CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Openings and Retrospectives

ENCOUNTERING INDETERMINACY: Colonial Contexts and Queer Imagining

SCOTT L. MORGENSEN
Queen's University
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8654-2422

Queer draws our attention to excess, and to the inconceivable. At its queerest, queer slips from attempts at definition or codification. Facing negation, queerness remains undisciplined: it is what negation cannot actually erase, for negation requires it as a target for projecting power. And if discipline ever attempts to embrace what it once negated, queerness still complicates conformity by exposing discipline's fabrication and threatening its unraveling. Where are these critical potentials being practiced within anthropology, and where might queerness still press against the disciplining and normalization of knowledge? Among the many directions such questions might take, I will focus on the ways in which queerness continues to expose and destabilize colonial conditions of anthropological epistemology and methodology. Just as queer accounts must analyze the violences of colonial modernity, thinking with qualities evoked by this term disturbs the colonial structuration of knowledge and invites unanticipated thought.

Once queerness draws my attention toward excess within power relations—toward the relationship between power and indeterminacy—I find that my desire for sure knowledge wavers, and my attention turns to questions that are neither

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 31, Issue 4, pp. 607–616, ISSN 0886-7356, online ISSN 1548-1360. *DOI: 10.14506/ca31.4.09*

readily asked nor answered. When Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) diagnosed epistemic coloniality in the works of Bronislaw Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss, she argued that to acknowledge that which exceeds it—much less to try to negate its excess—would follow first confronting the incapacity of things to be wholly contained by language. In so doing, I understand Trinh to be indicating that negation is a tertiary act: it follows naming excess—that which power does not predict or contain—an act that is itself secondary to the initial confrontation of language with what Trinh (1989, 48) calls "realms of opaqueness." If anthropology articulates queerness, and if it tries to do so queerly, then one effect may be to reflect on the opacity of things to any effort "to perforate meaning" (Trinh 1989, 48), while another will be to interrogate power's demand that things be made transparent to knowledge. An anthropology that has been queered may still go to great lengths to study and interpret social histories and cultural practices that congeal around negation or excess. But its aim would not be to codify, and thereby restrict in meaning that which cannot be contained by conventions of knowledge (anthropological or otherwise). Such directions in scholarship need not be called "queer," but their implications do arise in anthropological scholarship that takes critically queer turns.

I began confronting such conjunctures during my ethnographic research in the United States, in which I plied the tensions between critically queer potentials and the subjects and movements that attach to the term *queer* under conditions of white settler colonialism. On realizing that white gay men formed identities and movements through racialized negations of Indigenous peoplehood, I began to examine a constitutive coloniality within the modern sexual-minority subjectivity that they produced. Theorists of racialized sexuality and diaspora had prepared me to build on the insight, which I learned from Two-Spirit critics, that white sexual politics and white anthropology perform white settler colonialism when indigeneity is codified as a potential in (presumptively white) sexual subjects, even as Indigenous politics is erased from view. Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd (2011) clarifies that colonialism produces modern subjects in their passage through an imagined Indianness that functionally disappears the landed and sovereign life of Indigenous peoples. In queer form, we could interpret these practices as what Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco (2014) call *queer necropolitics*: whether they consign Indigenous sovereignties to impossibility by negating sexualized/racialized/colonized bodies, or absorb them into modern "freedoms" that maintain colonial and racial power (Reddy 2011).Yet on forthrightly examining white queer settler colonialism, my account fractured after

confronting its procession through white desires for kinship across the differences presented by Native, Black, and non-Black racialized people. I thus faced an ethnographic conundrum, in which some of those to whom *queer* might seem to apply came into being by queering others, and precisely through desire, even as their own objects of desire acted discrepantly to undercut this violence and to imagine lives beyond white settler reach. Thinking with this queer situation, I have grown cautious when deciding to whom I will choose to ascribe the category queer, even as my research interests continually return to the queer violences of colonial modernity.

Theorists of the formations of modernity show that the slippages we meet or read as queer are imbricated within race and coloniality, which arise and persist through distinctly queer means. We know, for instance, that queerness comes to define racial and colonial violence through mutually constituting projections of extermination (Miranda 2010), pathologization (Cohen 1997; Snorton 2014), specification (Ferguson 2004), contamination (Shah 2001), animality (Chen 2012), mixture (Somerville 2000), and mobility (Manalansan 2004), as well as via processes of settlement (Rifkin 2010), normalization (Carter 2007), and exaltation (Fiol-Matta 2002), to name only a few examples. To conduct research amidst these histories, in these times, on and across these varied lands and waters, is to take up modern violences as conditions of the queerness that we know and of our accounts of it. Linking queer to anthropology therefore invokes similar concerns within the discipline: namely, anthropology's unceasing need to unsettle its epistemic coloniality as this emerges from within Western ontology. Here, by *ontology*, I invoke first Frantz Fanon's (1967) analysis of the normalization of white subjectivity, which evicts blackness from the human (see also Wright 2004). I also invoke modes of Indigenous governance that are ontologically incommensurate with Western law and that interrupt their colonial universalization (L. Simpson 2011; Smith 2012).

Anthropologists who critique coloniality within knowledge thus study structural violences within social worlds, and the epistemic violences conditioning the field of intelligibility within which our accounts emerge. In turn, a queer anthropology must interrogate the formation of its accounts from within the same colonial and racial violences that condition the worlds it examines. It must confront the conditioning of its accounts by the power and limits of anthropology, and by all that slips from the capacity of language to contain. Queer anthropology will thus present not externalized and codifiable objects, but conditioned relations within and among social worlds and their interpreters; its writers will appear

alongside all other subjects as products and interpreters of the power it examines. Such work would resonate with Trinh's (1989, 76) call to turn from a colonial desire to define and consume an other, and to imagine instead "writing close to the other of the other." In such work, she argues, "I can only choose to maintain a self-reflexively critical relationship toward the material, a relationship that defines both the subject written and the writing subject, undoing the I while asking, 'what do I want wanting to *know* you or me?'"

Following such thoughts, then, a queer practice of anthropology marks and transforms colonial legacies within the intellectual projects that brought it into being. The anthropology of sexuality and gender has taken myriad forms across generations, geopolitical contexts, and academic and extra-academic sites. Various versions helped establish anthropology's epistemological purview, as explained by the expansive and incisive accounts of Kath Weston (1993), Kamala Visweswaran (1997), and Tom Boellstorff (2007). In one version, enlivened by mid- to late-twentieth-century sexual-minority politics, anthropologists renewed the classic project of cross-cultural comparison by exhorting Western science to document minoritized sexualities and genders worldwide and to assemble them under a global optic that could make them a basis for claims about human culture or nature. This project has been variously embraced, discarded, or renewed over the past fifty years of anthropological research on sexuality and gender. My interest rests in the epistemological work that this mode of inquiry does for those who enact it and those who draw upon it; I want to understand what sort of political subjects it produces. I am concerned about the potential slippage between, on the one hand, carefully noting where bodies, pleasures, or desires are marginal or minor within historically contingent power relations and, on the other, discovering sexual and gender minorities throughout the world that can be specified and codified across borders. Analytical interest in sexual/gendered diversification or marginalization may take many routes, but anticipating global analogues to the sexual and gender minority statuses that found Western sexual science projects epistemic coloniality across human existence (see, for instance, Towle and Morgan 2002). Where such projections take place, they justify a second move: projecting anthropology, or another scientific apparatus, to particularize and assemble a globalized world into a database for professional interpretation. Scholars have long critiqued colonial uses of anthropology to assert epistemic control over human possibility. Yet such gestures recur if Western sexual and gender minorities seek globally systematized knowledge about those whom they perceive to be their others, or even their own selves.

Perhaps the cross-cultural comparison and codification of minoritized sexuality and gender retains its appeal because, like cultural relativism, it can be presented as an *anti*colonial act. Scholars may make a number of ethical and methodological decisions: rejecting primitivism to honor coevalness; respecting local terms, while refusing to impose foreign ones; writing accountably to, if not collaboratively with, subjects. Yet alone or together, such methods do not displace the epistemic context of colonial modernity in which they are deployed. Philip Deloria (1998) confronted a similar situation when examining a paradox at the heart of white settler subjectivity in the United States. White settlers inherit what Deloria calls "playing Indian" as a resource that may be used to express opposition to perceived oppression, even as doing so advances white settlers' rightful representation within the white settler state. Deloria's project demonstrates that colonial subjects narrate anticolonialism through colonial narratives, which is to say that their supposed anticolonialism constitutes an oscillation that exists within, not beyond the power of colonial knowledge. When white settlers challenge their sense of marginality on anticolonial terms, they naturalize their sustained power and authority in an ongoing colonial situation. In turn, a queer account of the anthropology of sexuality and gender should ask to what degree either its colonial *or* its anticolonial leanings connect to the power of colonial modernity, which cannot be simply dismissed or resolved, but requires ongoing critical study.

Queer anthropologists are interrogating colonial legacies in the field by confronting how social life and representation are conditioned by racial and colonial power. In so doing, they act within legacies of decolonial anthropological scholarship. By *decolonial*, I invoke approaches within Black, Indigenous, postcolonial, and diaspora studies that challenge modern violences (genocide, antiblackness, settler colonialism, global capitalism, empire) by recalling what Western thought finds inconceivable and by marking Western thought's point of dissolution (Chakrabarty 2000; Coulthard 2014; Harney and Moten 2013; A. Simpson 2014; Vargas 2015). Decolonial approaches in anthropology inherit the legacy of what Jafari Allen and Ryan Jobson (2016, 129) call "the decolonizing generation," in which "Black, allied antiracist, feminist, and political economy–oriented scholars" joined together in Faye Harrison's (1991) collection *Decolonizing Anthropology*. Harrison states that this project arose by "grappling with what we call today the enduring coloniality of power, political economy, and knowledge" (McGranahan, Roland, and Williams 2016), which Allen and Jobson (2016, 134) say decentered then-ascendant white theorists of postmodernity "in favor of a critique of modernity and its enduring significance." Reflecting on the same era, Chela Sandoval (2000)

interrogated white masculinist theories of postmodernity by arguing that modern power and its limits were already explained within decolonization struggles and rearticulated in the postmodern praxes of U.S. Third World feminism. Like Sandoval, Trinh in the late 1980s confronted modern violence within epistemology by interrogating structuralism and deconstruction and then rearticulating them through postcolonial and women-of-color feminist methodologies. These works' legacies resonate within queer ethnography when ethnographers locate within and challenge the violences that their subjects queerly survive, while narrating their relational locations decolonially with respect to Western ontology.

For instance, Kale Fajardo (2011) explains how global capitalism is constitutively gendered by the practice of Filipino masculinities—specifically, *tomboi* masculinities—as these permeate and illuminate how race and empire inflect the relation of the Philippines to the United States and to global economics. Fajardo's explicitly decolonizing analysis highlights how indigenous Filipino gender practices interrupt projections of a Western sex/gender binary and embed *tomboi* existence within the political-economic conditions that Filipino masculinities diagnose and negotiate. Marcia Ochoa (2014, 13, 15) writes within her own relationship to diaspora to examine the gendered conditions of Venezuelan national culture through a "queer diasporic ethnography," a method that for her addresses how "the process of modernity extinguishes humanity but creates other possibilities for existence." Ochoa interprets *misses* (beauty queen contestants) and *transformistas* (transgender women) from within the racial and gendered power relations that produce and link them, in Venezuela and transnationally. In the process, "the perverse paths that make queer existence tenable, perhaps even legible" (Ochoa 2014, 14) begin to diagnose the power of the nation-state, of transnational capital, and of modernity itself.

In his account of Black diaspora culture, anti-Black racism, and creative acts of resistance in Cuba, Jafari Allen (2011, 187) applies Audre Lorde's concept of erotic subjectivity to explain how Black practices of self-making portend the "material and psychic liberation of marginal communities and marginal subjects." Citing critical insights in Black studies and Black feminist thought, Allen (2011, 187, 97) defies the racist optics placed on Black life by arguing "that inhering in these small, intimate, troubled spaces is a powerful and virtually unexplored ground for political possibilities" where erotic subjectivity "works towards not only transgressing but transcending and finally transforming hegemonies of global capital, the state, and of bourgeois, limited, and limiting notions of gender, sexuality, and blackness."

Without preemptively folding these works into queer anthropology, as opposed to other categories to which they may belong, I indicate their capacity to breach or circumvent the tensions that appear once *queer* and *anthropology* meet. Interrogating modern power and its resonances within narrative, these accounts—to quote Trinh (1989, 76)—relationally examine "the subject written and the writing subject," tracing the routes of their subjects and authors through the unfolding of power and its disruptions. They also share in articulating critical theory with what Allen (2011, 131) calls "the risk and reward of ethnography": in studying situated practices, "cultural, historical, political, and economic difference and pathos interrupt, exceed, and sully theorization." These works thus clearly interpret power while affirming complexities that remain opaque to extractive definition while slipping past what colonial thought might presume to know.

Traversing the imbrications of anthropology and coloniality, queer anthropology advances beyond concerns about defining an object to congeal around concerns of context and method. Certain topics will not cease to draw the field's attention—notably, the racial and colonial conditions that contextualize practitioners of queer anthropology and their inquiries. But, following the critics whom I have named, I am calling attention to methods that interact with those conditions, so as to encounter queer life existing both within and beyond their power. Such methods communicate knowledge about social worlds that can specify positioned and politicized interactions with power. But the performance of knowledge about those worlds places the demand for codification in question. Work in such modes unsettles any expectation that choosing to practice anthropology in anticolonial fashion will disrupt all of the ways that inquiry and representation may articulate colonial power. Methods that confront that power create space not to withdraw from language, but to interact with it as a medium that may perform its own limits while acknowledging that which exceeds it. Against a premise of "trying to find the other by defining otherness or by explaining the other through laws and generalities," Trinh (1989, 76) argues that "the other is never to be known . . . unless one understands the necessity of a practice of language which remains, through its signifying operations, a process constantly unsettling the identity of meaning and speaking/writing subject, a process never allowing I to fare without not-I." The relational formation of the subject within the conditions of modernity leaves ethnography poised to apprehend power and indeterminacy. I remain inspired by works that return such questions to new

ethnographic research, from which narratives may emerge that pivot toward what might not yet be known, or even knowable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay presented an opportunity for me to reflect on the enduring significance of scholarship that has provided direction to my work, from the time of my graduate studies to my current work teaching feminist and queer methodologies. In that spirit, I would like to recall and thank the many faculty whose contributions to the doctoral program in anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz nurtured critical interdisciplinary study within and about anthropology, and in particular to Anna Tsing, Carolyn Martin-Shaw, Lisa Rofel, Donna Haraway, and Patricia Zavella. For their constructive feedback on drafts of this essay I also thank Martin Manalansan, Cymene Howe, and J. Kehaulani Kauanui. I am solely responsible for all content.

REFERENCES

Allen, Jafari S.
2011 *¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Allen, Jafari Sinclaire, and Ryan Cecil Jobson
2016 "The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties." *Current Anthropology* 57, no. 2: 129–48. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/685502.

Boellstorff, Tom
2007 "Queer Studies in the House of Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36: 17–35. http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.36.081406.094421.

Byrd, Jodi A.
2011 *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Carter, Julian B.
2007 *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880–1940*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh
2000 *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Chen, Mel Y.
2012 *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Cohen, Cathy J.
1997 "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4: 437–65. http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437.

Coulthard, Glen Sean
2014 *Red Skin, White Masks: Critiquing the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deloria, Philip J.
1998 *Playing Indian*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Fajardo, Kale Bantigue
2011 *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fanon, Frantz
1967 *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press. Originally published in 1952.
Ferguson, Roderick A.
2004 *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Fiol-Matta, Licia
2002 *A Queer Mother for the Nation: The State and Gabriela Mistral*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Haritaworn, Jin, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco
2014 "Introduction." In *Queer Necropolitics*, edited by Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco, 1–27. New York: Routledge.
Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten
2013 *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
Harrison, Faye V., ed.
1991 *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation*. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association.
Manalansan IV, Martin F.
2004 *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
McGranahan, Carole, Kaifa Roland, and Bianca C. Williams
2016 "Decolonizing Anthropology: A Conversation with Faye V. Harrison, Part I." *Savage Minds*, May 2. http://savageminds.org/2016/05/02/decolonizing-anthropology-a-conversation-with-faye-v-harrison-part-i/.
Miranda, Deborah
2010 "Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, nos. 1–2: 253–84. http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-022.
Ochoa, Marcia
2014 *Queen for a Day:* Transformistas*, Beauty Queens, and the Performance of Femininity in Venezuela*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Reddy, Chandan
2011 *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality and the U.S. State*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Rifkin, Mark
2010 *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, The History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Sandoval, Chela
2000 *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Shah, Nayan
2001 *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Simpson, Audra
2014 *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Simpson, Leanne
2011 *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg, MB: Arbeiter Ring.
Snorton, C. Riley
2014 *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Smith, Linda Tuhiwai
2012 *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd edition. New York: Zed Books.

Somerville, Siobhan B.
2000 *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Trinh T. Minh-ha
1989 *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Towle, Evan B., and Lynn M. Morgan
2002 "Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of the 'Third Gender' Concept." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 4: 469–97. http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/10642684-8-4-469.
Vargas, Joao
2015 "Black Lives Don't Matter." In "#BlackLivesMatter: Anti-Black Racism, Police Violence, and Resistance," Hot Spots series edited by Bianca C. Williams, *Cultural Anthropology* website, June 29. https://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/695-black-lives-don-t-matter.
Visweswaran, Kamala
1997 "Histories of Feminist Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26: 591–621. http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.26.1.591.
Weston, Kath
1993 "Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22: 339–67. http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.22.100193.002011.
Wright, Michelle M.
2004 *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.