CHAPTER 20

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LANGUAGE AND SEXUALITY

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Laying the Groundwork

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Tʜɪs chapter aims to give an overview of the developments within the field of language and sexuality over the last thirty years or so. It begins with an outline of research trends and most recent debates; it then moves on to provide a discussion of the importance of a spatial approach to language and sexuality; and it ends with some suggestions for future directions. The main argument I want to mount is that the linguistic/discursive study of sexuality has much to gain from an engagement with materiality and corporeality. Before delving into the developments and heated debates within this field, however, I want to begin by explaining what I mean by *sexuality* and what is entailed here by the terms *language* and *linguistic*.

As the name itself suggests, sexuality has to do with sex, understood in two main senses: (1) as a specific aspect of the human biological makeup (penises/vaginas, XX/XY chromosomes, and in-between variations on these dyads); and (2) as erotic and/or procreative desires and practices, which may build upon, but are not reducible to, those bodily features. In this way, sexuality is related to, but should not be conflated with, sexual identities (i.e., heterosexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, asexual, etc.). These are forms of claim staking—intentional or not—through which individuals position themselves and others in terms of their preferred object of desire (or lack thereof). So, albeit related, there is a qualitative difference between, on the one hand, sexual desires and practices, which encapsulate the dynamics of a verb ("I feel" or "I do"), and, on the other, sexual identities, which, no matter how fluid and negotiable they might be, indicate a form of more or less temporary stasis ("I am").

This distinction between what one does and feels, and who one is sexually, is beautifully captured by the English writer Peter Ackerley in the novel *My Father and Myself*. When asked by a friend whether he was "homo" or "hetero," Ackerley recounts answering, "I did not care for the word 'homosexual' or any label, but I stood among the men, not the women," so "there seemed only one answer." Through the label "homo," he

continues, "I was now on the sexual map and proud of my place on it" (1999: 153–154). As Joseph Bristow poignantly notes about this literary excerpt, Ackerley's comments are indicative of "a curious tension between sexual *naming* and sexual *being*, revealing the power of the term homosexual to grant a coherent place in the cultural order, while at the same time expressing some discontent at having one's erotic preference attached to a specific classification" (Bristow, 2011: 4, emphasis added).

While Ackerley's example vividly captures the frictions between sexual identity and erotic feelings, it should not lead us to believe that sexuality only pertains to same-sex relations; heterosexual arrangements are no less part of the sexual realm. However, they are usually taken for granted and invisible, as a result of specific historical and socio-cultural processes that (re)produce heterosexuality as both "normal" and "normative." Needless to say, what is considered good (versus bad) and normal (versus deviant) sexual activities and identities are historically and socioculturally situated.

In sum, *sexuality* is as an umbrella term, "encompassing both sexual identity and eroticism" (Queen, 2014: 204), as well as the historically societal norms and conditions that regulate the two. But what role does language play with sexual identities and the domain of the erotic? And what is encompassed under the word *language*?

Understood as verbal and written code(s), language is a key resource through which human beings talk and write about, and hence understand, the world. First, among the most important affordances offered by language are the *labels* through which individuals and groups can invoke identities—sexual and otherwise—that serve particular purposes. A well-known example in the politics of labeling is the slogan "We're here, we're queer—get used to it," popularized by the US activist organization Queer Nation in the 1990s. Historically employed as a slur in English-speaking contexts, *queer* underwent a process of resignification in the late 1980s, when it began to be used as a positively laden in-group marker, one that sought to overcome the gendered splits created by the categories "gay" and "lesbian," and create instead a broader constituency including anyone who goes against normality, irrespective of sexual (self-)identification. In this context, queer also marked a break with a specific type of politics geared to achieving the recognition of sexual minorities on grounds of their identities, inaugurating instead a more radical activism that is less concerned with acceptance than with overt "resistance to regimes of the normal" (Warner, 1993: xxvi), and thus critiques binary and essentialist view of gender and sexuality.

Second, language is also an indispensable means through which to make sense of erotic activities. To take another example from the United States, in the wake of President Bill Clinton's extramarital relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, 60 percent of US college students surveyed by Sanders and Reinisch (1999) thought that the contact between mouth and genitals (*fellatio*) does not count as "sex." This is also what President Clinton seems to have meant in his now historical pronouncement: "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" (Sanders and Reinisch, 1999; see also Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 3). Every time I conduct the same survey among the cohorts of students who take my course "Language, Gender and Sexuality," there is never

agreement on which practices of intimacy can be subsumed under the category "sex." This is not to say that students cannot make up their minds about sex. Rather, the point is that one and the same intimate practice can be talked about differently, and hence is imbued with different meanings, by different people in different contexts.

Overall, an explicitly linguistic focus on sexuality "encompasses not only questions about how people enact sexuality in their talk, but also questions about how sexuality and sexual identity are represented linguistically in a variety of discourse genres" (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 12). As I have suggested elsewhere (Milani and Johnson, 2010; Milani, 2013), however, a purely logocentric approach that views language simply as verbal and written code—be it in a conversational interaction, a newspaper article, or a dating website—fails to fully address the multilayered nature of semiosis. This is because, as Kress and van Leeuwen have pointed out, "[l]anguage *always* has to be realized through, and comes in the company of, other semiotic modes," concluding that "any form of text analysis which ignores this will not be able to account for all the meanings expressed in [those] texts" (1998: 186). In the same way, I would argue that in order to fully understand the different meaning-making processes about sexuality, we cannot afford to overlook *multi-semioticity*, that is, the interplay between the verbal, the visual, and other semiotic modes, such as the corporeal.

Before discussing what a multi-semiotic approach to sexuality might entail, however, I want first to give an overview of the developments in research on language and sexuality over the last twenty years or so; this is followed by a discussion on what can be considered the most heated discussion in the field, the so-called "identity/desire debate."

At this juncture, I want to state up front that this chapter cannot do justice to the richness of theoretical frameworks, methodological techniques, and empirical insights in the growing body of scholarship on language and sexuality. In fact, as Norman Fairclough (1995) has taught us, the choice of foregrounding some aspects of reality—academic production included—inherently brings with it the backgrounding of others. This partiality, in turn, is not random but is the direct byproduct of what the Scollons call the "historical body" (Scollon and Scollon, 2004), namely the sum of "life experiences of the individual social actors [. . .], their goals and purposes, and their unconscious ways of behaving and thinking" (Scollon and Scollon, 2004: 46). Ultimately, the texture of this chapter has been woven following my own "historical body," which includes *inter alia* an academic formation as discourse analyst, an epistemological allegiance to post-structuralism, a queer aversion to any discourse of "acceptance" and "tolerance," and a multitude of other structures of feelings and beliefs, which, as the Scollons remind us, might not be immediately accessible to my consciousness but nonetheless permeate my research production. The recognition that knowledge is always partial, locally situated, and created by bodies, themselves shaped by histories that are particular in nature, is by no means tantamount to a dismissal of the importance of academic rigor. Quite the contrary, according to poststructuralist epistemologies, it is precisely through reflexivity that a researcher achieves that rigor, rather than "employ amnesia and poor arithmetic whilst claiming academic neutrality" (Heugh, 2003: 39).

TWENTY YEARS OF LANGUAGE AND SEXUALITY RESEARCH: FROM GAY LANGUAGE TO QUEER LINGUISTICS

The following overview of the developments in the field of language and sexuality over the last twenty years has been informed by a recent quantitative, diachronic investigation (Baker, 2013) of a corpus of abstracts of the papers presented at the yearly Lavender Language and Linguistics Conference during the period 1994–2012. While Baker's (2013) study will allow me to outline general trends in language and sexuality research, I will exemplify some of the main points by referring to a broader pool of scholarly work, irrespective of whether it was presented at the conference or not.

Needless to say, abstracts give only a partial indication of a broader field of inquiry. After all, not everyone working on language and sexuality presents his or her work at this conference. Moreover, as a genre, abstracts typically contain a shorter, percolated version of larger piece of work. However, the texts in this study "tended to provide succinct summaries of a paper's focus, research questions and theoretical and methodological frameworks used, so they could be classed as a 'rich' source of data" (Baker, 2013: 183).

For a diachronic analysis to be performed, the corpus was divided into eight time periods of two or three years each. Keywords analysis was then carried out for each period with the help of the corpus linguistic software WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2004). In corpus linguistics, keywords are "lexical items which occur statistically more frequently in one text or set of texts when compared with another (often a larger 'benchmark' corpus)" (Baker, 2006: 22). The eight sections of the corpus of conference abstracts were compared with the AmE06 corpus (Potts and Baker, 2012), which contains one million words of published written American English text. The choice of this reference corpus was dictated by the fact that the conference has always been held in the United States and a large portion of the delegates was also North American.

The part of the study that is most relevant for the purpose of this overview seeks to understand whether, and if so how, the theoretical and analytical foci of the papers presented at Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference have changed over time. Table 20.1 showcases the temporal aspect of the "keyness" of certain words—their *statistically significant salience*—in the corpus of abstracts during the periods under investigation.

What emerges most clearly from Table 20.1 is how identity has consistently held a key position in language and sexuality research presented at the conference, and still seems to cling onto this position, whereas desire was arguably a momentary "aberrance" that fizzled out rather quickly (see also section in this chapter about the identity/desire debate).

Similarly, *language* appears to be a constant variable in the conference abstracts. This might not be particularly surprising, considering the name of conference

Table 20.1 Keywords

Concept	Always Key	Previously Key (i.e., between 1994 and 2002)	Recently Key (i.e., between 2003 and 2012)
Analytical foci[1]	Discourse, language	Linguistics, representations	Discursive, analysis, presentation
Theoretical foci	Identity, identities	Culture, desire	Normative

[1]The distinction between analytical and theoretical foci depends on how words were used in context—some seemed linked to aspects of the analysis, while others were associated with the theoretical premises of the abstracts (Paul Baker, personal communication).

Adapted from Baker (2013).

itself—Lavender Languages and Linguistics. However, As Baker (2013) highlights, an examination of the actual occurrences of the word "language" indicates a theoretical shift that cannot be grasped by considering purely its rather stable level of keyness. Until 2002, conference participants tended to espouse the view that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people spoke a specific type of language, as is testified by the occurrence of the expressions "gay men's English," "gay language," and "gay speech." In more recent years, conference participants have not completely discarded the idea that sexual minorities might employ linguistic resources in ways that are different from heterosexuals; these researchers, however, "tend to use more cautious and qualified phrasing which focuses on language *use* or language *associated with* an identity" (Baker, 2013: 197).

This shift about the meaning of language can be better understood in the light of the academic context in which the conference emerged and the broader discussions that unfolded outside it. First, it is no coincidence that the founder of the conference, William Leap, has been a leading figure in research on "gay language." In the book *Words Out,* Leap offered convincing empirical evidence of the ways in which a group of self-identified gay men in Washington, DC, employ what he calls "Gay English,"

> a distinctive gendered approach [. . .] to oral, written and signed text making [. . .] [which] may include a specialized vocabulary or may be rich in male homoerotic content, but fluency in Gay English involves more than a personal familiarity with those words and phrases. (1996: xii)

The argument about the existence of a specific linguistic variety—a kind of sexual dialect or sexolect—was made on the basis of linguistically rich examples of conversations that could be only recorded because Leap was a participant observer. Because of his insider's perspective, Leap "was in a good position make insights into the subtleties and ambiguities of the interactions. However, it is important not to generalise his research" (Baker, 2008: 71).

Similarly, in a study of a conversation among lesbian friends in the United States, Morgan and Wood (1995) illustrate a series of discursive strategies through which the speakers in the study co-construct a narrative about shared memories of "big old rain boots," and "galoshes." Interestingly, the authors go a step further, arguing that "[t]he co-construction of a narrative binds us together in a sort of temporary conversational community [. . .]. This unrehearsed rhythmic collusion was another tool which worked to connect us *as lesbians* to a perceived, shared past" (1995: 245). As was the case of Leap's analysis, the researchers' insider position in the peer group and their lived experiences about what is being talked about are "warrants" (Swann, 2002) enough for the analytical leap about the relevance of a sexual identity (lesbian) to boots and galoshes. But, as Cameron and Kulick note, "[c]onfronted only with [. . .] [the] transcript, an analyst might be hard pressed to identify its specifically lesbian content. However, because Morgan and Wood know the participants to be lesbian, they interpret as specifically *lesbian talk*" (2003: 95).

So it is the researchers' acquaintance with the participants' sexual identity that constitutes the basis for the interpretation of the data set in sexual terms. It is open to debate whether such a warrant is enough to call the set of data under investigation lesbian language or lesbian discourse. Perhaps what needs asking is this: Would the conversation about boots and galoshes have been linguistically differently if it had involved heterosexual interactants? Would heterosexual speakers talk about these pieces of outfit at all as key elements of their childhood memories? Would other self-identified lesbians in the United States display a similar choice of topic in the narratives about their life stories? Finally, which other identities, such as race, class, and age, are at play here?

As a result of the critique raised against the very grounds on which the argument about a gay or lesbian language rests, more recent studies have been more careful not to reach too quickly conclusions about the ontology of linguistic varieties solely on the basis of their speakers' sexual identity. Rather, this scholarly work seeks to understand the meaning and function of linguistic practices—what people do with language—in light of those people's beliefs about language (i.e. their language ideologies; see also Hall, 2014).

For example, Msibi (2013) researched how a group of Black male teachers in rural areas of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, employ a specific variety of isiZulu—isiNgqumo, which is labeled as a "gay language" by its users and other speakers of isiZulu. Msibi points out that isiNgqumo is not spoken by all Black men who have sex with other men in Kwa-Zulu Natal; nor is this linguistic variety the precinct of men only, but is employed by women as well. All this leads him to question the very characterization of isiNgqumo as a "gay language" or "gay variety." That being said, Msibi offers compelling evidence of the highly contextual and contingent ways in which isiNgqumo can be employed by *some* men who engage in same-sex relations as "responses of resistance to homophobia, harassment, isolation, and ridicule" (Msibi, 2013: 259).

Quite a different picture is portrayed by Levon (2010) in an investigation of gay men's usage of the slang variety *oxtchit* in Israel. Unlike the South African male teachers studied by Msibi, who perform rather candid acts of resistance through language, the Israeli

men display a more ambiguous attitude toward *oxtchit*, a variety that is indexical of femininity. Drawing upon Bakhtin's notion of "vari-directional utterance," Levon shows how the men in the study perform linguistic acts of *mockery* through which *oxtchit* is displaced onto a non-present, feminine "other." In this way, these men discursively disavow male femininity and align themselves to hegemonic masculinity. Such performances, however, are not straightforward acts of collusion with dominant social norms. In a context like Israel, where homosexuality has historically been barred by the overarching nationalist discourse, the very mocking of *oxtchit* is itself transgressive in that it allows these men to perform a non-normative sexual identity within the constraints of accepted gender norms. So, as Levon points out, "while in a certain sense freeing themselves from one structure of subjugation (i.e., the exclusion of gay male sexuality as a viable embodiment of Israeli national identity), the [. . .] men enmesh themselves in another (i.e., the requirement that Israeli men embody hegemonic masculinity)" (Levon, 2013: 19). So, the Israeli data are indicative of how collusion and resistance may be accomplished in tandem through linguistic means; they also demonstrate how discursive enactments of sexuality are deeply imbricated with performances of gender.

Read together, the work by Msibi and Levon may be indicative of a broader shift in language and sexuality research from a dialectological interest in "fishing" existing linguistic varieties allegedly spoken by some members of sexual minorities to a more nuanced understanding of *language use*. Rather than pre-positing the existence of a linguistic variety in need of discovery, such an approach investigates how certain linguistic forms index, that is, point to specific social categories in a particular context, and how these indexical links are deployed by social actors, irrespective of their sexual self-identifications—for a variety of interactional purposes.

These studies were on some level informed by queer theory, a set of heuristic lenses that seeks to understand how gender and sexuality have been "casually entangled in knots that must be undone" (Butler, 1998: 225–226). Queer theory is geared in particular to deconstructing the processes through which certain sexual identities and practices become normal and normative, whereas others are reproduced as "deviant." A key axiom in queer thinking is that we should be wary of too easily making conflations between sexual desires and practices (a man desiring and/or having sex with another man), on the one hand, and sexual identities (homosexual, gay), on the other. As was mentioned with regard to the literary example in the introductory section to this chapter, desires and practices are dynamic forces, whereas identities are congealed forms; they are shapes that "tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (Butler, 1991: 13–14).

Queer theory has become overwhelmingly influential in the study of language and sexuality (see, e.g., Bucholtz and Hall, 2004; Livia and Hall, 1997; Motschenbacher, 2011). This has led to the emergence of queer linguistics, a strand of research that "puts at the forefront of linguistic analysis the regulation of sexuality by hegemonic heterosexuality and the ways in which nonnormative sexualities are negotiated in relation to these regulatory structures" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 471; see also Baker, 2008;

Motschenbacher, 2011, for detailed discussions about the debates surrounding queer linguistics). The success of queer linguistics, with its overt concern with unveiling heteronormative discourses and practices, might explain why the foci of the papers presented at the Lavender Language and Linguistics Conference have shifted in recent year toward "homophobic and (hetero)normative discourse or discursive practices and queering normative texts" (Baker, 2013: 199; see also Leap, 2010; Murray, 2009, for work on homophobia). Interestingly, (sexual) desire, which also lies at the very heart of queer theoretical thinking, was only momentarily key at the conference, losing salience drastically in recent years, possibly as a result of the ways in which the so-called identity/desire debate unfolded after the publication of the book *Language and Sexuality* (Cameron and Kulick, 2003a). It is to such an academic discussion that we will now turn.

Identity and Desire in Language and Sexuality Research

We saw in the previous section how research on language and sexuality has been heavily reliant on the notion of identity. Indeed, one could go as far as to say that, whether viewed as a stable, unified core with ontological status that can explain a particular linguistic behavior, or as a fluid, multifaceted social construct that is itself in need of explanation, identity has occupied a special position in the study of the relationships between language and sexuality.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, some scholars have called for the need for a "moratorium" on identity in language and sexuality research (Kulick, 2000: 272). Championing this position, Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (2003a, 2003b, 2005) have pointed out that sexuality *is not* and *cannot* be reducible to sexual identity only. Drawing upon an eclectic group of what some scholars might consider rather incompatible thinkers—Freud, Lacan, Deleuze, and Guattari—Cameron and Kulick have argued that a deeper understanding of sexuality cannot leave out an engagement with the desire. It is important to highlight that an approach that foregrounds desire does *not* entail a complete rejection of identity as analytical construct. In fact, it is hard to dispute that "people do self-identify and are labelled by others as male, female, gay, lesbian or heterosexual, etc. These identities 'exist' within discourse, shaping the minds, bodies and lives of many people" (Baker, 2008: 194). But, the point that Cameron and Kulick have tried to make is that, whereas identity does matter, it is not enough to capture the complexity of sexuality as perceived, embodied, and lived by people in their social contexts.

In line with Lacan (1998), Cameron and Kulick (2003) assert that desire is always *transitive*, that is, it is always for another person or object. Therefore, taking desire as an analytical object compels us "to problematize both the subject and the object of desire, and investigate how the relationships between the two are materialized through language"

(Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 107). Related to this, a focus on desire helps to capture the Gordian knot of gender, sexuality, and other forms of social difference. After all, as Cameron and Kulick remind us, "desiring subjects and desired objects are never genderless" (2003: 142). Thus, the domain of the erotic is *inherently* structured along gender lines, which, in turn, are likely to be laminated over by other axes of social categorization such as age, social class, and race.

These arguments generated a flurry of reactions critiquing the proposal of bringing desire and the unconscious into the study of language, gender, and sexuality. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall were perhaps the strongest opponents, raising important theoretical and methodological concerns. The main problem, they argued, lies in the fact that the psychoanalytic theories on which Cameron and Kulick's arguments rest do not offer adequate analytical tools for the empirical study of the ways in which desire is materialized through language, for they would "require sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, and discourse analysts to reinvent themselves as field psychoanalysts, ascribing repressed desires to those they study" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 480). Moreover, in stating that "desire is always mediated in some way by identity; that is, longing is always articulated through and against standpoints of belonging" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004: 507), they also leveled a more fundamental objection to the notion of desire itself as a byproduct of identity.

With hindsight, Coupland suggests that "the contest between these two analytic positions seems to be based on false premises" (2007: 135). Or, to put it differently, an interest in desire does not necessarily entail an outright rejection of identity, and vice versa (see also Leap and Motschenbacher, 2012).

Evidence of such a mid-ground position can be found in Kiesling's (2011) analysis of spoken interactions in a college fraternity in the United States. As a theoretical entry point, Kiesling relies on Whitehead's (2002) notion of "ontological desire." Here the assumption is that acts of identity are acts of "ontological security" (Giddens, 1991); they are ways through which the speaker constantly aims at granting a stable and authentic position for the self. But, given that the self, according to poststructuralist theories, can only manifest itself in discourse, it is always multiple, unstable, and transient. Accordingly, stability and authenticity are destined to remain a pursuit—an ideal that one does not have, but that one *desires* without ever completely achieving it.

Through painstakingly detailed linguistic analysis of conversations, Kiesling illustrates that the performances of heterosexual masculinity in social interaction are ultimately materializations of a *desire* for hegemonic masculinity. This, in turn, is enabled by constantly invoking available, often conflicting, cultural discourses about what counts to be a "proper" man. Needless to say, aiming at hegemonic masculinity is synonymous with an attempt to gain a position of power.

However, what is most relevant for our discussion here is that a full account of desire requires taking into consideration how speakers are shaped by the desire to have one's identities endorsed by the members of a present or imagined audience. Or, to put it differently, the pursuit for a masculine identity position always requires "authenticators" (cf. Bucholtz and Hall, 2004) that reward this attempt of desiring that masculine

identity. This is perhaps most patent in a flirting interaction that occurs between two young people, Jen and Pete, at a bar. Here Pete and Jen are enacting gender-stereotypical roles in the US context: Pete displays himself as rational and self-confident at the same time, as he answers Jen's question very briefly; conversely, Jen shows herself insecure while keeping the interaction going (see Fishman's [1978] canonical study). In this instance, Kiesling maps out the complex interplay between heterosexual desire, identity, and cultural discourses, whereby heterosexual desire is co-constructed asymmetrically by Pete and Jen in interaction and mediated through conventionalized ideas about what counts as masculine versus feminine. Against this backdrop, Kiesling concludes that "when discussing desire in analysing language and gender identity is to think about the desire we wish to create in others in order to gain approval of our identities" (2011: 233).

Analyses like this, however, are rare, and relatively little empirical work has been conducted to date in order to investigate whether the notion of desire is analytically productive and methodologically viable in the study of language and sexuality (see however, Georgakopoulou, 2005; Kiesling, 2005, 2011; Milani and Jonsson, 2011; Takahashi, 2013; Valentine, 2003; see also Køhler Mortensen, 2015, for a recent compelling investigation of the discursive construction of heterosexual desire in online environments). Sociolinguists' lukewarm engagement with desire might be mainly due to an analytical discomfort with the psychoanalytic legacy of this concept; it might also be related to the fact that "desire invokes the specter of the natural. Society mystifies and romanticizes desire" (2002, 105). Yet what Cameron and Kulick proposed is to unveil the way in which desire is socially mediated through language under particular historical conditions, which may involve, among other things, a reliance on discourses of naturalness. Moreover, Frantz Fanon (2008) reminds us that the power imbalances produced and justified on racial grounds cannot be fully understood unless one also teases out the sexual desires and fears generated by race.

It is with a view to understanding the nexus of same-sex desire and race that I recently undertook an ethnographic study involving twelve white, middle-class, non-heterosexual, South African men, aged twenty-five to thirty-eight, who reside in the Johannesburg-Pretoria area (Milani, 2014c). The reasons for the choice of this specific sample are manifold. To begin with, all these men have formed part of my circle of acquaintances during the last five years. While such a connection could be criticized for bringing a personal bias into the research, it allowed me to gain deeper ethnographic insights into these men's lives and beliefs *beyond* the relatively limited space of the actual interviews (see also Baker, 2008; Leap, 1996). Moreover, all the men whom I interviewed spent their childhood during apartheid, but had firsthand experience of the transition to a democratic South Africa during their adolescence and early adulthood. In this way, they can be taken to be *men of social transformation.* However, unlike many of their peers who strongly bemoan post-apartheid conditions, they can be defined as liberal insofar as they all consistently show positive attitudes toward the main tenets of the new dispensation, embracing a multiracial South

Africa: they would generally not pronounce overt racist utterances; nor would they make easy racist jokes or gaffes (see also Hill, 2008). When talking about sex, however, nearly all these men strongly disavow the possibility of engaging in sexual relations with Black men.

What is particularly interesting is how several of the men in the study become aware of the disavowal of Blackness in the actual talk about potential sexual encounters, and express disapproval of their own racialized sexual choices through a series of metaprag-matic commentaries ("I can't believe what I've just said," "What I've said is so horrible," "I don't like to think that I think these things"). These linguistic examples demonstrate that "there are already around each moment of apparent intimacy pasts in which you are entangled even if you don't notice them: *ghostly pasts*" (Ahmed in Antwi et al., 2013: 120, emphasis added)—the pasts of apartheid racial separation. Furthermore, several of these men—no matter how liberal they might be in other contexts—disparage the Black Other as violent, backward, dirty, less educated, and ultimately inferior. Similarly, even those who have had or might consider having sexual encounters with a Black man fetishize those very traits that the other men have scorned, and thus (re)position Black men as exotic sexual objects, down-to-earth, aggressive penetrators with a large penis, which are ultimately only good for sex. Overall, racial categories in the talk trigger other forms of social categorization through which the white men in the study discursively accomplish *social distinction*—supremacy even; they present themselves as better, more educated, less violent, more modern, and more progressive than the racial Other (see also Puar, 2007).

These results might not be particularly surprising, considering that apartheid came to an end only twenty years ago, and the structures of thinking created by state-sanctioned racial segregation will certainly take a long time to change. Yet, in a context like South Africa, where overt racism is increasingly less acceptable in public discourse, and the embracing of racial "transformation" has become a benchmark of progressive and lib-eral dispositions, a focus on the sexual desire of a group of some liberal white, non-heterosexual men reveals the way in which racism and its concomitant white supremacy have been *repressed* away from the public sphere into the most intimate domains. In a society made up of people still "living together but separately" (Menon, 2012: 258), the potential of a deeper social transformation perhaps lies in South Africans finding each other desirable, as sexual and romantic partners, irrespective of perceptions of skin pigmentation. A truly *post*-apartheid society might only begin once South Africans acknowledge the racial Other *as their human equal*, and allow him or her to share not just their houses, but also their bed sheets.

Perhaps the promise of better understanding—and maybe transforming—social structures and practices lies precisely in the mapping of the social life of desire, and other forms of affect, teasing out how they manifest semiotically in a variety of spaces. As I will argue in the next section, the investigation of the spatial semiotics of sexuality—understood as both identity and desire—might be an avenue worth pursuing further in language and sexuality research.

EXPANDING THE "LINGUISTIC": TOWARD A SPATIAL SEMIOTICS OF SEXUALITY

The notions of *space* and *place* have always been important in the study of the relationship between language and society. Early work in regional and social dialectology demonstrated how linguistic variation is not random but depends on speakers' geographical and social provenance. Space was treated in this research as an independent variable that could explain patterns of linguistic behavior. Partly as a result of the poststructuralist turn in sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology, of which this *Handbook* is itself a product, some scholars have argued that the social constructedness of space/place itself needs to be investigated. Blommaert remarks that "[s]pace can be filled with all kinds of social, cultural, epistemic, and affective attributes. It then becomes 'place,' a particular space on which senses of belonging, property rights, and authority can be projected" (2005: 222). From this particular point of view, the notion of space is qualitatively different from that of place. Whereas the former is ascribed some kind of pre-discursive ontology, the latter denotes the social meaning ascribed to that very reality through discourse. Whether this distinction is analytically productive is a matter of further debate. Yet what needs highlighting for the purpose of this study is how the interest in language and space/place has recently gained institutional momentum, leading to the establishment of *linguistic landscape* (LL), an exciting new subfield of sociolinguistic inquiry (see Van Mensel et al., Chapter 21 of this volume). Interestingly, however, sexuality seems to be conspicuous by its absence in LL research (see, however, Piller, 2010, for a notable exception, as well as work on language and sexuality in online environments).

With this in mind, what kind of added value does sexuality offer to analyses of the discursive construction of space? Conversely, what does a focus on space add to investigations of sexuality?

It is a truism among social and cultural geographers that public spaces both mirror and produce specific power relations (Lefebvre, 1970). To this one could add the feminist insight that the private is no less political. Needless to say, the very dichotomy between public and private is itself problematic because, as Gal has pointed out, "'public' and 'private' are not particular places, domains, spheres of activity, or even types of interaction. . . . Public and private are co-constitutive cultural categories . . . and equally importantly, indexical signs that are always relative" (Gal, 2002: 80). Public and private are thus signifiers that have historically carried gendered and sexual connotations that are not innocuous. In many Western and non-Western contexts, the domain of the home has been associated with women, whereas public life has been viewed as an exclusively male precinct (see Caldas-Coulthard, 1995; Johnson and Ensslin, 2007; Milani, 2014a, for recent examples). Moreover, Foucault has demonstrated that, since Victorian times, "[s]exuality [. . .] moved into the home. [. . .] A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged [. . .] at the heart of every household [. . .]: the parents' bedroom" (Foucault, 1990: 3), which is what ultimately made sex in public not only illegal but also

a form of moral "deviance," which would breach "public decency," whatever this may mean. Hence, a focus on sexuality when analyzing space not only allows a questioning of the very constructedness of the private/public divide, but also offers us a deeper understanding of the ways in which modern power works, among other things, by hiding its own operations from the domain of the visible.

Of course, Foucault has taught us that the workings of power are never completely straightforward because "where there is power there is resistance" (1990: 95). An example of such complex dynamics in relation to the sexuality/space nexus is offered by Koller (2015) in a study of an online blog published on the *Transfriendly* website, which is part of the larger web hosting platform *Blogger.com*. The blog has been authored by an anonymous "Mr. J," who defines himself as "male" and as a "London-based tranny muscle boy." Through detailed linguistic analysis of the online text, the study shows how the blogger discursively creates a place in which sexual activities take place in semi-public environments. In this way, the author defies normative conventions that relegate sexuality to the private comfort of the marital bed. By virtue of being located on a larger blogging platform that "neither encourages nor discourages sexual activity" (Koller, 2015: 268), the narrative in the blog also contributes to the sexualization of a relatively neutral online space. Such spatial transgression, however, goes hand in hand with less subversive practices of gender and sexual normativity. As Koller notes about the narrative, "the participants are constructed as binary opposites rather than fluid and merging" (Koller, 2015: 267). Moreover, hegemonic masculinity is (re)produced here through a representation of the first-person narrator as active and controlling vis-à-vis his sexual partner, who is depicted as submissive, vulnerable, and tentative. So, in the same way as the Israeli men studied by Levon (see earlier discussion) simultaneously reiterated and contested social norms in linguistic interactions, the representations of sexuality and space analyzed by Koller suggest a similarly ambiguous picture, one in which resistance coexists with the reproduction of the status quo.

While a focus on sexuality brings with it a sensitivity to the complex spatial dynamics of power, an approach that takes space as the analytical lens through which to understand sexuality has other analytical and methodological implications as well. This is a point that can be illustrated with reference to a so-called "die-in" protest that was enacted by the queer feminist group One in Nine against Joburg Pride parade in the wealthy and mostly racially white suburb of Rosebank in 2012 (Milani, 2015). Unbeknownst to the Pride organizers, a group of mainly Black women carrying human-sized figures ran before the parade and lay flat on the street tarmac, creating a human-mannequin carpet of bodies in front of the incoming parade. Carrying the signs "No cause for celebration" and "Dying for justice," a few other women went to stand behind the strip of apparently dead bodies and asked the walkers to stop and hold a minute of silence in memory of all the Black lesbians and gender non-normative individuals who had been killed in South Africa because of their defiance of gender and sexual normativities (see Figure 20.1).

The unanticipated interruption was not met with sympathy by the pride organizers and its participants. Racist utterances were uttered, and a physical scuffle took place between the protesters and the Pride parade marshals. In order to understand the spatial

FIGURE 20.1 Black bodies on the tarmac, Rosebank, South Africa. Photo taken by the author.

character of this event we need to ask ourselves, What are the meanings of a queer-feminist intervention in which a group of South African women strategically employ their Black bodies in order to interrupt a sexual minority manifestation in a *specific section* of the Johannesburg urban space?

In what follows, I want to sketch a slightly different analysis to what I have presented elsewhere (Milani, 2015), one that draws upon the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2004), two important, but somewhat neglected, theorists in language and sexuality studies (see, however, Cameron and Kulick, 2003). In their monumental *oeuvre, Thousands Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) distinguish between what they call *striated* and *smooth* spaces. Described through a variety of highly suggestive metaphors, *striated space* is typically the result of sedentary human labor—a plowed field would be a case in point. A neighborhood would also count as a striated space since "it is constituted as a semiology of coded arrangements of closed spaces, crossed by walls, enclosures and routes between enclosures" (Bremner, 2010: 76). In contrast, *smooth space* is like the wind-swept, grass vastness roamed by the nomad; it "is directional rather than dimensional. It structures movements in vectors, holding space for a while before moving on" (Bremner, 2010: 77). This distinction, however, is only at best partial because "the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated spaces; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (2004: 524).

Read through the lens of these notions, the tarmac of the street in Rosebank, South Africa, where the die-in protest took place, carries a particular history of *striation*. During apartheid, Rosebank was proclaimed a racially white suburb following the Group Areas Act (1950), which sought to divide urban areas neatly among different racial groups. Over sixty years later, demographic studies illustrate that the reality in post-apartheid times has not changed in that most of Rosebank residents are white. An exclusive focus on who lives in this suburb, however, fails to acknowledge the multilayered aspects of this urban space. Here, the local mall has become a key locus of aspiration for a generation of young and trendy South Africans who cross racial divides (see also Nuttall, 2009). The affluent "site of luxury" (Stroud and Mpendukana, 2009) of the mall, however, exists side by side with the "site of poverty" (Stroud and Mpendukana, 2009) of the traffic light intersection, where a Black man wearing torn clothes offers to take care of the drivers' litter in exchange for a petty sum of money.

In light of this, the One in Nine's intervention was a *smoothing act* that momentarily disturbed the existing striation of the neighborhood. Their bodies on the tarmac were not the stylish Black bodies of aspiration in the mall. Nor were they like the unthreatening Black body of the man at the traffic light intersection. Rather, operating like vectors, the Black bodies of the One in Nine women seized the tarmac, holding it for a while, as Bremner (2010) would say, and transformed it momentarily through the staging of the gender-based and homophobic violence that affects many township dwellers but is normally far removed from Rosebank.

What is analytically crucial in order to understand this moment of smoothing is how the materiality of the city, with its semiotic multilayeredness, was not a palimpsest stage on which human action took place, but was itself an indispensable affordance through which the members of One in Nine could produce and contest particular meanings of sexual identities, desires, and practices in South Africa.

Next Steps?

Over the last twenty years or so, the study of language and sexuality has gone a long way from the study of gay and lesbian vernaculars exploring a wealth of uncharted topics through a range of innovative methodologies and theoretical frameworks, which have been touched upon in this chapter. In my view, there are three directions that need further exploration. First, I sympathize with Baker's feeling that, while desire "might not explain everything, it is an important concept and deserves more emphasis that it currently seems to have" (2013: 203), not least because it can open up insights into the subtle ways in which power operates in a variety of more or less intimate spaces.

Second, although there is a burgeoning queer linguistic scholarship critiquing heteronormativity, we still know too little about the discursive processes through which some manifestations of same-sex identities and desire may become normal and normative, colluding with hegemonic heterosexuality and nationalist ideologies as well.

Homonormativity, as Duggan explains it, "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2002: 179). While normative heterosexuality and the gender binary have underpinned many nationalist projects (see Yuval-Davis, 1997), Puar has recently drawn our attention to *homonationalism*, "an understanding and enactment of homosexual acts, identities, and relationships that incorporates [*sic*] them as not only compatible with but even exemplary of neoliberal democratic ethics and citizenships" (Kulick, 2009: 28). Simply judging from the degree of rights enshrined in national legislations, one might be tempted to unreservedly applaud the "lesbian and gay friendliness" of, say, Israel or the Netherlands. Many years of lesbian and gay rights activism, it could be said, have finally succeeded in the recognition of non-normative sexualities on the part of certain nation-states. Such an unconditional praise, however, would fail to account for the more pernicious side of homonationalism, which

> secures particular racial and class privileges for *only a minority* of homosexual subjects, [. . .] and simultaneously produces whole populations of sexual and racial others whose rhetorical function is to provide a backdrop against which countries like the Netherlands or the United States can appear as progressive, democratic, desirable, and humanitarian. Through these kinds of processes, homophobia "at home" can be downplayed and disavowed because it is projected onto other spaces and other bodies, which emerge as both uncivilized and threatening. (Kulick, 2009: 28, emphasis added)

In a similar vein, current discussions about sexuality in English as second or other language (ESOL) classrooms have been influenced by Richardson's (2004) cautioning against too optimistic reliance on rights-based discourses as springboards for the enfranchisement of sexual minorities. For "there is a risk that the increasingly recognized legitimacy of same-sex orientation is linked with normative models of good citizenship" (Gray, 2015), as expressed through English.

All this considered, we need more linguistic/discourse analytical work that unpacks the *ambiguous* facets of sexual politics, offering careful deconstructions of many pitfalls and double binds connected to homonormativity, homonationalism, and sexual citizenship in contemporary conditions.

Finally, in a field like language and sexuality where social constructivist approaches to discourse have become something of an orthodoxy, it may be time for a spatial turn, one that engages seriously with the ways in which discursive constructions of identity and desire intersect with *materiality* and *corporeality* (see also Milani, 2014b, for a similar point in relation to masculinities; Peck and Stroud, 2015, for "corporeal linguistic landscapes"; and Bucholtz and Hall, forthcoming, for "embodied sociolinguistics"). Taking space as the entry point for analyses of language and sexuality forces us to account for the *multidimensionality* of meaning-making practices, thus pushing linguistic studies of sexuality beyond their epistemological limit—language understood as verbal and

written code—and compelling us to engage with the no less meaningful visual, material, and bodily sides of sexuality.

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