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# **Introduction: Anthropology's Queer Sensibilities**

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## **Abstract**

This special issue addresses vital epistemological, methodological, ethical and political issues at the intersections of queer theory and anthropology as they speak to the study of sexual and gender diversity in the contemporary world. The special issue centres on explorations of anthropology's queer sensibilities, that is, experimental thinking in ethnographically informed investigations of gender and sexual difference, and related connections, disjunctures and tensions in their situated and abstract dimensions. The articles consider the possibilities and challenges of anthropology's queer sensibilities that anthropologise queer theory whilst queering anthropology in ethnographically informed analyses. Contributors focus on anthropologising queer theory in research on same-sex desire in the Congo; LGBT migrant and asylum experience in the UK and France; same-sex intimacies within opposite gender oriented sexualities in Kenya and Ghana; secret and ambiguous intimacies and sensibilities beyond an identifiable 'queer subject' of rights and recognition in India; migrant imaginings of home in Indonesian lesbian relationships in Hong Kong; and cross-generational perspectives on 'coming out' in Taiwan and their implications for theories of kinship and relatedness. An extensive interview with Esther Newton, the prominent figure in gay and lesbian and queer anthropology concludes the collection.

**Keywords:** anthropology, gender and sexuality, queer studies, queer sensibility, difference

This special issue addresses vital epistemological, methodological, ethical and political issues at the intersections of queer theory and anthropology as they speak to the study of sexual and gender diversity in the contemporary world. As queer studies have increasingly come to influence inter/disciplinary theory production, in the fields of gender, feminist and sexuality studies, so too have issues regarding the production and dissemination of knowledge, academic (inter)disciplinarity, the use and abuse of methods and methodology, as well as the politics of knowledge production tout court become hotly debated.

A key problematic in the sub-field of queer anthropology, institutionalized by now in the US, and a fractured special interest network at dispersed locations elsewhere, is

to do with these connections – and inevitable ruptures. These (dis-)connections evoke tensions between empiricism and theory, concept and reality, activist and academic sensibilities. These tensions are productive and necessary, albeit oftentimes they do create feelings of discomfort or, indeed, negative vibes, or even disdain and anger: in class rooms, in conference venues, or indeed on the pages of journals and books. Importantly, these tensions and the chains of reactions they invoke, illustrate the principal topic of this issue, namely what we have called *anthropology's queer sensibilities*. A sensibility is often understood in connection with emotions, as responsiveness to others' feelings, an insight, awareness or judgment. Sensibilities are connected, further, to values and ethics, to moral landscapes of beliefs, politics, and actions; in other words they are real, particular and practical and dynamically intertwined with the theoretical, ethical and general. This is why the disciplinary location of anthropology, however defined, constitutes the ontological and epistemological framings of this special issue. Joined by the adjective 'queer' – also known as: puzzling, unbalanced, extraordinary, kinky, strange, suspicious (from Thesaurus.com) – to form a *queer sensibility*, the composite notion of anthropology's queer sensibilities aims to provoke experimental thinking and alternate approaches in ethnography-informed investigations of gender and sexual difference in the contemporary world. Anthropology as a discipline and ethnography as its principal methodology, are acutely well positioned in this respect, as it is so centrally concerned with describing lived everyday lives, in ways that are – or at least can be – particularly attuned to life worlds shaped by marginality and otherness. Anthropology and ethnography therefore can render – or indeed actively participate in producing and 'worlding' – the multiple transivities and relationalities that nestle under the term 'queer' (see Sedgwick 1994) in forms of engaged critique.

Sensibility was also the term given to a European eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophical and literary movement. The movement placed a high emphasis on emotional response and perceptiveness as a route to knowledge, acting as a precursor to Romanticism. In its emphasis of the affective dimensions of knowing we see a resonance between sensibility and ethnographic method – each emphasizing the value of knowledge based on experience over and above externalized categories and logic. Yet the Sensibility Movement also became subject to critique, for valuing an excessive display of emotion over and above more substantial qualities (Austen 1992 [1811]). In these terms sensibility itself came to be seen as a queer thing, associated with unnecessary and misjudged displays of sentiment. We see a resonance with the present project here also. This is especially so in the way that queer anthropological work is still regarded as suspect in much of the European academy, as demonstrated by its virtual absence in departments of anthropology, for example. We wonder, in part, whether this absence might be understood as a 'sensibility effect,' where queer anthropology, and queer anthropologists, are regarded as too closely aligned. Anthropologists working through queer epistemologies are most often doing so from deeply personal standpoints and life trajectories. While the reflexive dimensions of anthropological work may be encouraged, close connectivity between being clearly queerly identified both as subject and ethnographer has historically acted as a profound inhibitor to career prospects and success, a circumstance that is still especially pronounced in many global contexts. Might this be because a queer anthropological sensibility is regarded as an excessive one, sidestepping customary scholarly logic, and challenging the underlying colonialist and ethnocentric legacy regarding definitions of self and others,

in the field but certainly also in the departmental home? In these terms, might a queer anthropological sensibility be associated with an affective resonance that continues to locate queer anthropologists and their work – as undisciplined Others, perhaps - and as epistemologically and thematically suspect or illegitimate?

To date, much if not most of such debate, and its related research and publications, have come out of US academia, where queer anthropology and gay and lesbian anthropology before that, have been institutionalized for some time (Boellstorff 2007; Morris 1995; Weston 1993). Notable US-based queer anthropologists Tom Boellstorff and Naisargi Dave write in a recent special section titled 'Queer futures' in *Cultural Anthropology*, that queer projects today might easily take the shape of topics and problems not evidently "queer", meaning projects that might be less focused on gender and sexuality from a perspective informed primarily by identity politics or identitarian concepts of self and being (Boellstorff and Dave 2015). This might well be true, and certainly it is an important development of queer anthropology that queer projects are extending beyond theoretical and methodological concerns that first shaped the field of study. Yet in many global contexts the moment of 'queer anthropological arrival and transcendence' evoked by an epistemological move beyond obviously queer objects of study has a more limited resonance. In many contexts queer anthropological work (on or about seemingly clearly queer subjects/objects or otherwise) has had little purchase, or has afforded limited opportunity or expression within the academy. The moment of moving beyond queer objects evoked by Boellstorff, Dave and others might be read as contextually specific in these terms; a welcome intervention, and a reminder of the expansive capacity of a queer research sensibility, yet also a reminder of its limits and strictures too (Boyce, Engebretsen, Graham, Posocco et. al. 2016). This special issue therefore attends to the vitality and dynamism of queerly anthropological research, analysis and critique in contexts marked by profound structural precarity and near-absent institutionalization, where it may be difficult to relate to fixed points of arrival or even to ideas of shifts in paradigm and frame, but where theoretically incisive and politically resonant work is taking place.

The editors of this issue work in European universities, and we have conducted the major part of our ethnographic research outside Europe and the US (in China, Guatemala, and India) and are involved in a number of transnational collaborations (see, for example, Aggleton et al. 2012, Bakshi et al. 2016, Boyce and Coyle 2013, Haritaworn et al. 2014, Engebretsen, Schroeder and Bao 2015). An ambition in our respective as well as collaborative work has been to critically appraise the relevance and limitations to appropriating what is largely a US-based queer anthropology canon in the contexts in which we work and conduct research (see for example Engebretsen 2008). In turn, introducing the conceptual assemblage of anthropology's queer sensibilities is meant as a constructive lens toward a critical reflection upon the variegated ways in which queer projects and theories impact upon anthropology – as an institutionalized discipline, a research practice, and as a theoretical project. This entails comprehend and dealing with differences of many kinds, in the contemporary world including academic inter/disciplinarity and knowledge production beyond the Anglo-US core, as well as tensions arising on the cusp of theoretical engagement, applied practice and activism, and the precarious position of these engagements in the academy. These are all concerns that motivate both the editors and contributors to the present volume.

The idea for this special issue has emerged collectively and gradually through both time and space, connected to the emergence of a research network in 2013, the European Network for Queer Anthropology, an official subsection of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (see Boyce, Engebretsen, Graham, Posocco et al 2016). ENQA operates through a loosely organized network of students, researchers and university faculty, primarily in Europe but also globally.<sup>1</sup> We consider it the younger, less disciplined, queer sibling of the much older and institutionalized Association of Queer Anthropology, a network affiliated with the American Anthropological Association.<sup>2</sup> In these terms, the engagements engendered by the development of ENQA have opened a space for queer anthropological dialogues situated within and around the European anthropological academy and its affiliated partners – from other parts of the globe and from within other disciplines. A critical feature of the ENQA is that many, if not most, of our constituent members are operating from outside of formal affiliation to departments of anthropology, or have pursued careers that have taken them away from anthropological work for extended periods of time. This speaks to the circumstances pertaining to the institutionalization of queer perspectives in European academia and its still persistent lack within anthropological milieux.

Against this background the principal aim with *Anthropology's Queer Sensibilities* has been to present and explore new ethnographic perspectives and anthropological epistemologies concerning, broadly speaking, sexual and gender diversity. We have consciously selected submissions that engage with and further interdisciplinary debates. Contributing authors have especially provided an innovative approach to the – now-familiarly engaged – argument for (1) the importance of ethnographically grounded, theoretically inflected approaches in queer studies, and (2) of relativizing 'Western' paradigmatic knowledge in the study of gender and sexual diversity. The overarching questions we invited authors to explore were as follows: i) How might a critical ethnographic focus on sexual/gender diversity contribute to an understanding of how a sense of subjective sexual identification, may be refused, considered irrelevant, or simply not comprehended in many cultural and social contexts? ii) How, as engaged ethnographers, can we respond to these experiential realities, and work against prevailing narratives that associate same-sex desires and gender transformations with new regimes of 'subjectification'? And iii) what 'domain terms' are adequate – and ethically sound - for conveying the nuanced complexities of sexual lives intra-subjectively and in cultural contrast? As a result, this issue presents experimental and innovatively 'queer' approaches to such fundamental themes as the conceptualization of theory, the role of empiricism – the anthropological principle that theory must be grounded, for example – and its relationship to knowledge-production in and beyond the domain of anthropology. The vast terrain of locales discussed in the various contributions, and their oftentimes migratory shifts through time and space, offer further opportunities for critical and experimental queering of anthropology, and certainly of anthropologizing queer theory.

Turning the gaze to disciplinary anthropology, in turn, we have been interested in exploring how ethno-theoretical approaches to sexual and gender diversity might

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the network, and how to join, can be found here:

<http://www.easaonline.org/networks/enqa/index.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> More information about AQA here: <http://queeranthro.org/>

contribute to rethinking mainstream anthropological analysis. This has been especially so in terms of probing underlying normativities and truth regimes, and in remembering how sex and gender were so central to anthropological theory previously but have more recently been rigidly compartmentalized as sub-fields. In relation, we have wondered how sexual and gender difference might shape present and future anthropological understandings regarding broader constellations of intimacy, belonging, social stability, crisis, and even revolution. In what ways could queer sensibilities in anthropological inquiry 'proper' contribute to an understanding of ongoing struggles to define proper and divergent figurations of marriage, kinship and relatedness? How do queer sensibilities in anthropological inquiry address the tensions between religion, state and secularity; im/migrations, racism, nationalism, and citizenship; hierarchies and geopolitics of love and intimacy; governmentality and its democratic deficit; globalization, 'Fortress Europe' and the economic crisis, and lastly, sexual and gender transitions and the politics of (mis)recognition?

Taken together, the articles included in this volume all address these questions in different and original ways. In so doing, they offer intriguing ways of thinking about queer theory and anthropology, the importance of but also limitation to critical empiricism, and in a comparative perspective. The papers included in the following pages outline a productive landscape for thinking about and developing fruitful avenues for further research in this respect. By starting from the conceptual evocative lens of sensibility, then, we have aimed to inspire a selection of (mainly) emerging scholars and scholar-activists to think and write at the intersections of queer theory and ethnography, thereby pushing current thinking on gender diversity, human sexuality, and anthropology itself into new directions – geographically, ethically, and topically.

### **Overview of the issue**

We are particularly pleased with the wide range of locations that the authors work *from* and work *in*; the latter include Congo, Taiwan, India, online space, the US, Hong-Kong – Indonesia migratory imaginations, LGBT migrants in the UK and France, and Ghana – Kenya comparisons. Our authors, including the editors, are mainly Western Europe-based and –trained, while only two of the eleven authors have English as mother tongue. This geographical and topical richness testifies to the crucial role that critical gender and sexuality theory plays in contemporary research on pivotal challenges: migration and refuge, labor and care-provision, social inequality, new kinship, home and intimacies. We conclude this short introduction by giving a brief overview of the contributing papers in the following.

In the first contribution, a 'queer ontological take on desire' in Congo, Thomas Hendriks presents a provocative 'thought experiment' regarding how to effectively "anthropologize" queer theory without resorting to methodological 'fieldwork fetishism' or reproducing ethnocentrist arguments. Drawing on the recent ontological turn in anthropology and its renewed concern with 'difference' as a site for radical thinking, Hendriks offers to think of erotic *alterity* – in this context, same-sex loving boys and men in urban Congo – as an ethnographic situation whereby, referencing Ghassan Hage, possibilities "of being other than what we are" make alterations in awareness and knowledge possible in ways that has effects on how we conceptualize desire. In

turn, what this means for queer anthropology, Henriks argues, is that theory is where data are found. In other words, the relational components of difference, always unfolding in and around us, are the stuff of radical transformations of conceptual understanding, such as 'sexuality' and 'desire'. Henriks' is an ambitious intervention, presenting an intriguing queer ontological take on the very meaning of desire and sexuality, in the context of fieldwork conducted in urban Congo, a relatively underexplored location in contemporary anthropology and queer studies alike.

In turn, Calogero Giametta's article, 'Reorienting participation, distance and positionality: ethnographic encounters with gender and sexual minority migrants', focuses on the methodological and epistemological dimensions of interdisciplinary approaches to ethnographic research with LGBT migrants and asylum seekers in the UK and France. Queering in this context connects to a sensibility that is produced in and through the ethnographic encounter. For Giametta, queering is both an orienting device and a set of critical operations that emerge in the context of sometimes tacit forms of relationality. As the researcher's *senses* are rearranged in and across settings – a cafe, an advocacy project for asylum seekers, a community theatre production – queering allows for the emergence of an embodied, emplaced and affectively modulated sensibility towards knowledge and experience which can engender more participatory, analytically incisive and critical modes of representation.

Both Henriks and Giametta critically engage with the assumptions that frame the lives of sexually minoritised and gender-non conforming subjects, in their respective contexts. For Giametta, a queer sensibility entails a challenge to the heteronormativity and homonormativity of migration and asylum law, but it can also inform a reflexive stance for researchers, specifically in relation to their own positionality and location in the academy. In this sense, disciplinary boundaries may be markers and sites of reproduction of normativity that interdisciplinary perspectives such as those developed in queer studies may help to foreground and redress.

Rachel Spronk's contribution extends thinking about same-sex practices beyond intimate and analytical orientations toward bifurcated hetero- and homo-erotic experience. She advances the dislocation of queer anthropological analytics beyond seemingly obvious queer subjects to include attention to same-sex intimacies within life-worlds of otherwise opposite gender oriented sexualities. Based on long-term ethnographic work in Ghana and Kenya, Spronk's work opens a viewpoint on sexuality that disassociates it from performing as a route to an intrinsic truth that may be uncovered about a person (as ethnographic subject). In these terms Spronk queries identity-oriented politics as evoked in claims to rights and recognition (for example in terms of LGBTQI-type activism). Countering the globalizing momentum of such identity oriented claims (as promoted in international development discourse and practice for example) Spronk sheds light on ambiguous desires, locating same-sex erotics within otherwise heteronormative life-worlds. An effect is to indicate the potential of a queer anthropological sensibility aside from evidently queer subject claims.

Rohit K. Dasgupta and Debanuj Dasgupta's article offers an example of comparative ethnography derived from a common site. Dasgupta and Dasgupta have conducted separate projects in West Bengal, India – one examining the digital terrain of internet dating and communicating among same-sex desiring males, the other exploring the

use of digital media platforms among young economically marginal, 'runaway' men. Each project offers a perspective on ways in which self and intimacy are rehearsed in relation to ideas of neoliberal futurity in India, to queer effect. In particular the research opens a view on heteronormative assumptions that undergird much anthropological and other work on masculinity in South Asia. The work also queries analytical commitments to the identifiable 'queer subject.' Dasgupta and Dasgupta open a perspective on terrains of communication where secrecy and ambiguity are intrinsic to diffuse sensibilities, ones that exceed containment, either analytically or via programmes and legislature aimed at achieving rights and recognition for same-sex sexual subjects, or which seek to rehabilitate economically vulnerable young men via normative assumptions of successful masculinity.

Queer, and lesbian and gay, anthropology has contributed profoundly towards rethinking traditional kinship and family practices and values in contemporary society (Lewin and Leap 2002, Manalansan 2003, Weston 1997). The ways that alternative ways to love, connect, and create family constellations across gender, sexual, geographical, and bodily divergences from heteronormative institutions and values, have been amply discussed and excitingly theorized in much recent queer anthropological research. The two papers in this volume that most directly deal with kinship and family concerns, Franco Lai's and Amy Brainer's, illustrate well that kinship and relatedness remain timely concern in queer anthropology, across different domains of themes, politics, and life worlds.

Franco Lai's paper concerns how Indonesian female migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, who engage in same-sex intimacies, imagine 'home' and manage their variegated desires in different settings and moments over the life course. In this sense, Lai queerly addresses family and intimacy through the ethnographic and conceptual lens of 'home'. Memories of past home life in Indonesia evoke a strict patriarchal social and family system, characterized by limited female autonomy and enforced lesbian invisibility. In light of this, the relatively free life in Hong Kong encourages same-sex relationships and public display of affection between female lovers. Lai picks up on the existing rich anthropological literature on the gender complementary roles of *tomboy* (masculine) and *chewek* (feminine) in Indonesian lesbian relationships, but queers them interestingly by introducing the transnational migration framework and comparative angle with Hong Kong. Lai demonstrates that the complex workings of family and social relationships, social status changes through time and social roles (mothers, wives etc), contribute to imagining home and belonging in ways that might appear paradoxical and even contradictory – for example, most migrant women in Lai's study expected – and indeed, wanted – to return to Indonesia despite difficulties with living with a same-sex partner. As with the other submissions in this issue, Lai sidesteps simple ethno-cartographic description of difference, and analyses complicated life trajectories, their adjacent narratives of desire and hope, and their structural relations and limits through the practice of gender, sexuality, and shifting migratory positionalities.

Amy Brainer's paper, 'New identities or new intimacies? Rethinking "coming out" in Taiwan through cross-generational ethnography' is also placed in the theoretically innovative landscape of kinship, parenthood and family studies. In questioning the effect of 'coming out' discourse in Taiwanese society and the relative centrality of identity politics as an overarching framework for understanding queer kinship

practices and sensibilities there, Brainer suggests that a cross-generational lens helps us understand the complex cultural and affective terrain whereby 'coming out' and LGBT identity have emerged as important structural referents for life strategies and imaginaries for a good life there. By emphasizing the cross-generational referent, Brainer's research critically appropriates – 'hybridizes', in her own words – queer theory and anthropological kinship studies to make sense of ethnographically rich primary data that would hardly fit well into conventional explanatory frameworks. This pushes a critical empiricism, pace Boellstorff (2007), that is accountable to the grounded realities studied at the same time as the theoretical concept of queer is probed, queered, even further.

This special issue includes an interview with Professor Esther Newton, the American anthropologist whose groundbreaking research on drag queens and gay and lesbian communities has contributed to the establishment of gay and lesbian anthropology – and queer anthropology – as a recognized sub-field within socio-cultural anthropology. The interview with Newton was conducted by Paul Boyce, Elisabeth Engebretsen, EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Silvia Posocco at the 113th American Anthropological Annual Meeting held in Washington, DC, in December 2014, with Professor Ellen Lewin, a prominent feminist and queer anthropologist, joining in the conversation. The informal and jovial exchange covers a number of important themes and questions, ranging from the trajectory of Newton's research over five decades; the enduring legacy of her early works, notably the monographs *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972) and *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (1993) in anthropology, history, and gender and queer studies; tensions, discontinuities and connections between gay and lesbian and/or queer sensibilities and their implications for anthropological research on gender and sexual variance; Newton's career in academia and the challenges inherent in working in marginal settings and precarious conditions characterized by persistent homophobia and gender normativity; queer anthropological research priorities and orientations in the context of shifting geopolitical horizons; Newton and Lewin's lives with dogs as companion species – a passion shared by many of the interviewers –; and finally, Newton and Lewin's analysis of the debate over the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, in the light of their respective upbringing and Jewish backgrounds.

The latter section of our discussion emerged in the context of the debate over the academic boycott of Israel that engaged the membership of the American Anthropological Association at the 2014 Annual Meeting, and most pressingly, on the day of our appointment with Esther Newton, as the whole association prepared to vote on this matter in the early evening in a rather tense and palpably polarized atmosphere. The exchange between Newton and Lewin speaks to the deeply personal trajectories that motivate and sustain political sentiment and action, as they jointly deplore Israel's treatment of the Palestinians and the Occupation, but argue that they will not support an academic boycott of Israel. They discuss their Jewish backgrounds and consider how their different experiences and ambivalent identifications have led them to the positions they hold on the questions of the boycott and support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. In this context, the BDS discussion refracts broader debates and concerns regarding the status and 'queer expression' (Ritchie 2014:126) of, for example, settler colonialism, nationalism, sovereignty and coloniality. The latter emerge as queer subjects/objects

where the work of anthropology's queer sensibilities towards the lived experience of difference and marginalization is made ever more relevant and pressing.

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