

## Queering ethnography

Alexander Santillanes

*The challenge for queer theory... is how to make theory queer rather than just having a theory about queers.*

*John Nguyet Erni,  
"Eternal Excesses: Toward a Queer Mode of Articulation in Social Theory"*

For my Master's thesis at the Centre for African Studies, I am currently writing an ethnographic life history of a man named Bordeaux. Bordeaux is a young gay South African, who grew up in a conservative Afrikaner town during the height of apartheid, where he struggled to develop a homosexual identity. In writing his life story, I am attempting to examine gender performance and patterning in childhood, and to explore the relationships between homophobia and Afrikaner nationalism, and between masculinity and white identity. In part, I was inspired to write this ethnography after hearing about how Bordeaux has struggled to develop his identity in relation to his culture. Bordeaux once explained to me that he chose to identify himself as Afrikanse rather than Afrikaner. The choice was in a sense made *for* him, since as a non-Christian homosexual he doesn't fit within the boundaries of Afrikaner identity. However, it is a choice that he has embraced, and it serves as a way for him to reject the exclusionist politics he sees in Afrikaner identity.

In thinking about the nature of my methodology and discipline, I noticed parallels in my own academic identity. I was 'raised' within the discipline of cultural anthropology, but I now define myself with a qualifier, explaining that I do queer theory anthropology. Though I practice ethnography and see myself as building upon an anthropological tradition, I use queer theory as a form of analysis through which to examine my own practice. In this paper, I will attempt to explain how my anthropological methodology is informed through my interaction with queer theory, and how I conceive of the relationship between these two disparate parts of my work. Since queer theory is in part a method of deconstructing dominant structures, I will analyze my methods in relation to the current dominant mode of anthropology, post-modernism. Finally, I will return to a question of identity politics, to see how Bordeaux and I may share common characteristics as we attempt to assert queer identities against prevailing norms.

### Using Queer Theory within Anthropology

Much of the queer theory I employ in my practice is taken from the humanities, in particular literary criticism, philosophy, and art theory. Put somewhat roughly, queer theory is a form of deconstructive analysis that aims to show the constructed nature of identities, particularly in terms of sexuality and gender. The aim in queer theory is to destabilise normative identities, to show that what we take as natural isn't quite as natural as it seems. By using queer theory in my ethnographic practice, I don't feel the need to dissociate myself entirely from anthropology, and I actively pursue the common ground between anthropology and queer theory. Much like queer theory, cultural anthropology is premised on a constructivist project. By studying variables across cultures, anthropology has long argued that the concepts and categories we use to understand the world are more cultural than natural. For this reason, Esther Newton (herself a queer anthropologist) suggests that anthropology is potentially subversive. "Anarchism, I read once, is an ideology of permanent rebellion. Anthropology, by refuting any one culture's claims to absolute authority, offers a permanent critique."<sup>1</sup>

Following this point, I feel confident that anthropology can potentially pursue the same goal as queer theory: demonstrating that ‘natural’ categories like gender are in fact culturally constructed, and that ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (to use Judith Butler’s term) is a cultural value, not a biological design.

However, despite the potential for radical critique, anthropology has only recently begun to produce truly challenging work on the constructed nature of gender and sexuality. In a 1987 review of “the cross-cultural study of human sexuality”, the concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality were taken as natural categories, which could be applied to the any culture around the globe.<sup>2</sup> This form of analysis fails to look at the particular ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed *within* their particular contexts, and are not biological categories that are understood uniformly in all places and at all times. Only within the past 15 years have anthropologists begun to thoroughly explore the constructed nature of sexuality, demonstrated in works such as Don Kulick’s *Travestis*, an ethnography of transgendered prostitutes in Brazil. In part, the scarceness of adequate theorizing on homosexuality within anthropology has influenced me to look to queer theory.

I have employed queer theory in my ethnography primarily as a form of analysis with which to examine Bordeaux’s stories for the ways in which gender is articulated and performed in Afrikaner culture. For example, I have used queer theory to explore the ways in which the performance of gender served as a point of nervousness and unease for Bordeaux’s family during his childhood. He was rewarded for playing the correct gender role, and punished for playing the wrong one. He was often called to compare himself to other boys, to ‘normalise’. My aim is to show that the gender identities of Afrikaner culture are not natural biological essences, but performative identities that were regulated anxiously.

These stories could potentially be read in an essentialist way, that Bordeaux was gay, which thus marked him as essentially different from everyone else who was normal and heterosexual. A queer reading of several key stories has helped me counter that position. My ethnography begins with a story of Bordeaux at age five, watching the wedding of Princess Diana on television. He was so inspired by the ceremony that he got his friends to reenact the wedding with him when they came to play the following weekend. Bordeaux played the role of Diana, wearing his mother’s blue nightie as a wedding gown. Bordeaux would often traipse around the house in drag, playing a modified version of this game on his own. Distressed by this gender confusion in her son, his mother urged him to play the role of Prince Charles, which didn’t interest Bordeaux. To get him to stop wearing the nightie, she made him a pair of pants out of an old dress, so that he could still play dress-up, but in the proper male role. It is significant that his mother ‘corrected’ his gender confusion not by getting him to simply lose the costume, or to play in his normal clothes. Instead, she switched one costume for another, getting him to trade the part she saw as inappropriate for the part that was more acceptable for him to play. His drag was, in the language of Judith Butler, a “subversive bodily act”,<sup>3</sup> which played with the language of gender in a way his mother saw as inappropriate. My argument is not that Bordeaux was ‘undoing’ the gender system through his performance, but rather that the uneasy policing of that act reveals an element of anxiety in the gender system, and opens up the possibility for a subtle sedition.

### **Queer ethnography as critical ethnography**

Importantly, queer theory is not only a body of theory with which to think about social identities and relations. It also seeks to reveal the ways in which gender shapes our patterns of thinking. This is true not only of the ways in which we think about gendered bodies and

sexualities, but also of the power-structures through which all knowledge is produced. Literary theorist Alan Sinfield suggests that queer theory follows the writing of feminists and intellectuals of color in positing the “death of the reader”<sup>4</sup>. In using this term, Sinfield means not that people have stopped reading, but rather that literary theory can no longer rest on the assumption that there is only one ‘proper’ vantage point from which to read a text. He argues that although the normative reading positioning of literary criticism has long asserted itself as being universal or unbiased, it has actually been that of the heterosexual, white male. By countering that position through promoting alternative ways of reading, queer theory forms a criticism of hegemonic knowledge producing structures.

In part, I align my queer-theory ethnography within a larger project of critical ethnography. “The role of radical/critical anthropologies of various persuasions- none of which are mutually exclusive- is to struggle for an authentic anthropology wherein Westerners and non-Westerners, men and women, class-privileged and class-oppressed can engage on more leveled terrain in an anthropological enterprise that no longer objectifies, appropriates or nativizes ethnographic Others.”<sup>5</sup> Much like Sinfield’s description of queer literary theory, critical ethnography seeks to promote new ways of ‘reading’ culture. The traditional authoritative voice of the ethnographer is white, heterosexual, and male. A queer theory ethnography, then, must examine the ways in which the ‘objective’ heterosexual voice has shaped anthropology, and worked to silence the dissenting voices of queer.

In order to mount a critique, I have had to question every element of my methodology, to see where normative-heterosexual male writing practices have disabled queer voices and critiques. For my practice, this has meant a reevaluation of many standard ethnographic practices, from selecting my research topic to editing my writing style. I chose specifically to study an individual rather than a ‘cultural group’, as traditional ethnography often serves to generalise cultures, erasing discord or difference within the group. Ethnographies long advertised to describe whole cultures, while truthfully only describing the involvement of straight men in society. I have also attempted to equalise the disparate power levels of traditional ethnographer/informant relationships by including my ‘informant’ (a term so lacking that it reveals the deficiencies of anthropological language) in a more substantial role in the project. Rather than just recording his stories to use in my analysis, I have attempted to see how my interest in his identity may parallel his own questions of self, to promote ways in which we can work toward similar goals in the writing of this ethnography. I have also taken particular caution in the writing of the actual ethnographic text. I have attempted to replicate our relationship accurately, to reveal the human conditions under which knowledge was produced. I have also struggled to maintain a first person voice throughout the ethnography, avoiding writing either from his ‘thoughts’ or from a third-person perspective, so that the reader does not get the false sense of either interiority or objectivity, respectively.

### **Working against the Canon**

As I build my practice of queer theory anthropology, I remain aware that recent developments within anthropology have allowed me to do so. Earlier experimental anthropologists, such as Zora Neale Hurston, or queer anthropologists, such as Esther Newton, were not as fortunate as I am in that regard. Under the guise of science and professionalism, they were either reprimanded or criticised for their work, and castigated for being too reflective. Hurston was never recognised in her lifetime as being a proper anthropologist because of her ‘unscientific’ work, and Newton was denied tenure and effectively terminated from her teaching position for her queer politics.

These renegade works were excluded largely because they failed to fit the prevailing paradigm of ethnographic work. The canon of cultural anthropology has largely been composed of ethnographers like Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard, who set aside personal conflicts in the name of anthropological science. The choice to promote this style of work has not been an objective act. “Erasure, peripheralization, marginality and invisibility have long been concomitants of canon formation. The core of anthropological discourse has been historically constituted as a Western, White male domain, where the language of objectivity and value neutrality has served to mark and obscure mechanisms of silencing, alienating and subjugating the voices and subjectivities of White women, and the female and male descendents of the colonially conquered people denied history and access to anthropological authority,”<sup>6</sup> (and I would also include homosexuals within the category of the excluded). Normative anthropologists articulated their voice as universal and scientific; when women, people of color, or queers spoke back, they were labeled as unscientific (not capable of producing knowledge), or if they were lucky, as specialised voices (not capable of producing universal knowledge).

My use of interdisciplinary theory has been largely permitted by the literary turn in anthropology, a shift away from seeing anthropology as a positivistic science, and toward understanding it as a critical humanities project. Anthropologists under a number of identifications have taken up the literary turn in anthropology, but perhaps most prominently by post-modern anthropologists. Post-modernism within anthropology means a deconstruction of ethnographic authority, a focus on the textuality of ethnographies, and a deliberate move away from positivism, all trends that I pursue in my own work. But as post-modernism becomes the dominant paradigm within anthropology, I remain cautious of the new boundaries it establishes.

I don’t feel that it is overly suspicious to be wary of the post-modern trend in anthropology, the very trend that has enabled me to speak. For while it opens up the possibility of new methods and voices, it simultaneously silences others. The post-modern turn in anthropology is often marked by the 1986 release of the book *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.<sup>7</sup> In a now infamous passage in the introduction to *Writing Culture*, James Clifford stated that no feminist ethnographers were included in the book, because feminist ethnographers have either not experimented with ethnographic form, or have done so purely on feminist grounds. In these several short lines, he either ignored feminists, or contradictorily, acknowledged them, but argued that the work was ‘feminist’ (which should make sense, since they’re feminist anthropologists), and thus not universal knowledge (read: male thought). In so doing, Clifford summarily dismissed not only the work of his feminist contemporaries, but also groundbreaking intellectuals like Zora Neale Hurston and Ella Deloria who had written experimentally long before Clifford said that it was ok.

In many ways, Clifford’s point that feminist anthropologists were incapable of producing universally-applicable knowledge closely resembles the ways in which women and other dissident voices were excluded from the discipline by earlier generations of anthropologists, the same anthropologists Clifford ostensibly wishes to critique through post-modern anthropology, excluded women and other dissident voices from the discipline. This suggests that while Clifford crosses some old boundaries, he discretely re-inscribes others. Some critics have even argued that post-modern anthropology is a strategy for disarming queer, feminist, and minority anthropologists, and continuing white heterosexual male intellectual privilege.<sup>8</sup> Yet the language of post-modern anthropology hides this erasure, and demonstrates loudly that it allows new voices, while it quietly silences others.

In writing on Sociology's relationship with queer theory, Steven Seidman reflected on the ways in which queer theorists have been made weary of adopting stable identities. "Finally, rather than viewing affirmations of identity as necessarily liberating, queer theorists figure them as disciplinary and regulatory structures. Identity constructs function, if you will, as templates defining selves and behaviors and therefore as excluding a range of possible ways to frame one's self, body, desires, actions, and social relations."<sup>9</sup> Partly due to my positioning as a gay male, I'm aware that disciplinary boundaries serve not simply to define, but also to exclude. The choice for me to work inter-disciplinarily is thus not merely methodological, but political. As postmodernism has allowed new voices to speak, it has also disregarded old ones and silenced dissenting ones. It has been argued that post-modernism doesn't "know its politics"<sup>10</sup>. As a queer anthropologist, I understand the need to maintain my politics within my practice, and have made the fundamental decision not to hide my views under the rhetoric of objectivity. Rather, I am working to make my politics visible in my work, and to reveal how they shape and influence the ethnographic writing that I produce.

### **Crossing boundaries**

In his younger years, Bordeaux had never critically examined Afrikaner identity, assuming that he was Afrikaner simply because he spoke Afrikaans. In 1994, as Bordeaux began to accept his homosexual identity, and South Africa moved toward democratisation, he began to notice people announcing "We are Afrikaners", identifying themselves not merely as Afrikaans speaking, but also as right-wing, Christian, heterosexual, and white. This definition excluded non-Whites, homosexuals, and non-Christians. It became associated in Bordeaux's mind with the segregationary politics of Apartheid. An Afrikaner identity is associated in his mind with the landscape and the people of his childhood town of Hoedspruit, a place where he was excluded due to his sexuality. He associates Hoedspruit, and Afrikaner culture generally, with a set of values that he does not share.

Around the same time that Bordeaux became troubled with Afrikaner identity, he learned that some coloured groups were defining themselves as Afrikanse, meaning they were Afrikaans speaking but not Afrikaner. Bordeaux chose to adopt this identity. He saw it as an effort to maintain an identity linked to the language, but disavowing the politics of exclusion. Bordeaux recognised that he came from an Afrikaner culture, which had shaped and influenced him, but he no longer agreed with the exclusionary values of the culture. He adopted the identity of Afrikanse, maintaining a link to his language, but asserting a new way to exist in relation to it. An Afrikanse identity is one of both identification and disavowal, and locates him both within and outside of Afrikaner culture. In many ways, this insider/outside identification is representative of the position that his sexuality has always placed him in. His choice to keep Afrikaans as part of his identity reflects his heritage, and the role it had in shaping him. By distancing himself from it, he critically places himself outside of the exclusionary culture.

In many ways, Bordeaux's choice to define himself as Afrikanse parallels my own search for academic self-definition. Recognizing that traditional anthropology erased or omitted queer voices, I have struggled to define myself apart from it. I am thus within anthropology, and simultaneously apart from it. I recognise the strength in its methodology, and see potential in the anthropological tradition of uprooting cultural norms. By asserting my queer identity, however, I distance myself from its history of exclusionary practices, and remain critical of how I employ its methodology. To recognise that you are queer is not to exist outside of culture, it is to exist in a particular relation to culture.

To be honest, I don't dream of the day when we can have a 'queer anthropology'. One danger is that 'queer anthropology' could simply become (and perhaps already has become) a specialisation within the field: 'queer culture' could sit alongside witchcraft and ritual dance as possible speciality interests for anthropologists. This would deny the way in which 'queerness' is not a particular aspect of culture, but a pervasive underlying element. The more insidious result could be that anthropology could rob queer theory of its very power to queer, to upset boundaries and reveal hidden structures of power and dominance. For anthropology to absorb queer theory may simply have the effect of consolidating anthropology's power or authority, and to obscure the ways in which anthropology as a discipline works to shut out queer voices. It should not be taken as a mistake or a simple omission that homosexuality has not been theorised properly in anthropology; rather, it must be addressed as a systematic censure, an obscuring silence.

In attempting to define feminist ethnography, Kamala Visweswaran argues that we should not simply struggle to become part of the canon, but to question the very idea of the canon.<sup>11</sup> Following her, I choose not to simply graft queer theory onto my anthropological practice. Instead, I choose to use queer theory as a system of critique outside of anthropology, as a critical lens through which to examine my own methodology and practice. The normative voice within anthropology has long been that of the white heterosexual male anthropologist. To say that we've reached a point in which we've overcome that tradition would be to ignore the systematic way in which certain voices are allowed while others are simultaneously silenced. We cannot accept an established point as our end-goal; rather, we must remain continually critical of our practice. My choice is to don the anthropologist's role in a form of ethnographic drag. I'll play the part of the ethnographer, while simultaneously critiquing that role. Perhaps the very codes by which anthropology gets its authority can also be its undoing. For there is more subversive strength in queering Anthropology than there is in having a Queer Anthropology.

<sup>1</sup> Esther Newton, "Introduction", *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000, page 1.

<sup>2</sup> D.L. Davis and R.G. Whitten, "The Cross Cultural Study of Human Sexuality", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 16, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, "Subversive Bodily Acts", *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics - Queer Reading*, Second Edition, New York: Routledge, second edition published 2004, page xii-xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Faye Harrison, "Writing Against the Grain", *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 13 No. 4, London: SAGE, 1993, 402.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison 1993, 405.

<sup>7</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen. "The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective", *Signs*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Autumn 1989), page 15.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Seidman, "Queer-ing Sociology, Sociologizing Queer Theory: An Introduction", *Sociological Theory*, Vol 12, No 2, (July 1994), 173.

<sup>10</sup> Mascia-Lees, page 7.

<sup>11</sup> Kamala Visweswaran, "Defining Feminist Ethnography", *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, page 39.