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Always After: Desiring Queerness, Desiring Anthropology

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Openings and Retrospectives



ALWAYS AFTER: Desiring Queerness, Desiring Anthropology

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I'm still after queer theory. This might mean: even while queer theory has been pronounced over (can I get a refund?), I'm embarrassingly here. And it might mean: invited to the wake of queer theory, I'm still, as in somewhat paralyzed, with nothing to say. And it might mean: evidencing my usual incapacity to let go once I attach, I'm still after it; I haven't stopped desiring queer theory.

—Elizabeth Freeman

To do anthropology, I venture, is to dream like an Ojibwa. As in a dream, it is continually to open up the world, rather than to seek closure. . . . It is the constant awareness of alternative ways of being. . . . Wherever we are, and whatever we may be doing, we are always aware that things might be done differently. It is as though there were a stranger at our heels, who turns out to be none other than ourselves.

—Tim Ingold

What is *queer* in queer anthropology today?

I remember first reading Eve Sedgwick in a queer theory course in graduate school at Duke in the late 1990s. I remember the pleasure I took in her now indispensable definition of queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 1993, 8). I had come to graduate school fresh from analyzing gay and lesbian coming-out stories, and I was desperate to think sexuality and gender and power off the well-trod paths of identity and orientation. Queer theory provided an opening, a possibility, a way to think *differently*—exactly what had drawn me to anthropology.

But now, almost twenty years later, it is a good time to rethink *queer*. Almost every year since graduate school I have taught queer theory to undergraduates, and each year I open by insisting, in increasingly strident tones, that *queer* is not an identity—it is a critique, an analytic. Each year more strident, because each year more of my students insist that queer *is* an identity—their identity. A radical one, one that might be poly or genderqueer or kinky, but an identity still. And really, how can I argue? Queer is my identity too—personally and professionally: I occupy a queer studies tenure line at Wesleyan, where I created and direct a queer studies cluster. I think about this whenever I teach Judith Butler’s (1994) essay “Against Proper Objects”: we ought, Butler (1994, 21) writes, to resist “the institutional domestication” of queer, “for normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish.”

But it’s not finished—not yet—and that is where I want to begin this story about queer anthropology. *Queer*, from its start, was meant to point beyond or beside identity—specifically gay and lesbian—and instead signify transgression of, resistance to, or exclusion from normativity, especially but not exclusively heteronormativity. Thinking this way, queer is less an object of study (a *who* that we might study) and more an analytic (a *how* to think sexual/gendered norms and power). But for all this, queer has never quite moved beyond identity.¹ And queer has not quite been the site of resistance we had hoped, as the story of queer studies’ academic institutionalization might portend. Still, I am not writing a eulogy for queer. Instead, in this Retrospectives essay, I resist finding—if only to lose—a new proper object of queer anthropology and suggest, rather, that it is the frustration of the desires we invest in our objects that makes for a queer anthropology—and that makes anthropology queer.

I also refuse to offer a next/new/now queer anthropology—our future, our new vanguard. Instead I return to a past that, I suggest, we are not *after*, in the sense of over, in order to flesh out what it is we are *after*, in the sense of desiring. I locate these dynamics first in queer anthropology's move away from identity, then in its turn from antinormativity, and finally in the future-facing queer of speculation or possibility (what I call *desire*) that marks much recent work. But while I proceed linearly, I do not want to provide a progressive timeline, where we reject identity for antinormativity, antinormativity for desire, and so on, each new turn moving us out of intellectual naïveté toward a new and better *queer*. Instead, I argue that these three concepts—identity, normativity, and desire—are constitutive tensions in the past, present, and future of queer anthropology. They are our stumbling blocks and our goads, the limits that beg to be transgressed; they are, in the end, incitements to a queerer anthropology, an anthropology that keeps us queer.

YOU AND ME AND IDENTITY

I'll start with a just-so story set in 1993, the year that Sedgwick (1993) published *Tendencies*, the year that Butler's (1993) *Bodies That Matter* came out, and the year that Kath Weston (1993) first reviewed lesbian and gay anthropology for the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. In that essay, Weston charts the development of an anthropology of (homo)sexuality from early precedents through the groundbreaking work of the late 1970s and 1980s (Esther Newton's [1979] *Mother Camp*; Gilbert Herdt's [1984] *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia*; Evelyn Blackwood's [1986] *Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior*) to the nascent queer 1990s.

As Weston (1993, 341) argues, much of the work predating the 1990s—especially the comparative and typological studies—was what she calls “ethnocartography”: the search for “evidence of same-sex sexuality and gendered ambiguity in ‘other’ societies.” Ethnocartographic work relies on the assumption of sameness: that it is relatively easy to identify gay (and trans and occasionally lesbian) people elsewhere in the world, study them, and bring home this knowledge to expand our storehouse of cross-cultural same-sex sexualities. This should not discount the crucial role anthropology has played in decentering Western bio-sexological arguments and showing that sexuality is culturally constructed. But still this work tended, as Weston (1993, 344) argues, to assume “‘homosexuality’ as a universal category with readily identifiable variants.” And so, while ethnocartography provided rich examples of same-sex sexuality and gender-nonconforming practices around the globe, it tended to rely on understandings of ho-

mosexuality or of gay people that unintentionally bolstered Western (perhaps especially U.S.) universals of sex, desire, and subjectivity.

To get around this problem, anthropologists experimented with using so-called native terms (to avoid concept/translation problems) and distinguishing identities, such as “gay,” from acts, such as “same-sex practices” (to avoid ascribing subjectivities to behaviors).² Still, these work-arounds skirt a more fundamental epistemological problem: debates over what to call various practices come too late to challenge the knowledge practices that searched for and supposedly found them in the first place (Weiss 2011b). And so the issue remains: “By setting out in advance to look for sexuality, the anthropologist cannot help but reify the object of (ethnographic) desire” (Weston 1993, 347).

This epistemological crisis precipitated a paradigm shift from *gay and lesbian* to *queer*, and Weston’s essay might mark its date of inception. In contrast to ethnocartography, a new queer anthropology would not posit a self-evident sameness between ethnographic subject and object. Instead it would offer a provocation, a critique of “fixed sexual identity” or a “‘thing’ called homosexuality” (Weston 1993, 348). I see in this moment the birth of what we now call *queer anthropology*—an anthropology concerned not with gay and lesbian identities but with, as Weston (1993, 348) puts it, the “transgressive aspects of gender and sexuality.” Indeed, after this first queer turn, earlier gay and lesbian anthropology would look like (imperial and projected) identity politics—taking as its object *ourselves*, gay and lesbian people elsewhere, who are like us.

But before we put identity to bed, we might take a second look at this tale of getting beyond identity. For *queer* is, of course, only a partial substitution; not only do we continue to recognize work that concerns gay and lesbian (and bisexual and trans) identities and subjectivities as queer, we also continue to assume a correspondence between ourselves and our objects. Working in the other direction, I don’t think it was ever the case that what anthropologists saw when they got to Indonesia or Melanesia or even Kansas City was themselves—or even what they thought they were looking for. The problematics of sameness and difference, us and them, that moved us to study “gay,” “homosexual,” and even “sexuality” remain active and fruitful. And so while we might agree that our queer anthropology is decisively postidentity—has been for some twenty-odd years—we might try to resist the tendency to imagine that *queer* could be everything that *gay and lesbian* was not, and instead keep our focus on the ways new objects might be less a moving beyond and more a reflection of our queer identifications and desires.

TRANSGRESSION AND THE NEW NORMAL

Like the parallel shift in feminist studies from *women* to *gender* recently analyzed by Robyn Wiegman (2012), the shift from *gay and lesbian* to *queer* was motivated by a desire for more expansive, supple analytical concepts that could dislodge false universalizations. But as Wiegman (2012, 42) argues, the hope that a new object might save us, conceptually and politically, relies on a “transferential idealism” that “gender [read: queer] will be capable of giving us everything that women [read: gay/lesbian] does not,” that it “will be adequate to all the wishes that are invested in it.” This wish is a constitutive component of queer anthropology—there from the very start.

In our story, queer anthropology would analyze neither identity nor acts, but transgression and normativity: “queer,” Weston (1993, 348) writes, “defines itself by its difference from hegemonic ideologies of gender and sexuality.” This is the *queer* that I was taught: that which is, in Michael Warner’s (1993, xxvi) oft-cited phrase, resistant “to regimes of the normal”—not only heteronormativity, but “a wide field of normalization,” including “normal business in the academy.” And certainly by the time Tom Boellstorff (2007b) penned an *Annual Review* essay on what he (albeit not entirely comfortably) called “queer anthropology,” this was the dominant definition of queer. Widening our object to sexual/gender normativity and its transgressions opened up new topics for queer anthropology: other modes of sexualized marginality, other ways to think sexuality/gender with nationalism, capitalism, globalization. This more expansive queer might herald a return to Gayle Rubin’s canonical essay “Thinking Sex,” which, back in 1984, sought to galvanize a new critical sexuality studies that would examine sex not as identity, but as “a vector of oppression” (Rubin 1993, 22). It finds expression in contemporary work like Noelle Stout’s (2014) *After Love*, which explores queer and straight Cubans, sex workers, hustlers, tourists, and others caught within the contradictions of a mixed market, post-Soviet economy that pits socialist ideals against new material inequalities. Similarly, my own *Techniques of Pleasure* (Weiss 2011a) fits into the rubric of queer anthropology not because all the practitioners with whom I worked identified as queer (or LGBT), but because BDSM practitioners are, as Rubin (1993, 22) put it, “erotic dissidents.”

But as Weston (1993, 348) herself notes, what counts as transgression might—as much as *gay*—rest in the ethnographic eye of the beholder. As Boellstorff (2007a, 15) reminds us, insisting that queer is antinormative is often less of an analysis and more “a self-congratulatory exercise” where we know the conclusion—it’s queer so it’s transgressive!—in advance (see also Jakobsen 1998).

I found this in my own work: once I began to connect BDSM to circuits of capital, commodities, and neoliberal ideologies of gender and race, I could no longer endorse the by then dominant queer arguments about BDSM—that it is radical or transgressive. Instead, I was led to a more dialectical reading, resisting the either/or of condemnation and celebration as political positions one might take vis-à-vis BDSM, and sex politics more generally.

I am, of course, not alone in challenging queer as a prescriptive project—one that a priori assumes that all queer objects are antinormative (and anti-straight). Feminist and queer of color critics have long made this point; almost two decades ago, [Cathy Cohen \(1997, 438\)](#) argued that queer theory—despite a proclaimed deconstructive program—tends to “reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything queer” and, in the process, sidelines racialized (and classed and gendered) forms of nonnormativity, such as the “welfare queen” of her essay’s title (see also [Ferguson 2004](#)). And since the early 2000s, queer’s complicity with power has been difficult to ignore. In the United States, gay and lesbian absorption into American neoliberalism, settler/state nationalism, and racialized state violence gives a political-economic context to queer studies’ turn away from a critique of heteronormativity to homonormativity ([Duggan 2002](#)), homonationalism ([Puar 2007](#)), settler homonationalism ([Morgensen 2010](#)), and, most recently, queer necropolitics ([Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014](#)).³ This more intersectional approach to queer resonates with anthropology and our often more materialist analysis of not only antinormativity, but also the workings and limits of social intelligibility (see, for instance, [Engebretsen 2013](#)).

Still, when pressed, many of us give some version of “nonnormative sexualities and/or genders” as the central definition of *queer*. I know I do in the classroom, and the same holds true for most of the new essays and monographs in queer anthropology (for a review of new queer anthropology, see [Weiss 2016](#)). The editors of the recent *Routledge Queer Studies Reader* define queer studies as the “critique of normative models of sex, gender, and sexuality” ([Hall and Jagose 2013](#), xvi), lauding queer studies’ “commitment to non-normativity and anti-identitarianism,” as well as “its refusal to define its proper field of operation in relation to any fixed content.” Yet this insistence proves doubly ironic given the academic institutionalization of queer studies. In the marketplace of ideas, queer difference is too easily absorbed through an embrace of multicultural diversity that re-entrenches and bolsters, rather than unseats, the everyday workings of the neoliberal university ([Ferguson 2012](#)).

In this context, we might ask not what comes after antinormative queer theory, but rather why we romance the antinormative, oppositional, or transgressive queer (see [Wiegman and Wilson 2015](#)). It is my suspicion that we substituted political *identification* for *identity*, finding in queer studies the political possibilities and desires we have for ourselves ([Weiss 2015](#)). For this reason, even as work in queer studies has increasingly challenged queer (as) transgression, and even as queer does not deliver on our hopes for resistance or oppositionality, we continue to invest in it because queer—in a kind of “our objects, ourselves” wishful thinking—weds our professional investments and careers to our political desires (see [Wiegman 2012](#)). In other words, queer unites the nonnormative object of analysis with the antinormative critic, analysis with politics—perhaps telling us more about our own scholarly desires than about the objects we mean to analyze.

But at this point, I am not—as you may have guessed—going to propose a new object that might resolve these political and conceptual dilemmas. Instead, I am drawn to the parallel between the way we generate convergence between ourselves and our objects (via identity), and between our politics and those we ascribe to our objects (identification). This parallel is our desire—a desire that links us to our objects—and it is this desire that, more than cant definitions, motivates our queerness and our ethnographic practice, while bifurcating queer anthropology from the start.

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

In 2012, I was sitting with Reina Gossett in the light-filled conference room at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in New York City. I was talking to Reina as part of my fieldwork for the book I am writing now, a book on how queer left activists cultivate a radical political imagination—one that is both critical and utopic—at a time of economic precarity and imaginative scarcity. Reina is an activist, writer, and artist whose work centers low-income trans people of color. At one point in our conversation, she described her frustration with the “check your privilege” kind of activism (where one might say, “as a person with white privilege, I need to be accountable to people of color by doing XYZ”). Based on a kind of balance-sheet reckoning, this activism recenters the white (or wealthy, or cisgendered, or straight) person. Instead, Reina told me, “I would love for folks to shift away from this politics of privilege” toward a “politic of desire,” where “you’re engaging through desire.” Everyone needs to ask, “What do I want?”

This question is central for the activists with whom I worked, as it is an invitation to imagine or envision otherwise. But I think this question is a useful one for us anthropologists, too, since it is our desire that leads us to our objects. Indeed, it is a queer desire that, I suspect, lies at the core of anthropology itself—not the ethnocartographic project of describing, but the anthropological project of seeking “a generous . . . but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit” (Ingold 2008, 69). As knowledge projects, anthropology and queer studies both desire a “space for thinking differently” (Hall and Jagose 2013, xvi), with and alongside others.

My enthusiasm for rethinking desire in these terms might be prompted by my field research—I think ethnographically, as anthropologists are wont to do. But this queer of desire, of possibility, is also the queer José Muñoz (2009, 21, 25–26) reaches toward in his work on utopia: a queer of emergence, potentiality, the desire for something not yet, something yet to come (see also Rodríguez 2014).⁴ Resonating with what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) terms an “anthropology of the otherwise,” queer (as) possibility appears in new queer ethnographies like Naisargi Dave’s (2012, 20) on the emergence of lesbian activism in India as an “ethical aspiration” to create a new world. In my own work, queer is not so much an object—proper or not—and more a stake in a shared project, a future imagined. Queer names not only the messy realities of peoples’ sexualities and genders as they intersect with class, race, disability, and nation; not only impossible dreams, or visions, or desires for something better. Queer also points to our own desires—our desires to know and inhabit a different way of thinking, a path of solidarity that does not rely on facile identity (that we are both queer) or identification (that my own politics in the academy might be shored up through my interlocutors’ activism, say), but on the more vulnerable and queerer work of trying to know another. Queer is not only how I might conceptualize and categorize the activism and world-making projects of my interlocutors but also how I reckon with my own.

For this, we need a dialectical queer—a queer marked at once by epistemological closure and intellectual potentiality, complicity and solidarity. Bound to the social field we occupy together, this queer cannot avoid contamination. But perhaps that is a strength, not a weakness: queerness, like anthropology, not as “a study of,” but “a study with” (Ingold 2008, 82, 83), a way of asking questions in a world constituted by who (and what) we think alongside (see also Povinelli 2012). It is this queer that, I think, characterizes our work in anthropology—anthropology that is less about the study of an object, less about gaining “knowl-

edge about the world” and the people in it, and more about opening “our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being” (Ingold 2008, 82). Anthropology as a way of attending to, inhabiting, and thinking an otherwise. To know another is, in some senses, the most intimate act, and the queerest—as “a way of knowing it is also a way of being” (Ingold 2008, 83). This queer, this anthropology, depends on our desires to learn an/other way alongside others.

Which leaves us where we are, today—in what we might think of as post-antinormative queer times. For institutionalization has not been the end of queer, even as queer doesn’t carry the transgressive promise it once had. Instead, it is precisely the limitations of our ways of knowing, the frustration of the (political-analytical) desires that motivated the field to begin with, that push us toward and link us with new objects, new analyses, new horizons. This fracturing has produced a wider than ever range of queer work—work on nonhuman animals, on temporality, on affect, on objects and vitalities that uncouple queer from sexuality/gender (see, for instance, Holland, Ochoa, and Tompkins 2014, 2015; Chen and Luciano 2015). I say this not to herald a new queer vanguard, but rather because I think it shows that we are still *after* queer—still seeking it, investing in it, desiring it—even though, no, *because* we don’t know what it is.

For this reason, I have not offered a *queerer* (better) queer that might finally overcome queer anthropology’s frustrating attachments. For it is our queer desires that motivate 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, I think, the point. And so I think we should acknowledge our desires; indeed, I think it is our erotic, political, and intellectual desires that make our work queer and, I’m wagering, that make anthropology queer. Queer as a wanting to know, to know more—“a commitment to a wondering curiosity,” rather than “disciplinary certainty” (McGlotten 2012, 3). Queer as a provocation to think otherwise, think anew. Aren’t those our desires? They’re certainly mine.

NOTES

1. Indeed, Sedgwick (1993, 8) herself never intended it to: on the same page that she writes about queer’s “open mesh,” she insists that “given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression,” displacing same-sex desire “from [queer’s] definitional center would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself.”
2. Take, as one well-known example, the debates around the Sambia practices Gilbert Herdt (1984) so famously first described as “ritualized homosexuality,” before shifting to “boy inseminating rites” in 1993. Yet as Deborah Elliston (1995) argues, such terms still draw our attention to sexuality and gendered erotics. She calls the rites “semen

practices” (Elliston 1995, 850) and urges us to connect them not to same-sex practices elsewhere (no matter how much cultural context we give the fellatio), but to other ritualized fluid exchanges in Melanesia.

3. Queer and feminist Marxist scholars have made related arguments about *queer*'s imbrication with capitalist social relations (Hennessy 2000; Floyd 2009).
4. This is not an entirely new queer; queer as a hope for an otherwise appears in the very first use of the phrase *queer studies* in 1991. Teresa de Lauretis (1991, iii, xi) proposed that *queer* might provide a “conceptual and speculative” opening, asking: “Can our queerness act as an agent of social change . . . and our theory construct . . . another way of living the racial and the sexual?” Of course, de Lauretis (1994, 297) also registered the characteristic failure and frustration of queer studies, turning away from *queer* a mere three years later because, in her words, it had become “a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry.”

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