Thematic Section

"We're Here and We're Queer!": An Introduction to Studies in Queer Anthropology

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There is no doubt that the use of the term *queer* will raise the hair on the back of people's necks as well as some eyebrows. The word *queer* has a history of being derogatory and confrontational. Drawing on Graham (1998), Tom Boellstorff notes that, in fact, "many anthropologists and others do not like the term queer 'because it reminds them so strongly of homophobia and oppression'" (2007:18). Despite this history, *queer* has been reclaimed in an effort to bring people of non-normative genders and sexual practices and identities together. While the word has Anglo Euro-American origins, individuals and communities in a variety of countries worldwide embrace and identify with the term *queer*. This, of course, is not universal and the word remains problematic and still considered by many to be confrontational. In fact, the tensions and discomfort associated with the term are part of what some people appreciate in identifying with the term. That said, identities and practices change over time; it is quite likely that in the future a different term will be used to refer to the topic at the heart of this thematic issue.

Sexuality has served as an "intellectual concern of the anthropological tradition since the Age of Enlightenment" (Lyons and Lyons 2006:153; similarly noted by Boellstorff 2007:17), and yet the anthropological interest in studies of gender and sexuality have ebbed and flowed over the years. Moreover, as Kath Weston notes,

> Before ethnographers could set out to remap the globe along the contours of transgendered practices and same-sex sexuality, homosexuality had to become a legitimate object of anthropological inquiry. One prerequisite was the redefinition of homosexuality from a matter of individual pathology (the medical model) to a cultural construct. [Weston 1998:149]

The particulars of the focus on sexuality (or sexualities) and the theoretical interpretations applied to them have varied over time, in part due to the cultural changes surrounding the historical and geographic contexts of

the ethnographers, as well as their personal and professional interests. In addition, anthropologists have queried, defined and redefined "what counts" as same-sex relations and transgendered practices cross-culturally (Weston 1998; Boellstorff 2007; Lewin and Leap 1996).

The historical context has generally affected what has been considered sexuality, same-sex sexuality, third genders and transgendered behaviours and identities. Early anthropological studies of sexuality, up until about the mid-point of the 20th century, focused on Other cultures, which can mostly be categorized in one of two ways: either "veiled in ambiguity and as couched in [negative] judgment as were references to homosexuality in the dominant discourse" (Weston 1998:147), or as idealistic, playing into "the fictions of primitive promiscuity" (Lyons and Lyons 2006:153). This was followed by a disciplinary silence, from the 1940s through the late 1960s, with regard to studies of sexuality—possibly due to disciplinary effort to gain "scientific respectability" (Lyons and Lyons 2006:153). In turn, a reemergence occurred that saw a focus on sexuality studies both "at-home" and among Others, no doubt brought on by the sexual revolutions occurring within western societies. In each decade since the 1970s, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) anthropological research and publications have experienced exponential growth, while different topical foci have emerged.

Since the resurfacing of the anthropological study of diverse genders and sexualities, there have been three general and overlapping phases of LGBT/queer anthropological development: the late 1960s through the early 1990s, the late 1980s through the early 2000s, and the late 1990s until the present. In the first of these phases, anthropological work focused mainly on causes of homosexuality, same-sex practices among males and a few transgender/third gender practices and identities among those (western anthropologists have) deemed male. These included studies of so-called ritualized homosexuality among the Sambia of Eastern Papua New Guinea, Hijras of South Asia, Kathoeys of Thailand and Two Spirit individuals among various First Nations groups in North America (formerly referred to as *berdaches*). As with other anthropological research of the pre-postmodern time period, this research situated itself as "salvage anthropology" mainly focused on the exotic Other, including "indigenous homosexualities" (Weston 1998:154). That said, there was also an increasing "at-home" focus, which continued to expand into the second and third phases.

During the second phase a shift began to occur. This shift was a result of postmodernism, the rise of second- and third-wave feminisms, and the existence of HIV and AIDS. In the 1980s, as HIV and AIDS most explicitly affected (and decimated) gay men, trans individuals and sex workers around the world, anthropologists took up HIV and AIDS research related to the populations perceived to be most at risk, both "at-home" and abroad, typically maintaining a focus on LGBT/queer populations. "By the 1990s, ethnographic analyses of homosexual behavior and identity, 'genderbending,' lesbian and gay male communities, transgressive sexual practices, and homosociality were flourishing" (Weston 1998:147). The 1990s then saw a notable increase in studies of female same-sex sexual practices, a wider range of transgender identities and practices than those traditionally studied (including more transmasculine [or so-called "female-bodied"] practices), and an emergence of LGBT/queer family studies. As noted above, more local (i.e., "western" and "at-home") research was also being conducted, as was research not solely focused on Others, but that gave more contexts to their experience and cultures and thus lessened the exoticization of their behaviours or identities. In the most recent phase of LGBT/queer anthropology, this move away from exoticization has continued and the range of foci of queer studies opened to include an even wider range of transgender identities and experiences; LGBT/queer families, parenting and reproduction; bondage, discipline, dominance/submission, sadomasochism (BDSM) practices; and LGBT/queer activism, homophobias and even more "at-home" (local) practices.

What has differentiated this latest phase from past phases of LGBT/queer anthropology is not only our moving beyond "a preoccupation with issues of visibility" (Weston 1998:175) and simple acknowledgement of their/our existence, but also a recognition of the times where globalization, neoliberalism, migration and people's agency and activism have to be considered. Whereas anthropologists have always been concerned with holism, holism is considerably different in a world where international trade, the Internet and other media, and the migration of people and ideas move much quicker than in previous times. The articles in this thematic section exemplify how these issues explicitly affect queer experiences and identities, as well as add to the growing work in LGBT/queer activist ethnography (Engebretsen 2013; Dave 2012), whether implicitly or explicitly. Moreover, as with an increasing number of recent queer ethnographies, the concepts of neoliberalism and homonormativity are central to a couple of the articles (e.g., Murray; Phillips) in this thematic section.

When studying and simply trying to understand LGBT/queer experiences and identities in both Euro-American contexts and those areas abroad affected by

cultural imperialism and neoliberalism, homonormativity is key. Homonormativity relates to neoliberalism, activism and the differentiation (sometimes made) between *gay* and *queer*. While *queer* is often used as an umbrella term for all things LGBTQQ2IPA* (or lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, Two Spirit, intersex, pansexual, allies, etc.), it is also used as an identity and practice that differs from *gay* identities and practices. This undoubtedly is confusing to many, but as Kath Weston explained,

> If lesbian and gay take a fixed sexual identity, or at least a "thing" called homosexuality, as their starting point, queer defines itself by its difference from hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality. [Weston 1998:159]

In essence, the argument is that, being "gay" does not challenge the status quo, whereas being "queer" does.

How this differentiation relates to homonormativity is, as I have noted elsewhere, that

> While "queer" is about difference, hetero- and homonormativity are about maintaining the status quo. Heteronormativity is about how policies, institutions, individuals, and society in general have normalized heterosexuality—along with monogamy and patriarchy—to the point that everyone is (first) assumed to be heterosexual. On the other hand, homonormativity refers to one side of a political (and representational) separation within LGBTQ communities; it refers to the practice of the normalization of being gay or lesbian, and not presenting oneself as a threat or challenge to heterosexuality (Duggan 2003). It demonstrates to heterosexuals that gays are "responsible, respectable and civilized" (Holmes 2012:240). Homonormativity has, among other things, proven to be effective in gaining rights like marriage. Due to the political successes and the fact that many do believe that the only difference between gays/lesbians and straight folks is their sexual attraction, homonormativity has appealed to a great number of gays and lesbians. It does not "rock the boat" but just asks to be recognized as the same as anyone else. Neoliberalism and homonormativity have amplified the distinction of who is an acceptable gay ("gays") and who is not ("queers"), to both those within and outside of LGBTQ communities. [Walks 2014:124]

At the same time, the division between gay and queer is not so simple. There is constant flow and flux due to safety and comfort, as well as how people negotiate their intersectional identities and politics with those immediately around them and the institutions they engage with. These complexities are exemplified here in the articles by Murray and Phillip.

Likewise, while a thematic section of *Anthropologica* focused on "The New Anthropology of Sexualities" in 2006 (Lyons and Lyons), this thematic section both narrows and broadens that focus. Whereas those articles covered issues of incest, same-sex marriage, bisexuality, sex work and BDSM, this issue is decidedly more Canadian focused, with all four of the English contributions written by anthropologists affiliated with Canadian universities. Two articles centre on migrants to Toronto (Murray) and Vancouver (Kojima), focusing on LGBT refugees and the gay Asian diaspora, respectively. Thematically, the articles also consider issues of activism (Phillips) and transgender experiences (Zengin; Thongkrajai). Individually and as a group, the articles present both new perspectives on issues and identities of previous anthropological consideration, such as Thongkrajai's look at the Kathoey of Thailand and Murray's and Kojima's explorations of LGBT/queer immigration experiences. In addition there are new anthropological foci as Zengin presents the trans experiences in Turkey and Phillips presents LGBT/queer activism and experience in Singapore. Moreover, beyond studies of gender and sexual diversity, the articles speak to the current times where people are confronting medicalization (Zengin), negotiating diasporic and migrant identities in new countries (Murray; Kojima), and living the effects of globalization and the media (Thongkrajai; Phillips), as well as a common thread in all the articles of the "basic" negotiating of life in a time of neoliberalism. There is no doubt that these articles exemplify complexities, as well as add depth and new perspectives to non-queer–specific studies, just as they add to the continual development of queer anthropology.

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