WHO'S QUEER? WHAT'S QUEER? Queer Anthropology through the Lens of Ethnography

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I would like to use this space to explore the utility of queer nomenclature for understanding the lives of many real-world people with nonheteronormative sexual or gender identities and presentations, asking whether a field of inquiry many choose to label as "queer anthropology" can adequately represent the full diversity of the populations we study. I respond here to what I read as the prescriptive elements of "queer" as a sensibility and particularly as a discourse of resistance, and I challenge them with a call to return to our roots as ethnographers, that is, to report on and respect people as we find them in various locations. For the most part, anthropologists have done quite well at avoiding the use of classifications from Western culture, such as "gay" or "lesbian," to label nonheteronormative sexualities/genders outside the West. Instead, we have paid close attention to the way the so-called natives understand and label themselves, thereby questioning efforts to amalgamate same-sex sexualities outside the West into the Western category of "homosexuality" (Elliston 1995).

But the ascendancy of queer analytics in studies of the West has created some difficulties not present when we work in non-Western cultures. Indeed,

queer perspectives have had the effect of disparaging those whose sense of them-selves is less antagonistic to so-called normativity than queer theorists would expect or consider desirable. In particular, the pursuit of marriage equality and the emblems of family legitimacy have set off waves of outrage at the normativity and accommodation that such yearning presumably reveals. Since those seeking access to these insignia are the very LGBT people whose lives I have chronicled in my work, I find myself needing to defend the authenticity of their aspirations as I attempt to document the cultural patterns that shape their experience.

I arrived at this position unintentionally. When I set out to study lesbian mothers in 1977, I was sure, based on what Kath Weston (1998, 145) would subsequently call "street theorizing," that I would find novel social arrangements among a besieged population that few people even believed existed. I predicted that because of strained relationships with their blood kin, these women would form new kinds of kinship arrangements based on friendship and shared lesbian identity, what Weston (1991) would later famously name "families we choose"— a term so apt that it has become part of the LGBT popular lexicon.

However, as an anthropologist, I had been trained to listen to people and to analyze what they told me about how they organize their lives and what they believe in. And I learned that lesbian mothers actually were (or became) fervent adherents of biological kinship as the foundation for the formation of solidary, reliable support networks. Further, they disparaged lesbianism as the main foun-dation for defining their selves and building supportive alliances, instead seeing motherhood as essentially trumping other aspects of their identities. One mother I interviewed put it this way:

> There's a difference between people who have children and people who don't have children. People who don't have children, to my way of thinking, are very selfish. . . . They needn't consider anyone other than themselves. They can do exactly what they want to do at any given time. And though I admire that, it's not possible for me to do that and I guess for that reason most of my friends are single mothers, because it's hard for me to coordinate my needs and my time with someone who's in a completely different head set. "Why can't you get a sitter for the kid?"—that kind of thing . . . I just prefer being with people who have some sense of what it's like to be me, and I understand where they are too.

Indeed, I found that lesbian mothers' understandings of how to manage the ma-terial and cultural challenges of parenthood depended on an elaboration of biology

both as the foundation of social support and as the explanation for their desire to be mothers. Most mothers understood motherhood as intrinsically linked to their being women, as something they "naturally" desired and could do because they were women. Some mothers even explained their decision to become parents as driven by some mysterious hormonal process they couldn't account for. They situated their experience within a framework of nature, based on their beliefs about ineffable impulses that emerged from being women. At the same time, they tended to elaborate connections based on blood kinship as the most trust-worthy sources of support, while denigrating alternative family forms as not naturally reliable. Keeping such relationships going often entailed complex ne-gotiations with family members, usually parents, who did not accept their sexu-ality, though many mothers reported that parental disapproval of their sexuality evaporated or dramatically lessened once a grandchild entered the picture (see Lewin 1993).

    In other words, careful ethnographic observation and analysis forced me to give up my search for alternative kinship ideologies and to report on and respect what the women actually told me. As I later considered Weston's findings, which are very solidly grounded in ethnographic investigation but which mainly focus on gay people who are not parents, I could only conclude that parenthood changed the meaning of kinship for gay and lesbian people from the emphasis on the chosen-families model to something much more similar to what nongay people who had children embraced. It is not that lesbian mothers' families were neces-sarily conventional—few people's families conform to 1950s myths these days—but that they understood kinship obligations in terms of a system that was far from alternative and that maximized the significance of what they viewed as biology.

    My next big project focused on same-sex commitment ceremonies. I con-ducted the research in the mid-1990s, before legal same-sex marriage existed anywhere in the world (it was introduced in the Netherlands in 2001). I was fascinated by the increasing numbers of these ritual occasions, considering that there were no important legal or material gains to be made from the public declaration of a couple's relationship. Some of the ceremonies I studied entailed great expense; others were modest affairs. But all set out to celebrate the rela-tionships in a wider community context than that offered by lesbian and gay social groupings. Couples situated their unions expansively, with participation spilling over the boundaries of gay communities as couples insisted on including family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and participants of multiple generations to what-

ever extent was possible. All-gay ceremonies sometimes occurred, especially when nongay relatives refused to participate or when an opportunity to stage a ceremony at a gay cultural event presented itself, but couples saw these as expedient yet not completely satisfactory ways to solemnize their relationships. Although material benefits that might accompany ceremonies, primarily in the form of wedding gifts, were desirable, couples' comments about benefits like these mainly focused on how they served as evidence of the authenticity of their claims to legitimacy. While further material advantages may accompany legal marriage (e.g., health insurance, tax benefits), I read the desirability of these as further evidence of the authenticity of the relationship, rather than as the primary motivation for choosing to marry. In other words, such benefits are nice to have, even vital for some couples, but they also signify being married in the eyes of all who encounter the couple.

As I reported in *Recognizing Ourselves* (Lewin 1998), some ceremonies depended on forms and symbols that echoed ordinary weddings. Couples used familiar rituals, usually officiated by clergy, to present themselves as deserving of recognition on the same basis as other married couples. But their presentation of ordinariness often entailed sharp contrasts—attendants in drag along with the inclusion of familiar wedding-related texts, for instance. Other weddings were replete with elements couples identified as "queer": theme weddings, campy costuming, the reworking of ritual language, and the explicit incorporation of political concerns. Yet these, too, drew on what was described to me as "tradition." Indeed, the manipulation of seeming assimilation was essential to the performance of queerness. The two strategies, conformity and resistance, were locked in a passionate embrace, despite the intentions of the celebrants.

I found similar patterns when I studied gay fathers, though I did so more than two decades after completing my research with lesbian mothers. While these men experienced more public visibility and legitimation than the women I had worked with so many years before, they also tended to situate their paternal impulses in nature—and, sometimes, in the supernatural, as driven by forces that eluded simple explanations. These men also discovered that parenthood moved their social location into one that had little to do with being "gay," as they had long understood that term. Using a playful tone, one father told me, for example, "Oh, we're not gay anymore. We pick our friends by what time their kids take naps." Such comments drew on definitions of gay identity as linked to activities understood to be uncompromisingly gay—clubbing, going out to eat, attending the opera, circuit parties, and so on. My informants provided various models,

but in all of them *gay* and *parenthood* were conceptually distinct. As men offered these accounts, they tended to disparage their old gay life, or whatever they imagined a gay life to consist of, as "not important." While being fathers shaped or constrained their lives in concrete ways—for example, it became too expensive to go to the opera when one had to manage the expenses of a child; they found themselves spending time with other parents, rather than their gay friends who were not parents—I was struck by the moral judgment fathers' comments betrayed. One father had this to say:

> At the end of our lives, do I want to say, "Wow, we had some great trips to Key West, and wasn't the Pottery Barn fabulous when we furnished our house, and wasn't my garden cute?" I mean, is that what I want the essence of my life to be? Yes, there was career and friends, and all that stuff that was important, but then there's also that bigger legacy that's important. When you think about importance, it ties to social responsibility and making a difference and growing and raising this hopefully happy and well-adjusted and productive and caring human being.

In my current project, which focuses on a coalition of predominantly African American LGBT Pentecostal congregations, The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (TFAM), the issue of labeling comes up in different ways. First, TFAM members almost never use the term *queer* in describing their identities. They call themselves gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or often SGL, which stands for "same-gender loving." They also identify along spiritual dimensions as "saved" or as "saints," and understand their religious yearnings as part of their racial history. That is, worshipping in the expressive manner characteristic of many black churches in the United States and, for some, engaging in dancing, shouting, and falling out—all classic Pentecostal manifestations of inhabitation by the Holy Spirit—constitute a way of affirming their place in a history and community and reclaiming a heritage, even if parts of the black community, especially homophobic families, churches, and clergy, have rejected them. They are engaged in a quest for spiritual enlightenment, for the Holy Spirit to fill their bodies and souls, that will not be impeded by their nonheteronormative gender/sexual identities.

Marlon Bailey (2013) also worked with a population that did not use the word *queer* in his evocative ethnography, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*. Like the folks I am studying, Bailey's interlocutors rarely use the word *queer* to describe themselves; therefore, he refrains from labeling them with this term, instead using the term *LGBT* or one of the six gender categories that actors in the African American

ballroom scene use to describe themselves—*butch queen*, *butch queen up in drag*, *femme queen*, *butch*, *women*, *men/trade*. His use of the term *queer* derives from his understanding of its usefulness in revealing how conventional binaries (male/female, gay/straight, etc.) can be understood as social and historical constructions that are used, in Siobhan Somerville's (2007, 187) words, to "police the line between 'normal' and 'abnormal.'" Bailey (2013, 23) chooses, instead, to "deploy queer theory to examine what members of the Ballroom community *do* as opposed to who they *are*."

But that very sensitive usage won't work for the people I work with, insofar as their interaction with conventional gender binaries lacks the element of confrontation present in the ballroom scene that Bailey analyzes. While the parents and couples I worked with demand access to particular statuses denied to them because of their gender and sexual identities, they still embrace naturalized understandings of both who they are and what they do. Similarly, the Pentecostals who worship in TFAM congregations are carving out a place where they can worship in a manner otherwise inaccessible to them, but they still define themselves in terms of their spiritual achievements, regardless of how transgressive their gender or sexual presentations seem to be. In other words, transgression in these contexts shrinks in significance when compared with the meanings attributed to being a parent, being recognized as a married couple, or experiencing spiritual transcendence.

Given the priorities of the populations with whom I've worked, it's been difficult over the years not to associate queer scholarship with intolerance and the disparagement of people like my informants. At an American studies conference some years ago, I gave a paper that focused on the kinds of unexpected transformations that can follow from same-sex commitment ceremonies, intending to illustrate the power of ritual. I told the story of an upper-middle-class lesbian couple whose public behavior epitomized discretion and who had struggled to craft a ceremony that would avoid even a whisper of confrontation or public display of gayness. After the ceremony, and to their surprise, the couple found themselves taking relatively dramatic public stands in support of gay rights and outing themselves in a number of settings, including their very conservative workplaces. They experienced these episodes as spontaneous outbursts brought on by having had a wedding, even if they didn't call it that at the time. The shift was most evocatively represented by the changing meaning they attached to the rings they had exchanged in the ceremony. They had first told me they carefully chose these particular rings because they didn't match and, in their view, didn't resem-

ble wedding rings, and so wouldn't fuel speculation about their sexuality. But during an encounter in a public setting where they were dismissed as not being married (and thus not equal to the straight couple they were with), they instantly extended their hands, displaying the rings, and said, "Yes, we are!" During the Q&A period after my paper, a well-known scholar of queer cultural studies stood and addressed me. "How can you study such yucky people?" she asked, abruptly sitting down to signal that no discussion of this comment could follow.

There is a lot that could be said about this incident (besides the fact that it gave me a great way to start my next book [Lewin 2009]), but I'd like to focus on two points. The first can be framed in terms of the aversion to real life implied by the statement. The second is more complex, but directly connected to the first. It assumes that queerness unquestionably resides in visible, intentional, and effective subversions of mainstream cultural norms and the related expectation that explicit and palpable transgression is the only sort of queerness worthy of the name. All behaviors and styles that are coded as not achieving a particular standard of transgression or queerness fall into the complicated category my interlocutor defined as "yuckiness," disparaged as not queer, dismissed as accommodationist, and thus not deemed worthy of respectful investigation. There is more than a whiff of what Sherry Ortner (1995) has called "ethnographic refusal" here, a failure to consider the complexity of a situation that might be revealed by a fuller engagement with the multiple lived realities of subjects. I read Ortner as calling for us to have faith in the authenticity of people's behaviors and beliefs and to repudiate tendencies to dismiss what the analyst finds unappealing. Her work, and indeed all of cultural anthropology, tells us to base our conclusions on what our informants say and do, rather than using what our informants say and do to sustain already formulated ideas.

My other concern about queer as a framework for anthropological scholarship concerns the claims we might make about how we do our work, implied in the transformation of one section of the American Anthropological Association from the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists (SOLGA) to the Association for Queer Anthropology (AQA). Note the shift in prepositions from *of* to *for*, implying our mutual immersion in a *kind* of anthropology rather than an affinity based on *identity*. But is there a queer anthropology?

I believe that feminism presented a set of challenges to traditional ethnographic methods and representations that have had lasting effects on the entire discipline. Paralleling postmodern scholarship and empowered by earlier questions about structural-functional models of cultures (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen

1989), feminist anthropologists did (at least) two important things. We demanded a commitment to accountability in ethnographic research, a priority that has realized itself in new standards of reflexivity in our work. Who is writing this? What is her motivation? What is her standpoint? We also insisted on putting the voices of the people we studied, the informants or interlocutors or "natives," front and center, thus attempting to minimize the extent to which we spoke *for* them and thereby rendered them mute. This approach was vital at the beginning of the field as we sought to discover the views of women and girls, long erased from the arena of cultural agency, as Edwin Ardener (1975) argued four decades ago. But the commitment to present our interlocutors as active and vocal beings also meant that we took responsibility for showing the reader how we knew whatever it was that we said we knew. In other words, an attack on male-centric cultural models also required challenging the God voice that had long been the hallmark of ethnographic writing. Our conclusions, thus, were filtered through the sources of our information and through our own visible and invisible subjectivities. Truth was recognized as unstable and relative, both temporally and on the basis of how and by whom supposed facts were gathered.

I'm not describing anything here that most of us in anthropology are not familiar with. What I want to ask is in what way queer work offers a unique methodology or theoretical perspective that goes beyond this. Aren't those of us who dedicate ourselves to presenting the voices of persons who are otherwise erased and disparaged basically working along the lines of feminist anthropology? Is there a good reason for us to attribute these innovations to the insights queerness provides or to declare ourselves practitioners of queer anthropology? Aren't we just doing ethnography? And don't our interlocutors deserve our respect, even if they don't embrace outrageousness or seek to separate themselves from normative social and moral standards in a way we find exciting?

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