend with precisely because Foucault tends to think sexuality without gender. Afsaneh Najmabadi, for example, examines the production of Iranian national modernity and its reliance on a binarization of gender. She sheds light on the retrospective character of gender dimorphism, arguing that processes of gender categorization shifted during the modernist revolution of the nineteenth century.

More generally, Dakhliya, Andrews and Kalpakli, El-Rouayheb, Najmabadi, Ze'evi, and Massad make clear that the division between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*, at least in so far as their domains of enquiry are concerned, should not be apprehended as a duality of two distinct truth-telling procedures. In particular, one has trouble identifying the centrality of the master that Foucault seems so assured of. They acknowledge the presence of stumbling blocks between sexual cultures, but they mostly illuminate the moving,

agonistic and dynamic character of the lines of fracture they study, while stressing the interpenetration that blurs lines of demarcation in the very process of their production. Taking “coloniality” in the strong meaning that Quijano proposes --that is, including territories that, though never colonized, have been submitted to indirect colonial influences-- they demonstrate Foucault’s omission of the cultural effects of colonial systems on conceptions of sexuality. They also point out the quasi monadism in Foucault’s account of the category of “sex,” as if European conceptions of sexuality had been immunized from encounters with extra-European sexual cultures. More generally, these works also shake our periodizations, since the latter rely on what Dakhlija criticizes as a “conventional” historiographic moment, overdetermined and over-invested with meaning. Najmabadi contends that the historicizing process, beyond the matter of periodization, calls into question our very cultural categories, such as the gender categories through which sexuality is apprehended. She asserts that Foucault’s method relies on unproblematized universals, suggesting, in a stance radically opposite from Foucault’s own methodological habits, that comparativism is not only possible but potentially productive. This methodological suggestion would benefit from further extension, since any area of the world could be historically compared to “our” civilization, which Foucault describes as the *only one* possessing a *scientia sexualis*.

Conclusion

These last remarks are mere leads; thoughts that cannot be developed further here. The work of these authors shed light on the condition of the investment of Foucauldian tools in colonial and postcolonial critique in all their limitations. This body of work suggests that it is necessary to come to terms with the incompleteness of Foucault’s theoretical intuitions in order to appreciate the full extent of the potential productivity of his work. The imperial absence in his work is suggestive of a paradox: that of a radical blindness to empire, one that exists alongside the formal productivity of Foucault’s writings for postcolonial theorists. If Foucault’s theses need to be deeply transformed and rearticulated after an encounter with coloniality, they nonetheless continue to provide a set of useful tools that have been productively used by many writing within the field. Foucault is posthumously challenged, contradicted, chided; but he is never dismissed outright. He writes *about* race while being trapped *within* Empire, and henceforth occupies a thoroughly perplexing subjectivity. The fragile equilibrium between race, liberalism and sexuality that he outlines in his work is haunted by its obliviousness to Empire and coloniality. Consequently, the main weakness of his genealogy of racism might lie in the fact that he constructs a theoretical frame that is too wide, as it allows manifold forms of domination disconnected from tactics of racialization to travel under the sign of racism. It is this gesture which leads to an oversignification of racism in his work. Yet the specificity of race can definitely not be accounted for in the absence of Empire, as it is a flaw that brings its own risks, most centrally the danger of diluting racism, and thus the struggle

for racial justice, in its underestimation of the specificity of racial domination.⁵⁰ The risk, simply put, is that in asking racism to operate as a broad metaphor, we gamble subordinating it to other political fights.

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