Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/retn20

Anthropologists Are Talking about Queer Anthropology

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Published online: 07 Sep 2015.

To cite this article: Mark Graham (2015): Anthropologists Are Talking about Queer Anthropology, Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology, DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2015.1084021

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1084021

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The following roundtable discussion took place at the European Association of Social Anthropologists’ biennial conference held in Tallinn, Estonia, on 31 July to 3 August 2014. It sprang out of the session ‘Whatever is happening to the critical study of sexual and gender diversity in anthropology?’ convened by Paul Boyce and Silvia Posocco, and a meeting of the European Network of Queer Anthropology (ENQA), which was founded in 2013 by Paul Boyce and Elisabeth Engebretsen. The aim of the discussion was to explore what we mean by a queer anthropology and what it can still contribute to the discipline some two decades after the emergence of queer theory in the academia. The discussion was recorded, transcribed and edited by Ethnos Co-Editor in Chief, Mark Graham. The participants:

Paul Boyce is Lecturer in Anthropology and International Development, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex. Ethnographically he has principally worked in West Bengal, India. He has also conducted community-based research for a range of international development agencies on HIV prevention, sexual rights, and sexual work.

Elisabeth L. Engebretsen is a co-founder of the ENQA, and Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Centre for Gender Research, University of Oslo. She is the author of *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (2013).

EJ Gonzalez-Polledo teaches ethnography and research methodology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. EJ’s research interests include queer/trans epistemologies and transitioning.

Thomas Hendriks is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa (KU Leuven University, Belgium). Thomas’ ethnographic work focuses on dissident performances of masculinities.
and the production of queer desire in contemporary urban Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo).

Adnan Hossain is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Amsterdam working on masculinities, cricket and mobilities. His paper ‘Beyond Emasculation: Being Muslim and Becoming Hijra in South Asia’ was published in 2012 in *Asian Studies Review*.

Silvia Posocco works at the intersections of social anthropology and transnational gender and sexuality studies. Silvia is the author of *Secrecy and Insurgency: Socialities and Knowledge Practices in Guatemala* (Alabama University Press, 2014) and co-editor, with Jin Haritaworn and Adi Kuntsman, of *Queer Necropolitics* (Routledge, 2014).

Taylor Riley is currently working on her PhD at Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies in Germany. Her research focuses on knowledge and female same-sex intimacies in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.

Hadley Z. Renkin received his PhD in Anthropology from the University of Michigan. Assistant Professor of Gender Studies at Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, he has written on postsocialist homophobia, Budapest Pride, and Eastern European histories of sexual science.

Heather Tucker is a PhD candidate at Central European University. Her research focuses on a feminist and queer ethnographic study of the embodied narratives of individuals who, according to notions of ‘tradition’ and sexuality in Accra, Ghana, live non-normatively in the capital.

Paul: Welcome everyone. Let’s get started. After a discussion with our co-conveners, Elisabeth and Silvia, I sent some questions around beforehand, many of them about what we were discussing at the end of the last panel. As we move on with our discussion, we’ll be returning to them, but to kick things off, the first question I propose to discuss is, ‘what can anthropology offer to queer epistemologies?’ I wondered what you have to say on that specific topic.

Adnan: I think what anthropology can offer to queer epistemologies is first and foremost ethnographically grounded perspectives that are not necessarily Euro- or American-centric. One thing that queer anthropology does is challenge the intellectual adequacy and complacency of ‘western-inflected’ queer epistemologies. I mean how the categories and assumptions and theoretical standpoints developed in certain contexts are not always necessarily transposable onto contexts different to the ones in which the concepts and categories developed in the first place. So my point is that anthropology can...
offer necessary correctives to the parochialism of Anglo-american queer studies.

Elisabeth: I also think something we talked about in some of the earlier panels was about western categorical vocabularies and imperatives. I think that the kinds of research practices and methodologies that are informed by, well, a queer perspective but are also very much grounded in ethnography and a particular fieldwork encounter can really challenge the kind of binaries that continue to be the underlying foundation of much of critical thinking that remains extremely abstract. Where I think a lot of the assumptions that are actually very violent and discriminatory are remaining almost silent but very much present. So I think, for me, that is one great contribution.

Hadley: I would agree with both of those. Perhaps it’s an increasingly inaccurate and crude distinction, but I think what anthropology can offer is a focus on grounded practice and on everyday life which can challenge and perhaps test some of the perspectives that seem to be part of a queer epistemological framework, coming from the beginning of queer studies, and from a cultural studies and literary studies background.

Adnan: Going back to the last point about conceptual categories, I want to say that if you look at gender and sexuality ethnographically in diverse contexts, the kind of meanings these categories take on are very different to what we are used to in Western academia. Like the very moment we hear the words ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ we start to associate them with certain images and attributes, but then it’s really different in different contexts. For example, does gender come from sexuality or sexuality come from gender? That kind of thing, and ideas of sexual orientation and gender /sexual identities, and the distinctions Western sciences have insisted on are often broken down when you look at gender and sexuality ethnographically in India, China, Bangladesh or in Congo.

Paul: I wonder if there is tension in some of the ideas we are developing, because one tendency seems to be suggesting that anthropology or ethnography can offer some kind of grounding, some kind of empirical perspective to an otherwise quite abstract queer potentiality. At the same time, it also seems that a lot of the work we have been doing uses the empirical work of ethnography to bring about new forms of abstraction. So we aren’t just saying that queer theory is quite abstract and let’s ground it in the real world of ethnographic life, but we are saying that when one goes about trying to do that, new problems of abstraction arise. How to use categories or make claims about life-worlds in different places become very problematic in this way.
Silvia: One of the problems of abstraction is the question not just of translation but also of incommensurability. Some of the papers were really focused around thinking about failure, how categories, theoretical frameworks and concepts travel to other contexts, and so the question is not only about translation but also incommensurability, which can be one of the results of anthropological inquiry, a productive result and not necessarily a failure in a negative sense.

Hadley: I’d like to go in the same direction as the second option that you mentioned, in the sense that for me there is a difference between ethnography and anthropology, and the grounding work is something ‘ethnographical’, while perhaps the conceptualising work is more ‘anthropological’. If you want to talk about queer anthropology, it is more than just an ethnographized version of queer studies. So perhaps the question is at what level... whether our objective is a higher theoretical abstraction than we are sometimes used to?

EJ: I think perhaps the work of queer theory is at the level of thought and conceptualisation rather than just adding some empirical addendum to existing theories. That is what we might be trying to do.

Thomas: I completely agree. For me, this theoretical ambition is really where queer anthropology can make a difference to queer studies or queer theory. To come back to the tension between grounding and abstraction that Paul referred to: I think it is one of anthropology’s major strengths that we are comfortable about looking for theory in the same place we look for data. In other words, that grounding and abstraction are two sides of the same coin of ethnographic fieldwork.

Paul: So Elisabeth, I was having a discussion with you about someone who has objected to your use of the word ‘queer’ to describe women in China because those women might not use that terminology to describe their own lives.

Elisabeth: Well I don’t exactly remember how I responded at the time, but I think it’s a valid point to make that you are somehow using a term, ‘queer’, that comes from a very particular context, a lived context elsewhere, whereas most the people you are trying to describe might not use that term themselves. Now at the time of my first fieldwork starting in 2004, yes, queer was not in China, but by the time I left two years later queer was being used. When I look online I find ku’la a combination of ku’er, queer, and lala, a colloquial term for lesbian. In this short space of time the people there are using these terms and they are certainly not brainwashed in any way. Now the criticism of this particular scholar comes, I think, out of an ideological stance rather than a critical engagement with the scholarship and the ways in which the
world is changing. I guess your question or the criticism you mention is that you should use native terms to describe these people; otherwise you are imposing something that is negative. But at the same time, I don't think that is necessarily what you do. For example, the way I tried to deal with that in my book (Engebretsen 2013) was that I have a foreword where I explain and justify, I hope, why I use queer as an umbrella category . . . I was very much ripping off David Valentine's (2007) use of transgender in his monograph *Imagining Transgender* because otherwise you get into a situation where you can't describe anyone if you are going to be 'ethical' about it. You cannot talk about anyone because people themselves change the way they use terms in different contexts, about who they are, I mean it's a very complicated situation,

Taylor: I just want to say that it’s really important to point out that language is limited in that way. The capacity of language to describe is functionally limited, and I remember the foreword to your book, Elisabeth, and I really appreciated it, and I think that if you can kind of outline why you are using a term there might be instances when that term is applicable, but you won’t be able to rely on it all the time. I think of the term ‘lesbian’ and I know that it’s sometimes accurate and sometimes it’s not, but at the end of the day these kinds of languages are all we have. We can use the most descriptive words but we can’t always rely on them, and I think this is what is most problematic.

Hadley: I think this is what I meant by saying that we can use anthropology to provide tests for queer epistemologies. Because what we can do is show the limitations of this kind of question about language, by suggesting that it's not simply that, for example, there is a 'queer' that is here or not, or that appears and then disappears, or that existed at one point and not at another, but rather that this is part of what queerness is: It takes different forms that are related to but different from both the limitations of language and questions that emerge from bounded notions of language and linguistic categories. So anthropology can raise basic questions about queer epistemology and its limitations, suggesting that this – different practices, in different places – is what queerness is, and thus perhaps a much wider range of what we might consider to be queerness and its implications.

Paul: When it comes to categories, one of the themes that came out of some of the papers concerned failures and sideways connections; other kinds of entry points into and trajectories out of other people’s worlds that don’t rely on categorising imperatives. I think that that connects
quite a few of the things that we have been discussing so far. So ‘sideways’, for example, was a key thing for EJ.

EJ: Tell me about it! Well, I am thinking that through currently and it resonates with some of the things we have been hearing in the past few years from debates around the ontological turn to ontography. For me, making these connections is really at the core of what we are doing as anthropologists but obviously when you are dealing with diverse communities that have different experiences and stakes there is a negotiation that needs to go along with analysis, and that negotiation sometimes ends up in compromise that does not happen as often in other fields. I am thinking of questions like: ‘What happens when we see things differently from the way the communities we study with see things?’ Through the ethnographic process we are negotiating meanings with people. So what kind of politics do you adopt when you are developing these kinds of conversations? I’m thinking about that old Habermasian notion of knowledge and interests I suppose, and what the kind of knowledge we produce does in the real world. So I think that for me that is a very important thing about ethnography.

Paul: Another question concerns how anthropology and queer studies connect or disconnect. And maybe connections might not always be fecund and useful but problematic, while disconnections might be fecund and productive. This is again connected to the point about failures and rupture points; moments when things sort of stop and we come up against ourselves and have to ask ourselves where are we now, who are we now?

Hadley: Yes, I was just about to make the connection between that question and your question about failure, in the same way you just did. Because I think that perhaps in asking this question of what can anthropology offer to queer studies and queer epistemologies, I think we often imagine that there is a successful connection, where anthropology succeeds in offering something, in making its contribution, in transforming queer epistemologies – as we often feel, I think, that queer epistemologies have been transformed. And I suppose that’s true. But I wonder if it’s also important to look at the way in which the failure to connect could be incredibly productive, and not to try to make the goal our success in offering something to queer epistemology or queer studies, but to exploit the tensions we can produce instead. This makes me think of the earlier discussion we had, when we were talking about this whole issue of ‘does the insider have better insight than the outsider’? Do you need to be an insider, queer, native to be
a successful queer ethnographer or anthropologist? And I wonder if this view depends on a certain kind of ‘successful’ understanding, the ability to get at that subjective or objective insight that tells you what the native’s point of view is, the truth about what we want to know, about what we are looking at. I think that’s a fantasy of connection that’s better broken. Perhaps an anthropology we would want to work towards instead is one that does fail, that doesn’t achieve that connection, that repudiates that fantasy, and that therefore produces a different kind of knowledge.

EJ: Are you saying that the object of our description is to capture ‘the native’s point of view’? I think anthropological work is also about opening up new connections where a translation can take place.

Hadley: No, I agree with you. But I think it’s also about the knowledge that potentially comes from the failure of those connections.

Adnan: It’s also inflected by the ethnographer’s own subjectivity. We are describing how ‘they’ see it, but ten different people describe ‘it’ differently because of who they are, where they are based, so it’s definitely I think a dialectical process.

Elisabeth: But for me that’s kind of the key. I think one of the fallacies of our thinking is that we are still somehow wanting to get to that neat conclusion, that neat data, that neat piece of knowledge that’s going to be almost final and there and true. Whereas in fact everything that has to do with the perspective of queer for me and certainly after doing anthropology, which is a lot about connecting with others, between self and other, and to do with a political desire to make knowledge and research contribute to creating justice and equality in the ‘real’ world, is actually that particular connection and how it continually connects and sometimes disconnects. It’s a processual thing in a dyadic sense, of failures and successes or connections and disconnects, and which cannot be finally resolved, once and for all. The trouble is that our language is not advanced enough to actually describe this well enough, and I think we still . . . our imaginaries are not always advanced enough to describe what happens. This relates back to the previous point about the inadequacies of terminology and concepts across cultures and translation, and I think that continuing to discuss solutions and compromises is part and parcel of a queer-informed approach to doing anthropology.

Silvia: And yet epistemologically speaking we do have a wider array of frames for describing these specific processes. So if you think about the fact that we can think about it performatively or we can think about it with idioms of intersubjectivity, we have the dialectic that Adnan has...
just cited, etc. So we actually do have many forms we draw on in the theoretical register. The question is that these forms are always troubled by the encounter and so that is the difficulty and also the interesting element. There is always a troubling of the theoretical register that we inherit from traditions of critical theory, for example.

Heather: I’m just sort of having an ‘Aha!’ moment in terms of the conversations that have been going on today. It seems to me that there is a lot of resonance with the term authenticity, going towards this problematic in anthropology, and how this resonates with what critical queer theorists such as Jasbir Puar (2007) are thinking in terms of moving beyond intersectionality and introducing concepts like assemblages. How do we talk about individuals and groups and move beyond the list of – race, class, gender – to problematise that simple list of dimensions that we may have of authentic racial, gender or queer connection and to look/analyse/work with the framework of assemblages instead. I think what this framework does is to allow us to look at the fact that we are all part of larger, complex transnational flows of capital in a global context in which there histories of colonisation and exploitation are much a part of the story, which we are also trying to get at.

Paul: And how do we try to tell those stories and engage in those stories ethnographically do you think? A lot of what we are talking about is autobiographical. In the paper I presented, I tried to present myself as a partial, and impartial, troubled, and troubling, connected and disconnected ethnographer and was trying to make my processes of objectification and subjectification explicit, problematic and worrying in this way. Speaking for myself, in one way or another I felt that many of us were doing that sort of thing, engaging with ourselves within that frame. It’s not easy, perhaps, being an ethnographer who is constantly worrying, querying self and the ethnographic project through the particular kinds of paradigms we are interested in.

Mark: Perhaps I can return to Heather’s point going back to assemblages and so on and going beyond intersectionality. Looking at assemblages might suggest that what we are doing is not always fully under our control. We can ask how and where the people and things we look at arise and come from, which also brings us back to ourselves and to the question: Where did we come from and what put us here? Queer is perhaps more reflexive and more self-critical in that respect because it likes to think of itself as undermining categories such as ‘gay and lesbian anthropology’.

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Paul: Well I’m thinking a lot in the work that I do about understanding myself in the context of things that come from outside; so trying to engage with thinking about Dasein, for example, the being present that one tries to make sense of; the construction of oneself in the moment. But in doing that we are also engaging with a world that comes from outside of ourselves – trying to construct it in our own narratives of self.

Hadley: Actually, that makes me think, if I can go back to Povinelli’s keynote, it makes me think about the concept of collaboration, which other people here have mentioned, and the ways in which this represents both a working with and the potential to betray. One of the meanings of collaboration is betrayal, and I wonder if all these questions about the relationships between anthropology and its outsider status – questions of belonging and not belonging, objectivity and subjectivity and questions of queerness and queer studies and its belonging or not belonging and the like – suggest that in each of us, as people who are involved in queer anthropology and queer ethnography, there is a kind of collaboration going on, that involves the productive aspects of that mutual labour, but also involves a constant potential for betrayal, which then becomes part of oneself – as well as perhaps other collaborations going on between us and whatever we are studying. Maybe that takes us back to failure?

Thomas: I like Mark’s reminder that fieldwork is not under our control and that, as Hadley says, it is full of failures and betrayals. For me, that is central to the specificity of anthropology. As ethnographers we are, almost by definition, ‘out of our minds’ as Johannes Fabian put it. And, this is why anthropology as a ‘discipline’ is already, to a certain extent, queer.

Taylor: For me it just keeps going back to questions of sameness/difference, whether we can relate ourselves, not necessarily to our subjects but to what we are studying if the experience gives us perhaps more insight, a kind of insider’s perspective. It’s just such a tricky question. But it might also be a betrayal to assume that we have no kind of insight, and I’m not necessarily thinking in terms of relations to people we are studying but perhaps to the processes we are studying because I think it’s actually dangerous and a betrayal to abandon that link and it can be kind of a cop out. I’ve noticed that with people doing PhDs in gender and development studies. Some of them say ‘I regret it and I’d never do it again’.

Paul: What do they regret?

Taylor: They regret their research from an ethical perspective. They say ‘Oh, I wish I hadn’t done that. It’s too complicated and I want to remove...
myself from that whole discourse’. But then there is a problem of just removing yourself and saying you have no part in it. That’s almost as problematic as making ethical mistakes. I think you have to look at it in both ways.

Paul: The next question is: What are your reflections on the politics of doing queer /gender and sexual diversity work anthropologically in the academy and beyond?

Silvia: Well perhaps I can say that the purpose of the question was to try to think of the work that we do outside the ivory tower, and the politics of the work and the way it travels and circulates or fails to travel and circulate in and out of academia. We all come from very different academic contexts and it’s a very big question, some of the questions we’ve already touched on, such as thinking about ethics.

Heather: Well definitely for my specific project I explicitly chose post-colonial and African feminists to start with just in order to understand the history of anthropology in terms of African sexuality, and to start from a critical take in the work of Third World theorists, such as Mohanty. I started my project to really interrogate the ways in which this politics of knowledge has been reproduced and could possibility do harm. There is the potential for essentialisms, racialised essentialisms, etc. So just in terms of starting my first literature review it relied heavily on a political citational process of explicitly looking at not only the specific colonial history written by Ugandan scholars for my work in Uganda, but also looking at specific African feminists who were addressing the question of transnational research in Africa, and that which addressed, politically and academically, an ethics. Paying attention to that scholarship was an explicit political choice.

Silvia: Do we all pay attention to our citational practices? It’s a heated topic.

Elisabeth: I find it very interesting to follow, I don’t know if this is relevant, but it’s very interesting to follow a certain sharing of stories and polemics, for example in places like Facebook. Whose stories do people choose to cite, what kind of debates do they get into? But it’s also certainly true in scholarship: Who gets cited? And I think it’s really something that on the abstract level people are aware of, of the notion of citational politics, but are we really aware of who we are citing, especially since, on the one hand, we want to advance something that is new and fresh, but at the same time we are heavily reliant on the big canon and in a way we are complicit in reproducing those structures by showing that I’ve read Butler and what not when writing my funding application, for example. So I think that is another collaborative situation in both senses of the word.
Mark: Can I ask a question here? It’s 2014 and queer theory has been around, let’s say from 1990, or something like that. It’s an arbitrary date, but for quite a long time and yet here we are launching a queer network in the European Association of Social Anthropologists quite a long time after queer appeared in other disciplines. An outsider might say ‘You all arrived very late at the party’. So on the subject of whom do we cite, and who is relevant at the moment, I am just wondering ‘why now’? Why at this conjuncture? What brought you/us all together now? And is it still relevant? Why was it necessary at all to have this meeting, this session and to build this network?

Elisabeth: Well for me, if I can start, my thought was that there is a need for a community. For instance, I don’t want anyone, any post-grad, to have the experience I had of isolation and worse. I’m sorry to say this, but I didn’t have a great experience, and as you say in 2014 it shouldn’t have to happen. I knew all the dispersed, queer anthropology, great scholars around in different departments, a lot of whom are not housed in anthropology, but a lot of people with the same vision I think, and are working already to practise that vision. So why not try to bring together a network to collaborate and develop resources on multiple levels?

Paul: I also think we are fighting in different contexts and we are working towards different trajectories. I can’t say that since I finished my thesis and post-doctoral work that I’ve been working along an anthropological trajectory only; I didn’t necessarily think that that was available to me, or what I wanted; given that I saw such a heteronormative anthropological academy in the UK and Europe it did not seem like a viable or wise career choice at the time. My work has been interdisciplinary anyway and so leant itself to other things I thought I might be able do, for example in terms of work on HIV prevention and sexual rights. But anthropology was in my mind and I was always thinking about it through queer and other paradigms, but just not always having the outlet or desire to work only in those terms. Like I said before, it’s about making sense of where you find yourself ending up. We were speaking before about failure; every life possibility carries with it other possibilities that weren’t realised. I can’t say that I was necessarily going to end up in this position; that I was going to end up in this network [ENQA] or in a department of anthropology but as it turns out I have and in retrospect, and in the present, it seems worth trying to construct a context that might make things better for us and other people who are working queerly and anthropologically in Europe, and I was lucky that Elisabeth asked me to join and work
on this project [ENQA] with her and Silvia – and now everyone else who is becoming involved.

Silvia: If I may say, I actually don’t work in an anthropology department – I am based in a very interdisciplinary academic unit. The call for papers we put out had a theme of crisis at the heart of it, but actually the crisis is not a crisis of the field because we know our colleagues and friends who are actually doing fantastic work. The crisis is perhaps a crisis of the institutional level where the status of a certain kind of critical queer anthropology is quite precarious. So I think that was the crisis we wanted to signal in the call for papers. And we were confident that there were many people, perhaps not all homed in anthropology departments, doing very interesting anthropological work using the concepts that we use. So it’s at that level that, we thought, a crisis is structuring the field.

Hadley: Of course, that’s a particular institutional history you are referring to, the history of this anthropological institution, the EASA. I’m just thinking, because my first experience of a large-scale anthropological community is the American Anthropological Association, where there is a very particular history of the changing relationships between the perspectives of ‘lesbian and gay’ anthropology and ‘queer’ anthropology, including the recent transformation of the Society for Lesbian and Gay Anthropology, SOLGA, into AQA, the Association of Queer Anthropology. The key question is why it has taken so long for this crisis to develop. In the US, I think the timing has to do with a broader disciplinary resistance against anthropological perceptions of queer epistemologies. The kind of thing we were talking about earlier. These are often seen as an abstract, literary and ungrounded, and therefore there has been resistance to the idea of calling for a queer anthropology. Maybe that’s something that is happening here as well.

Thomas: To answer the question of why, now, we need queer anthropology: In my case, perhaps speaking for ‘African anthropology’, whatever that may be, I feel that the attraction of queer theory comes out of very concrete dissatisfactions about the ways anthropology has been dealing with sexualities and genders in Africa. Queer theory might propose different ways of doing that. But at the same time, I must confess that I have a quite ambivalent love-hate relationship with queer theory. It seems to push you in certain directions, and this comes to politics again, in which you unavoidably end up alienating some possible allies in the field where you are doing your work. If I’m trying to be a ‘queer anthropologist’ and I use that as an identity in Congolese aca-
demia, I will not be able to find the same practical allies or do the same collaborative work that I would be able to do if I just use queer theory as a critical practice rather than as an identity or a specific kind of anthropology. I think that the political question of doing fieldwork in a setting where queer has very negative connotations, if people know at all what it is and what it means, is very important. We must take into account these alienating effects and find ways of queering that resonate with our participants’ everyday tactical politics.

Paul: This relates a bit to what came up in the discussion about how we define ourselves and what kind of self-definitions do we expect, or not expect, from people who are doing the kind of work we are trying to do or might be affiliated to this network. Something struck me in what you said about not being able to use the label ‘queer anthropologist’ in different contexts or registers. I had a conversation yesterday with a colleague and felt uncomfortable situating myself in yet another limiting category, another kind of ‘-ist’ that feels alienating because of the heteronormative legacies in the contexts where one finds oneself. And I wonder also about other people’s experiences of that, in terms of is it productive or helpful for us to claim that we are anthropologists, are we queer anthropologists?

EJ: Well I think one of the main things about our identities, or our working identities, is how relational they are. So I, for one, wouldn’t identify myself as a queer anthropologist. I only even label myself an anthropologist when I’m talking to people from other disciplines, but otherwise not, since I don’t work in an anthropology department.

Taylor: I think it’s also hard to separate anthropology and our identity as anthropologists from that crisis in the discipline because it has certain connotations about what anthropology is and I think we forget the meaning of the term in its simplest sense. Does anthropology own ethnography and can we conduct ethnographic fieldwork without being associated with the fundamental problems of orthodox anthropology? I think that’s a question that is open for debate but I wonder about that quite a lot. For instance, if I’m working outside an anthropology department am I still an anthropologist if I want to conduct ethnographic fieldwork? I don’t know what the answer is to that. And so I think it’s quite difficult to shake off these meanings. We are all quite dissatisfied with anthropology, as people talk about queer topics being marginalised, but I don’t know if that means that anthropology is bad.

EJ: But isn’t your experience of anthropology that it has multiple margins, and that as a discipline anthropology operates from a marginal position anyway? I don’t think we are necessarily always marginalised, but there
are areas of conflict especially in relation to theoretical assumptions and the scope of ethnographic description.

Paul: This will have to be the last question because they are going to lock up the room! Well, actually, it’s Elisabeth’s question, about how we experience these issues we’ve been discussing particularly in relation to the European academy. We don’t have much time to discuss it in detail . . .

Thomas: I don’t feel at all uncomfortable within this European academy or in orthodox anthropology, whatever that might be. But maybe I’m too young to have experienced the marginalisation of queer topics and approaches. Or, perhaps, I am too naïve. Who knows? I rather experience academic anthropology, as EJ says, as a set of multiple margins where queer perspectives can fall on very fertile ground. My fieldwork among fioto men and boys in urban Congo teaches me that. Instead of distancing ourselves from the academy as the heteronormative Other, and instead of constantly marginalising ourselves from it, we might, just as my fioto participants do, try to seduce that supposedly ‘heterosexual’ other and look at queer anthropology as an exercise in seduction.

Mark: Thanks Thomas, that sounds like a very sexy and seductive note on which to wrap up our discussion. So thank you all.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. Elizabeth Povinelli delivered the keynote address entitled ‘Downloading the Dreaming? All of It Extinguished but None of It Dead?’ at the EASA conference on 31 July 2014.

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