

Openings and Retrospectives



QUEER ANTHROPOLOGY: An Introduction

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Arrival stories in anthropology have long been an integral element of disciplinary lore, as they invoke encounters with the Other as well as moments of legitimation, emplacement, and emergence. To this end, has queer anthropology arrived? Most people would answer in the affirmative. Consider the evidence. “Queer anthropology” can now be spotted in course titles and descriptions, as well as, in the past twenty years, in the contents of academic job descriptions and book titles. In addition, we can examine the standard markers of disciplinary historical shifts such as review articles (Fitzgerald 1977; Weston 1993; Boellstorff 2007b) that showcase transitions from the language of *homosexuality* to *gay and lesbian* to *queer*, as well as the renaming of the organization originally known as the Anthropology Research Group on Homosexuality (ARGOH) to the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA) and, more recently, to the Association for Queer Anthropology (AQA). These institutional transformations not only gesture to varying conceptions of collective identities but also highlight changes in organizational orientation or mission—not just who we are, but also what we do. Notice the significance of the prepositions in the section’s various

names, such as *on* in ARGOH, *of* in SOLGA, and *for* in AQA, which signify the transformation of the collective as devoted or oriented at various times to a topic, a sense of identification and finally to an advocacy for a set of methodological or analytical optics under the umbrella “queer.”

Arrivals, in whatever form, are never complete or smooth. The shifts and changes I enumerate above are neither trouble-free nor total, as the various essays in this Retrospectives collection demonstrate. Queer anthropology, far from being a monolithic field of inquiry, is shown to be characterized by messy genealogies, incomplete and uncomfortable transitions, divergent strands, and contentious debates. But despite my initial Babel-like characterization, I reemphasize one of the persistent themes in the various essays in this series: the argument that queer anthropology can be productively apprehended as an aspirational field of inquiry. As Margot Weiss (2016, 634) elegantly puts it in her essay, queer studies and queer anthropology are about dreaming of a utopic world(s) to enable ways to imagine, think, or desire “otherwise.”

The following essays by Jafari Allen, Ellen Lewin, Scott Morgensen, and Weiss offer trenchant, yet divergent assessments of and frustrations over the wages, travels, and travails of queer anthropology. They demonstrate the multiple itineraries and engagements in this field of inquiry. Indeed, the essays in this collection ask: If queer is an opening, where does it lead and how do we get there—or are we there yet? What would the “there” look like? What are the routes and roots that have enabled us, limited us, and are still propelling us to seek projects and ideas in their names? The essays in this section limn the various ways anthropological ideas, practices, and institutions have arrived (or not) to the portal we call “queer” and the various ways in which those paths and ongoing struggles are marked by discomfort, messiness, and longing.

As a way to think further about this stance, I would like to go back to the idea of an arrival. Queer anthropology’s arrival story, as Allen, Morgensen, and Weiss argue in their essays, is a renarration or reworking of disciplinary travel as marked by deferral and continuous transit. The fixation of departures and arrivals in a teleological manner will not work in this instance. The idea of queer as proposed by these authors is one that is in continuous motion. One never really arrives “there,” and arrivals are never a done deal. Queer anthropological research is not about reaching and arriving in “the field,” since processes such as globalization and colonialism have put this very concept into question. Indeed, the acceptance of queer anthropology as an analytical frame and methodology should not be about its comfortable emplacement in the study of cultural things. It is,

rather, about the messy and uncomfortable enmeshment of both anthropologists and the communities they study in the lived realities of life and death, of suffering and exuberance, and therefore, of quotidian mutabilities and contingencies. This enmeshment, in many ways, has always formed part of the ethnographic enterprise. To put such fieldwork realities in queer motion is to heed Tom Boellstorff's (2007a, 3) call to "anthropologize" queer studies, which brings the ethnographic *here* and a queer *there* into a kind of uneasy, highly mutable yet productive juxtaposition. Thus, to mark the field not only in terms of what it is but also in terms of what it can be lies at the core of what I have described as the aspirational and desiring orientation of queer studies and queer anthropology. What might this mean to anthropologists, when it applies not only to people who live under the varied signs of LGBT or those who are legible sexual or gender insurgents? It would, I suggest, mean continuing to anthropologize queer studies: engaging in careful ethnographic and sensitive analytical traipsing of, and thinking differently about, messy encounters and challenges, especially in the ways that people are conscripted to go about their lives, open to the possibilities of imagining how they might live otherwise.

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