Discipline and Desire: Feminist Politics, Queer Studies, and New Queer Anthropology

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Examining the political aspirations we invest in our disciplines, I explore how the desire to exceed the limits of institutionalization has sparked a critical queer studies, one that is attentive to both particularity and to a larger global context. Detouring through some of the new work in queer studies that, in my analysis, is compatible with cultural anthropology, I focus on the places where queer analytics aim to surpass proper objects and pat political interpretations. I conclude with a survey of what I term the "new queer anthropology," which seeks to remake its objects and analytics by pushing its key terms—queer and anthropology—into uncharted territories. Throughout, I remain attuned to what I see as the key tension driving queer studies in and outside anthropology: the ways disciplinary desires produce new political and intellectual possibilities, even as we remain attached to the conditions of their emergence.

PROPER OBJECTS: GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Let's start with proper objects. No matter how many times she tells us it just wasn't so, most of the stories about the founding of queer studies start with Gayle Rubin's 1984 essay "Thinking Sex," and in particular that one part, toward the end of the essay, that goes: "I want to challenge the assumption that feminism is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality. Feminism is the theory of gender oppression. To assume automatically that this makes it the theory of sexual oppression is to fail to distinguish between gender, on the one hand, and erotic desire, on the other" (1993 [1984], 32). The essay was intended, as she explains, to enable us to "think about oppression" and "the structures of sexual stratification" (Rubin 1994, 90) beyond binary gender, "presumptions of heterosexuality, or a simple hetero-homo opposition" (Rubin 1994, 70). She protests in a 1994 interview with Judith Butler, "I think those last few pages [of "Thinking Sex"] have been overinterpreted as some huge rejection or turn-about on my part. I saw them more as a corrective, and as a way to get a handle on another group of issues...issues of sexual difference and sexual variety" (67).¹

But although Rubin did not intend "to found a field" or argue that feminism "should not work on sexuality" (1994, 88), it is a testament to the power of her words that the essay was taken as such. Indeed, the Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader—the first of its kind to anthologize the field—begins with Rubin's essay, drawing on it to argue for lesbian and gay studies as an (at least semi-) autonomous field for the study of sexuality. As the editors write, "lesbian/gay studies does for sex and sexuality approximately what women's studies does for gender" (Abelove, Barale, and Halperin 1993, xv).

Yet how, analytically, might we cordon off "sex and sexuality" from "gender"? As Judith Butler writes in "Against Proper Objects," such a division between sexuality and gender denies both "the normative operation of gender in the
regulation of sexology” (perhaps Butler’s main contribution to the field of queer theory) and, as she puts it, the “constitutive ambiguity of sex,” where sex points to both gender embodiment and sexuality/desire (1994, 6). Immediately, then, we have proper disciplinary objects that refuse to stay put—a dilemma perhaps obvious to anthropologists trained to see gender more as an “entry point into complex systems of meaning and power” and “less as a structure of fixed relations,” as Kamala Visweswaran describes disidentificatory feminist ethnography (1997, 593). If gender and sexuality cannot be neatly separated—as indeed they cannot in studies of travesti sex workers (Kulick 1998) or matri work (Wekker 2006) or men who have sex with men (Boellstorff 2011; Padilla 2007) or transnational gayness (Manalansan 2003; Rofel 1999), to draw on the range of topics central to recent queer ethnography—neither are they identical, which we can see when we scale down to any particular cultural milieu.

Take, as a brief case in point, the different mappings of gender and social power in Evelyn Blackwood’s Falling into the Lesbi World (2010) and Tom Boellstorff’s The Gay Archipelago (2005). Comparing these two stellar ethnographies of same-sex desire and sexuality in Indonesia illuminates the crucial difference sex and gender, in combination with desire, make in terms of access to public spaces, familial autonomy, mobility, and other markers of social power and sexual possibilities. Blackwood’s ethnography of lesbi tomboys and their girlfriends in West Sumatra emphasizes the (re)mappings of gendered binaries and power, whereas Boellstorff’s emphasizes the emergence of gay and lesbi sexual subject positions in a national context. Taken together, these two ethnographies highlight both divergence between gendered experiences and identities in local communities and strengthened connections between lesbi, tomboys, girlfriends, gay men, and waris across Indonesia, and in global or transnational LGBT/ queer circuits.

But if the analytical separation of gender and sexuality is conceptually untenable, it remains the case that this purported separation fosters, in Butler’s terms, foundational “territorial claims,” claims that continue to map disciplines and secure institutional authority (1994, 6). Butler calls for both feminist and queer studies to “move beyond and against those methodological demands which force separations in the interests of canonization and provisional institutional legitimation,” to remain open to other differences such as race or class, and to think “against the institutional separatisms which work effectively to keep thought narrow, sectarian, and self-serving” (1994, 21). Indeed, it is the demands of legitimacy and legibility that call for the impossible separation of objects as a mechanism of institutional authority, and it is my contention that this is a key legacy that both feminist and queer anthropology confront today.

Awkward Relations, Political Desires: Feminist Studies and Queer Studies

If the first legacy is a kind of closure-through-institutionalization that, simultaneously, produces women’s studies and gay and lesbian studies as figurally autonomous fields, the second is its dialectical other: the desire to think “against the institutional separatisms” and limitations institutionalization portends. I refer, of course, to the shift from women to gender and from gay and lesbian to queer. This shift is far more than semantics—as any linguist could tell you—but what I want to focus on is the way this shift was (is) guided by a political desire for better, more expansive concepts, methods, and disciplines. As Robyn Wiegman has argued, for scholars working in women’s studies, the move to gender was a response to the failure of women to account for all women. Gender, then, could include men and masculinity, as well as queer and transgender. Perhaps it would be more inclusive, complex, sophisticated, and intersectional than the former object, women (Wiegman 2012, 39–40).

I will spend some time on Wiegman’s argument because it helps us think about the political investments we make in and through our objects of study. For the hope that this new object could dislodge the false universalizations that seemed to plague women’s studies relies, as Wiegman argues, on a “transferrential idealism”: that gender might save us, conceptually and politically, moving us forward, in a progressive march toward “representational inclusion, historical precision, subjective complexity, social reparation, and theoretical sophistication” (40). This move—which entailed renaming women’s studies programs (to feminist studies, gender studies, or a combination), rethinking curricula, and remapping the field—rested on the belief that “gender will be capable of giving us everything that women does not . . . will be adequate to all the wishes that are invested in it” (Wiegman 2012, 42). In short, that our object will satisfy our feminist political desires.

The search for a perfect or fully inclusive object is akin to the desire to find the perfect terminology that will yield a one-to-one correspondence between language and our social world, a desire Boellstorff critiques as the “logic of enumeration” (2007b, 18; see also Weiss 2011a). Yet still, this wish or desire, invested in an object, is a central legacy for us today in both feminist and queer studies. Both, as politically motivated fields, aim to do “justice with, to, and through our objects of studies,” even as our objects are always “incommensurate with the political desire invested in them” (Wiegman 2012, 42). If this is true of gender, which continues to strain under the sometimes-inclusion of the rapidly expanding field of trans studies, perhaps the same might be true in queer studies (née gay and lesbian studies). Yet while the dynamics of the good-enough object in
feminist and queer studies suggests certain parallels, the object relations in each are not precisely analogous.

Just as women's studies began to question its foundational object, women, so too did lesbian and gay studies—moving away from gay and lesbian to queer. The shift in terminology entailed interrogating the conceptual content of homosexuality and, indeed, sexuality itself (Weston 1993, 346). But unlike gender, these queries, in queer studies, took the form of an "internal critique" of lesbian and gay studies, rather than the substitutive search for a new perfect object (like gender). In other words, queer, at least in its early 1990s formulation, was less an object and more a provocation, a critique of the "fixed sexual identity" or "thing called homosexuality" offered by gay and lesbian studies (Weston 1993, 348).

This is where feminist and queer studies' object relations diverge. Feminist studies, in moving toward gender, sought an object capacious enough to withstand the political desires invested in it, desires formulated according to identification with one's object. The convergence (and mutual identification) between subject and object in feminist studies seemed necessary for political solidarity; it is this purported convergence that generates the "awkward relationship" between feminism and ethnography that Marilyn Strathern (1987) and Judith Stacey (1988) have so cogently outlined. In queer studies, on the other hand, one does "justice to or with one's object of study by steadfastly refusing identification" (Wiegman 2012, 97)—by not assuming self-identical or indexical relations between author and object—but instead focusing on category confusion or transgression.

Queer, then, is not a more inclusive or robust category of identity—indeed, in feminist foremothers Eve Sedgwick's (1993) and Judith Butler's (1993) work, queer is profoundly anti-identitarian. Queer is a political location, that which is, in Michael Warner's oft-cited phrase, resistant "to regimes of the normal" (1993, xxvi; see also Berlant and Warner 1998), a category for the "transgressive aspects of gender and sexuality" (Weston 1993, 348). In the decades since 1993, Wiegman argues, the centrality of anti-normativity or transgression to the concept of queer has dovetailed with its quasi-institutionalization in the academy; as she writes, anti-normativity serves today as queer studies' "guiding frame and political guarantee" (2012, 341).

Yet for all this divergence between identification (in feminist studies) and anti-identitariant fracturing (in queer studies), the political desires that underlie each field are not so neatly opposed. Indeed, in many ways, queer studies echoes and inverts feminist studies' awkward relationship between self, object, and political desire. Queer is simultaneously a disciplinary object, an analysis (or, in stronger terms, an epistemology), and a political stance. As a political stance, queer studies tends to describe the critic through the object, cloaking our own "professional investments in the noble rhetoric of the political desire that incites it" (Wiegman 2012, 314)—even as it is precisely the "inherently radical political position" of queerness that underwrites its institutional authority (308–309, 341–342). The (partial) institutionalization of Queer Theory in the academy demands a continual reinvestment in that dynamic, which sustains the critical authority of the interdiscipline and the radicality of our own queer political desires.

In both feminist and queer studies, then, the field imaginary, as Wiegman puts it, is one that promises to support the critic's political desires through the object. And yet, the failure of the hoped-for equivalence between politics and professionalization often leads to frustration or disappointment: "what happens," Wiegman asks, "when what you once loved no longer satisfies your belief that it can give you what you want?" (2012, 10). This happened in queer theory, of course. Indeed Teresa de Lauretis, the first person to use the phrase "queer theory" in print in her 1991 introduction to a special issue of differences, turned away from the term a mere three years later, claiming that it had become "a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry" (de Lauretis 1994, 297). De Lauretis's complaint is one of institutionalization—institutionalization as unwanted normalization.

With queer, de Lauretis hoped for a way to "transgress and transcend" discursive categories; queer, she imagined, might investigate the formations of identities across time and space and in the intersections of race, gender, and class, rather than assume them (1991, iii). Above all, queer promised a "conceptual and speculative" opening for de Lauretis. "Can our queerness act as an agent of social change," she asked, "and our theory construct another discursive horizon, another way of living the racial and the sexual?" (1991, xi). This was the possibility of queer, in the early 1990s at least: a "site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future imaginations," as Butler rather hopefully wrote. Even so, for Butler, queer can only have this political value insofar as the term remains undomesticated—"never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (1993, 19). Similarly, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner worried over the potential calcification of "queer theory" as it was being absorbed into the academy and suggest "queer commentary" instead as an inclusive academic and activist project that could be "radically anticipatory," "trying to bring a world into being" (1995, 344, 347).

This short history of queer is painfully ironic: what was, at its start, an opening to new possibilities has, as it has become institutionalized in the academy, taken on its own normative anti-normativity. We can see why this frustrated de Lauretis—as soon as queer is marked off, it is absorbed by precisely those institutions it seeks to critique—and also why Butler urges us to avoid marking territory in a bid for institutional recognition: "There is more to learn from upsetting such
grounds . . . and resisting the institutional domestication of queer thinking . . . For normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish” (1994, 21).

But, as I will detail in the next section, institutionalization has not been the end of queer. Instead, we might take a lesson from feminist studies and see that it is precisely the frustration of the (political-analytical) desires that motivated the field to begin with that moves queer studies in new directions. The transference of our political desire onto a disciplinary object (like queer) generates “predictable disappointment, if not at times political despair” (Wiegman 2012, 322). Still, this is the logic of field formation—an “affective failure” that simultaneously “restores the horizon of possibility” by promising new objects or analytics that might achieve our political desires (322). In the same way that women’s studies sought new political horizons through gender (however we wish to evaluate its relative success), the “ongoing revision and differentiation” that we can see in queer regenerates the field through our own political frustrations. Thinking about queer studies’ temporality in this way, we might see institutionalization—and its attendant complicity with precisely the “exclusions by which [queer] is mobilized” (Butler 1993, 20)—as perhaps less a mark of failure, and more a sign of the productive social conditions that guide both our scholarly and sexual pursuits. If this is the case, then we might say that the cordoning off of gender and sexuality, feminist studies and queer—along with the constitutive exclusions and impossible incommensurabilities that those divergences put into place—has also recharged the political desires we’ve brought to our objects and our disciplinary work.

As I hope I’ve shown, it is not that feminist studies and queer studies are neatly analogous; in the case of feminist studies, we’ve sought a more perfect object (gender), whereas in queer studies, we’ve sought an object equivalent to our politics (the resistant queer). I have spent some time unpacking queer studies’ political-disciplinary attachment to anti-normativity because, and crucially for anthropologists, the valorization of anti-normativity as a merged object-cum-political-analysis within queer studies can produce work that turns away from, rather than engages, the social world. This happens when queer studies becomes a prescriptive project—one that a priori assumes that all queer objects are anti-normative. It is this that, I think, might motivate some anthropologists’ suspicion of queer studies (as anti-empirical or overly abstracted). Yet still, in queer studies (and feminist studies), I would argue that the limitations of these objects vis-à-vis our desires also serve as prompts that push us toward new objects, new analyses, new horizons.

REMAPPING BOUNDARIES: ANTHROPOLOGY AND CRITICAL QUEER STUDIES

In her cogent analysis of the ethnocentrism of queer studies, Elisabeth Engersten argues that “despite a growing appreciation in queer studies of the complexities of contemporary global sexualities and genders . . . there seems to be little genuine effort to re-visit and revise” foundational analytical concepts (2008, 90). Queer studies, she argues, rests on a “particular definition of sexual meanings and research questions and objects” (91). As long as this is the case, the descriptions of non-US genders and sexualities offered by anthropologists simply operate as “data on the half shelf” (as Kath Weston so brilliantly put it [1998]); they do not challenge the theoretical paradigms and exclusions that undergird queer studies itself.

Engersten’s is one of a number of anthropological critiques of queer studies’ US-focus (and presumptions), even in its transnationalizing or globalizing key. I certainly don’t dispute the claim that queer studies does not pay attention to anthropology—and not only because I am a disciplinary chauvinist; it is a source of continual frustration for queer anthropologists that we specialize in exactly the sort of theoretically sophisticated, locally grounded, transnational analysis that “transnationalizing” queer studies claims to want. Indeed, to peruse the American Anthropological Association annual conference program or the nominees for the Association for Queer Anthropology’s annual Ruth Benedict Prize is to be awed by sophisticated, cutting-edge theoretical-empirical work on nationalism and sexuality, on queer and trans/transnational politics, on queer modes of belonging and futurity, on language and its sexual politics, on queer activism in locations across the world. But still, I think there is another possible relationship between cultural anthropology and queer studies—a more synergistic one with what might be called a critical queer studies.

I’ll take as my starting point the 2005 special issue of Social Text, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” Editors David Eng, J. Jack Halberstam, and José Muñoz answer their own question (and sound rather anthropological), writing that their queer studies “insists on a broadened consideration of the late twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gendered hierarchies” (2005, 1). Naming empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, immigration, and citizenship, alongside race, class, and nation, as key terrains for queer studies in the early 2000s, the editors herald a queer studies that does not retain queer’s strict relationship to sexuality (and certainly not identity) (2005, 2). What I call a critical queer studies also troubles a strict attachment to anti-normativity. As Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz note, we are witnessing the growth of “queer liberalism,” which attempts
"to reconcile the radical political aspirations of queer studies... with the contemporary liberal demands of a nationalist gay and lesbian US citizen-subject petitioning for rights and recognition before the law" (2005, 10). This emergence, they write, "challenges us to reconsider some of the canonical ideas of the field," including "normal and antinormal" (2005, 13).

Critical queer studies troubles both sexuality as the proper object of queer studies and the assumption that queer is always oppositional (to the state, capitalism, and the like) by moving queer analysis in two directions: toward the more specific or particular, and toward broader global or transnational flows. (It might be the special province of anthropology to aim to do both of these at the same time.) So, for example, Roderick Ferguson argues that the centralization of sexuality as the "property object" of queer studies has elided the ways that sexuality is "constitutive of and constituted by racialized gender and class formations" (2005, 87, 88). He urges us to take inspiration from women of color feminism and insist on "the historical specificity and heterogeneity of 'sexuality,' a specificity and heterogeneity denoted as racial difference" in the United States (86). From the other direction, Chandan Reddy's work seeks to uncover the US state's operations as a form of "freedom with violence" that fuses state protection with legitimated state violence against racialized, non-normative others (2011; see also Puur 2007).

These are just two examples of US-focused queer studies work that tends, at least in my reading, to complement queer anthropology by foregrounding social specificity and embedding queer subjects and communities within broader national imaginaries and political economies. I make no claims as to the global reach of this work. Indeed, although it might be the case that US queer studies, perhaps unsurprisingly, tends to presume an American national context, it is also the case that this concentration has fostered much of queer studies’ best work. Like ethnographic work, such critical queer scholarship can help us better understand the specificity of a US racialized sexuality or the nexus of the US nation and queerness.

It is beyond the task of this chapter to survey the entire field of queer studies, but these new directions suggest that the frustrations arising from an institutionalized and normative anti-normativity, alongside an expansion of the boundaries of "sexuality," have generated a critical queer studies that—to me—connects to the work that we are doing in queer anthropology. What, for example, might be learned by reading work in queer Marxism, queer affect, or queer of color critique alongside ethnographic examinations of queer globalization, neoliberalism, and imperialism? In my own work on the sexual politics of BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination/submission, sadomasochism), generative frictions between ethnography and queer and feminist studies shaped my analysis of race, gender, and late capitalist cultures of neoliberalism (Weiss 2011b).

Similarly, my current research on how queer left activists conjure new visions of queer social and economic justice has benefitted from exploring concepts like potentiality, endurance, and futurity across and between ethnographic and non-ethnographic registers (especially Berlant 2011; Dave 2012; Muñoz 2009; and Povinelli 2011). The analytical and political stakes of that project are, of necessity, in dialogue with interdisciplinary queer studies work that challenges progressive narratives of activism (Hanhardt 2013) and situates queer politics in the broadest sociopolitical frame (Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014). I offer these rather mundane examples of my own interdisciplinarity to destabilize, rather than reentrench, an assumed oppositionality between queer studies and anthropology. That such synergies are possible is one of the hallmark strengths of anthropology's promiscuous theoretical purview. Indeed, we all might take a note from the debates around the proper objects of feminist and queer studies and resist the "methodological demands which force separations in the interests of canonization and provisional institutional legitimation" (Butler 1994, 21).

But taking that lesson a bit further, as I aim to do in this chapter, we can see that the normalization institutionalization carries offers not only (some) legitimation, but also serves as a productive limit that might spur new relationships between queer studies and anthropology. For example, Scott Morgensen's Spaces between Us (2011) is situated on the borders of anthropology, queer studies, and native studies; his work not only challenges disciplinary norms, but also the ground—white settler colonialism—upon which our disciplines function. Departing dramatically from ethnographic studies of Indian (Native American) gender and sexuality, including analyses of two-spirit people, Morgensen's book is as much a critique of queer studies as it is of anthropology's appropriation of Native peoples' sexualities, genders, and lands. Other collaborations aim to recalibrate disciplinary ways of knowing, as with the generative collaboration between Lauren Berlant and Katie Stewart on "Sensing Precarity"—the experience of living in a vulnerable, collapsing present. In my analysis, such collaborations between queer studies and anthropology draw on both fields' frustrations and desires—for better objects, more powerful methods, more robust politics—and, in so doing, seek to produce new ways to comprehend the textures of social life.

QUEER HORIZONS: TOWARD A NEW QUEER ANTHROPOLOGY

And so finally we arrive at what I am calling a new queer anthropology. To be sure, the new queer anthropology appeared on the scene dragging some serious baggage in the form of the fraught problematics of institutionalization I've detailed earlier (between gender and sexuality, feminist and queer studies, and
queer studies and anthropology). And queer anthropology, although still a tiny subset of the larger anthropological world, has achieved some institutional legitimacy: it has its own AAA section, book prize, courses, and review essays such as this one. And so, as we might expect, queer anthropology shares many of the same frustrations (about institutional closure and limitations) and desires (for more expansive, more political objects) that power its sister fields. With “new queer anthropology,” then, I mean to refer not only to very recent trends in queer cultural anthropology, but to a queer anthropology that encounters queer and anthropology as generative limits, and seeks to reimagine both terms as proper objects and ways of knowing.

First, queer. In her recent _Queer Activism in India_, Naisargi Dave cites David Halperin’s definition of queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant . . . a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance” (quoted in Dave 2012, 20). This double definition points first to the meaning long accepted: queer is anti-normative, perhaps transgressive. But it also, and this is where I begin to see a new queer in queer anthropology, points toward queer as an emergence, a potentiality, a utopic desire for something not yet, something yet to come (Muñoz 2009, 21, 25–26)—even as it also creates new limitations, normalizations, or boundaries.

We can see this dynamic in Dave’s ethnography, which details the emergence of lesbian activism in India. Yet her analysis does not follow a straight narrative of LGBT progress. Instead, Dave pays particular attention to tensions between affect (as what is not-yet delimited [2012, 10]) and norm (as the consolidation of affect into a social and historical form). So, for example, a lesbian networking list or the debates between activist groups that favor different forms of politics both spark new hopes, desires, and possibilities and produce norms of what lesbians or sexual justice can or should be. For Dave, then, queer serves as a “horizon of possibility,” an “ethical aspiration” to create a new “radical world” (Dave 2012, 20). Yet containment, “the fixing of potential into certain normative forms—is an inevitable part of activism,” and, I would add, queer anthropology, too (2012, 203).

It is not that the anti-normative meaning of queer has been entirely effaced. Many anthropologists use queer to signal that which is non-normative (identities or practices that challenge normative gender roles) and transgressive (those that challenge heteronormative sexuality)—while also noting a less-than-oppositional relationship to normativity. For example, in Evelyn Blackwood and Mark Johnson’s introduction to a special issue on “Queer Asian Subjects,” they write that queer highlights “the possibilities and constraints of different systems of gender/sexuality” that produce “both normative and transgressive bodies and practices” (2012, 442). Similarly, Jafari Allen explains that his use of queer references the non-normative erotic subjectivity of the black homosexual and gender non-conforming Cubans with whom he works and the ways queer is “an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2011, 195). These definitions, then, take up sexual and gender non-normativity, yet also move it somewhere else. In this way, queer in new queer anthropology is less a repetition of the queer = transgressive analysis Wiegman describes as normative anti-normativity, and more an invitation—at least as long as we are trying to do justice to our (ethnographic) object.

Engelbrechten opens her ethnography _Queer Women in Urban China_ with a discussion of her use of queer. Her book is an analysis of the emergence of lala social-sexual identity and community in Beijing, in the context of changing gender and sexual politics within a rapidly transforming China, with new modern discourses of individualism and choice. For Engelbrechten, queer marks the “sexual and gender nonnormativity” of Chinese lesbians (2013, 8) even as she interrogates—through close ethnographic analysis of both social particularity and broader context—the “powerful ways that hegemonic norms continue to define girls’ and women’s scope for meaningful independence and agency” (2013, 8). But her work also questions queer’s purported anti-normativity, especially in terms of the ways that the lalas with whom she worked sought normalcy. It is not only the political weight of anti-normativity that is at stake here, but more crucially the ethnographic analysis of social intelligibility itself, in the form of regulatory norms (like gender) upon which all subjects (queer or not) depend—a critique that dovetails with queer of color interventions such as Cathy Cohen’s (1997). In this way, Engelbrechten’s ethnography is an analysis of the “meaningful and complex ways that normativity remains a central aspiration for, as well as limitation to, same-sex desires and life strategies”—an exposition of the desire for social normativity alongside “new queer imaginaries” (2013, 13, 28).

The dynamic of opening/potential and closure/norm in these ethnographies parallels that in queer (and feminist) studies: queer’s expansion becomes the grounds of its institutional restriction. In this case, typical of anthropology and of a piece with gender, queer issues an invitation or entry point into complex mappings of a social field: linkages of racialization, sexuality, nation; divergent political imaginaries; the ways queerness can serve liberal, neoliberal, and radical projects alike. There are no political guarantees in this invitation, which means that queer can’t secure a political stance for either the object or the ethnographer. Queer, then, does not only, perhaps not even primarily—in my maybe idiosyncratic reading—point to the range of divergent or transgressive sexual (and gendered) practices. Instead, and building on the existent incommensurability of gender and sexuality across cultures, queer might trouble the categories through which “normativity” itself—as a social and historical praxis—is mobilized.9
example of queer multispecies analysis. Hayward is interested in the laboratory as “an arena where species meet” (2010, 593). This focus enables Hayward to build a “sensory ensemble” (2010, 593) based on the sensory connections between her body and the corals she prods and pokes. The linking between queer people and coral—perverts and inverted (invertebrates)—is a form of “tranimal” (“an enmeshment of ‘trans’ and ‘animals’”). Hayward not only challenges assumptions about normative/natural sex (and reproduction) but more fundamentally, analyzes the “appearing and disappearing boundaries between the human, the posthuman (human and non-human), the in-un-human, and the animal” (2010, 595).

Multispecies ethnography might queer borders between human and animal; it might also take up human and non-human boundaries. While not ethnographic, Mel Chen’s recent Animacies (2012) offers cultural and linguistic readings of animacy hierarchies (human > animal > vegetable > mineral) as they are linked to racial hierarchies (and crosscut by sex, gender, and disability). Allied with work in queer studies that confronts necropolitics or disposability, Chen seeks to broaden the way we understand the (political) relationships between the living and the dead, animate and inanimate. For this reason, Animacies can be read as an example of the “new materialism,” work that attends to what Jane Bennett calls “vibrant matter,” or the capacity of things to act (2009). In anthropology, especially in science and technology studies, this has taken the form of an “ontological turn” away from interpretation or hermeneutic analysis. As Martin Holbraad explains, “Rather than using our own analytical concepts” to answer “why the Nuer should think that twins are birds,” for example, “we should be asking . . . What must twins be, what must birds be” in this conceptual universe? (Carrithers et al. 2010, 184). In this way, ontological anthropology seeks not only new objects (things, inanimate matter, diseases), but a new method to encounter ethnographic objects within their own reality (or plural realities).

As of now, there is a limited archive of queer ontological theorizations; theoretical physicist Karen Barad’s queer, feminist notion of “agent realism” is perhaps the best known (2007). In anthropology, Annemarie Mol’s work connects ontological methodologies to the study of disease, asking not how “medicine knows its objects,” but how it “enacts” them through practices (2002, vii). S. Lochlann Jain’s approach to breast cancer is particularly suggestive, exploring cancer not as an object of knowledge, but as “as a creative force . . . that can powerfully organize relationships” between gender, sexuality, the body, temporality, risk, capitalism, health care, and more (2013, 233). Such work in extrahuman anthropology seeks to trouble the boundaries between human and world, nature and culture, yielding a queer analysis of ensembles/assemblages and non-humans as political actors. The ontological turn, then, might reanimate the question not only of the proper objects of anthropology (the human) but
also the way we might know those objects—and therefore of the epistemology of anthropology. In this way, queer might generate a new way of knowing that pushes us past anthropology, too.

FEMINIST, QUEER, REDUX

These examples of the new queer ethnography are not intended to be complete nor even particularly laudatory. I offer them as provocations—not endorsements. For I don’t imagine that either a queer or a non-anthroposophical will finally overcome queer anthropology’s frustrating attachments to its objects or its methods. Instead, what I take from these excursions in the history of feminist and queer studies is precisely the inverse: our desire to overcome our own attachments is what motivates our search for an otherwise, for an object and a mode of analysis that could do justice to our hopes and dreams—political or analytic (or both). That this may never be achieved is, perhaps, to our and our fields’ benefit.

Imagining queerness and anthropology as sites of hope, potential, or aspiration for something better, anthropologists seem, to me, not to confuse their objects with their own desires, nor to expect—frustratingly—a commensurability between self and other, at least not by investing in queer. In a way, Wiegman’s analysis of the disappointment we might feel when our objects fail us, or fail to measure up to the political commitments we have invested in them, is inverted in queer anthropology. For the lesson here is not so much that our object will always fail us, but that we might always fail our objects. This is, I suspect, the condition of doing ethnographic research: all we know is that we never know enough.

And this, finally, is what I think brings these interdisciplinary dreams and desires together: neither an agreement over gender or sexuality as proper objects, nor even a territory battle over them, but instead a shared frustration in the limitations of our ways of knowing to do justice to our objects, or ourselves. This state of frustration, in queer anthropology as in feminist studies and queer studies, has led us toward new objects and new analytics that draw on the incommensurability of our political desires and our objects to bring a new future into view. It’s the task before us, then, to keep struggling to do justice both to our objects and our political commitments—knowing that institutional closures also might open us to new ways of knowing, and achieving, that which we hold most dear.

NOTES

1. In 2011 Rubin reflects, “While the essay has sometimes been interpreted as a rejection of feminism, I saw it as completely within the best traditions of feminist discourse, particularly the constant self-critical striving toward more analytic clarity and descriptive precision about inequality and injustice” (2011, 57). This “self-critical striving” is central to both queer and feminist studies, as I aim to show.

2. Boellstorff defines waria as “male-to-female transvestites” (2005, 11). There is a parallel between the necessity of analyzing gender alongside sexuality and the longstanding complaint that much of queer anthropology is centered on the experiences of (cisgendered) men and “gay” desire, in contrast to more limited work on (cisgendered) women, transgender identities, “lesbian” or other non-gay desires or sexualities (see Blackwood and Wieringa 1999, 39). The anthropology of sexuality (or LGBT anthropology) only began to take up a broader range of topics—lesbian practices, transgender identities and communities, and even heterosexuality and sexual practices like BDSM— in the 1990s. Even so, queer anthropology—and queer studies in general—is not necessarily a feminist queer anthropology; queer analyses do not always center intersections of gender, sexuality, the body, and social power (see Lewin 2002). Further, as Elizabeth Kennedy argues, while gay anthropology in the 1980s paid little attention to women, gender, or lesbians, feminist anthropology was not a particularly friendly site for research on gays, lesbians, or sexuality either (2002, 99–100). In this way, the legacy of the proper object debates is a constitutive limitation in both queer and feminist studies.

3. Indeed, nearly every queer ethnography begins with a discussion of the impossibility of proper terminology. While these debates are in no way settled, I do think that queer anthropology has recognized that linguistic purity is impossible, especially given the multiplicities of transnational flows and frictions.

4. As Gayle Salamon argues, although women’s studies has struggled to incorporate (unevenly, sometimes unsuccessfully) “the work of women of color, lesbians, sex radicals, and queers,” trans studies presents a singular challenge to the field: a “breaking apart” of the category woman and a “new articulation of the relationships between sex and gender” especially for emergent genders (2010, 97–98). See also Susan Stryker on transgender studies as “queer theory’s evil twin” (2004, 212).

5. Anti-normativity is not the only epistemological norm within queer studies. For reasons of space, I will merely gesture to three other consolidations of queer: around a normative (cisgendered) mode of embodiment, sex, and gender; around racialization in the form of universalized whiteness; and around sexuality-as-identity, an effacement of the more unruly psychodynamics of desire.


7. The most intricate and useful reading of the relationship between queer studies and anthropology remains Tom Boellstorff’s A Coincidence of Desires (2007a).


9. It is, of course, these incommensurabilities that have driven much of the anxiety over the applicability of “Western” concepts (like gay, lesbian, queer) outside their sites of origin.
REFERENCES


MAPPING FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

EDITED BY ELLEN LEWIN AND LENI M. SILVERSTEIN

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Brunswick, New Jersey and London
Leni dedicates this book to Manuela and Leonora Silverstein Zoninsein, the next generation, with pride and hope.

Ellen dedicates this book to Liz Goodman, my companion through the twenty-first century.