

Queering The Home – Politics and Ethics of the ‘Field’

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It is time [...] to put our queer shoulders on the wheel.
Micaela di Leonardo 1998, 367.

This special issue of the SQS journal poses questions about queer exotics and queer idealism. There seems to exist a plethora of ethical concerns we have to struggle with when doing queer ‘fieldwork’. First of all, we have to question the existence of a ‘field’. Our own ‘others’ otherwise easily get marked as “domesticated exotics”, as the US anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo has put it in her classic book *Exotics at Home*. It is important, productive and interesting to look at the processes and politics of “othering”, which hinges repeatedly on questions of normative sexual orientation, gender resistance and defiance.¹

Originally, the idea for this special issue of the SQS Journal came up in the UK in 2008. I was invited to give a workshop for PhD students on law, gender and sexuality at the Keele Law School together with Professor **Corie Hammers** from the Department of Criminal Justice, Social and Political Science & The Gender and Women’s Studies Program, Armstrong Atlantic State University, US. Her presentation was about research ethics in the fieldwork concerning lesbian bathhouses in Canada. My paper focused on ethical questions in queer research on the politics of the paedophile.

1 Herdt 2009, 3.

We discovered a common ground, the need to discuss research ethics of queer ethnography that refuses to go ‘elsewhere’.² We felt that there was a deep need to analyse the problems and questions we face when ‘we’ are interviewing, observing and theorizing on ‘us’. What are the troubles we have to tackle when we are queering the ‘home’?

Trouble with sexuality is inherently also a trouble with gender, and a trouble with cultural and social categories and understandings of ‘sexual cultures’. Queer theory has stressed the complex structures and connections between power relations, desire and sexualities. To analyse these questions in the light of current queer research, we decided to invite two queer anthropologists to observe themselves observing how we observe ourselves at ‘home’. Also a number of other queer researchers of queer sexualities were invited to analyze the often-unrecognised biases in the politics of queering the ‘home’.³

2 On my earlier ponderings on the issue, see Sorainen & Tuori 2007; Sorainen 2011.

3 Professor Hammers main research project has been one of examining lesbian/queer public sexual cultures and sexual spaces in Canada and the United States. I am most grateful to her for editorial co-operation, invaluable substantial insights and the time she invested in this SQS Journal issue.

Anthropology, Queer Studies, Sexuality

In anthropology, the topic of sexuality is ambiguous. Some scholars say that anthropology has always been inherently interested in sexuality whereas some others claim that the variety of human sexuality has received surprisingly little anthropological attention. As Darnell and O'Murray have noted, this "lacuna may be attributable to the aura of the exotic or scandalous that clings to the topic within a discipline that has long aspired to the status of "science.""⁴ The observation that Lyons and Lyons made about the Victorian anthropologists is not far-fetched concerning some of their modern successors: "One position, however, dominates anthropological discussions of sexuality. A truly instinctive sexual response, whether desired or deplored, is relatively absent from the bedrooms of modern Europe. One must seek (or avoid) it elsewhere. Science may be employed both to find it and to keep it at a safe distance."⁵

The different and sometimes 'exotic' practices of others have been a long-discussed theme in anthropology from Richard Burton's controversial accounts in the 19th century through Edvard Westermarck, Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead in the early 20th century to recent reflective fieldwork – such as Esther Newton, Kath Weston or Gayle Rubin – that looks at anthropologist's own sexuality in relation to their informants.⁶ Sexual behaviour and sexual practices have profoundly informed modern anthropologists' understandings of kinship, identity, community relations and methodology. Anthropologists, along with historians, and recently, queer theorists, have reclaimed sexuality from psychology and biology and rejected the idea that sexuality is a universal or psychological impulse.⁷

4 Darnell and O'Murray 2004, xiii.

5 Lyons and Lyons 2004, 56.

6 See Duggan 2011; Lyons and Lyons 2004; Newton 2000; Rubin 2011; Weston 1998.

7 See Montgomery 2007, 323.

Sometimes anthropologists' accounts, such as Margaret Mead's study of the Samoans, have been interpreted as exoticising or eroticising the 'other', implying that sexual cultures 'elsewhere' are freer or less repressed than in the West.⁸ Queer anthropologists have debated whether the colonisation of Western lesbian and gay identities and ideologies in Asia, Africa and elsewhere is, after all, not such a straightforward project than we might have thought.⁹ The stress on ethnography in anthropology has been seen as *the method* that shows that ideas of sexuality cannot be taken out of the cultural or temporal place under discussion.¹⁰ To deepen our understanding of sexualities as a cultural and political issue, we should look at local *sexual cultures*, in plural.

Queer anthropologist Gilbert Herdt has argued, that the "creation of sexual culture is an epistemology, a system of knowledge about the world, and about things in the world. Sexual culture provides for a culture its received theory of what human nature is. What is a man? What is a woman? What is manliness? What is womanliness? What is a boy? What is a girl? What is heterosexuality? What is homosexuality? What is sex for? What is good about sex? What is bad about sex? Those questions are all being iterated as a set of distinctions from the locally created theory of human sexual nature. This theory is then being promoted and taught to children, becomes part of their individual ontologies, and then feeds back into what we might call the collective pool of the sexual culture and its public representations for the culture as a whole."¹¹

Anthropology and Queer Studies are somewhat suspicious of one another. Both of them are porous and imperilled, fragile and under siege, especially during the recent economical oppression of the academy which is hitting

8 See Montgomery 2007, 325.

9 For example, Boellstorff 2007.

10 See, for example, Boellstorff 2007; Knauff 1996.

11 Herdt 1998, cit. Montgomery 2007, 344.

hard on critical humanities and social sciences. Both fields find themselves “repeatedly invaded and imposed upon by interlopers claiming to do their job in a more effective manner than they themselves, trapped in inertial rigidities, are able to do.”¹²

This need not be so. Both of these ‘disciplines’ have the dynamite-like ability to make us see the ‘familiar’ in a new light, to constantly and thoroughly surprise us, to struck us with new insights towards matters we tend to take as self-evident; thus they both can work as cultural critique.¹³ Cross-overs between two such research approaches and perspectives can, if encouraged, promoted and celebrated, produce extremely fruitful and politically powerful views on all things familial or familiar.

Hidden in the Plain Sight?

This special issue of the SQS journal contains two theoretically informed empirical articles from the ‘field’ of queer anthropology. They examine the specific cultural, social and political preoccupations and “irregular connections” that have shaped the projection of ‘our’ theoretical, political and scholarly anxieties or aspirations on ‘us’. The two feminist queer anthropologists, Ulrika Dahl and Venetia Kantsa, focus on the particulars of a topic-theme of “queering the home” through a critical approach to methodology and positionalism informed by Queer and Gender Studies.

The Swedish anthropologist **Ulrika Dahl** reflects on the queer dimensions of conducting ethnographic research with and within “ones own

community” and on the possibility of queering ethnographic writing. She focuses on femme-on-femme research and modes of representation, and argues that collaboration with research subjects is queering research conventions. She is also reconsidering of what counts as theory, particularly with regards to femininity and its place within *queer feminism*, an especially strong approach developed in Sweden.¹⁴ Dahl’s contribution is of a particular interest for the question of “anthropological home” as she has not only been an activist in the creation of the sexual culture of femmes she is observing, but she is also scholarly reflecting on her and Del LaGrace’s book *Femmes of Power* that visualises, promotes and analyses this culture.

One of Micaela di Leonardo’s central arguments in *Exotics at Home* was the following: “Scholarship, like art, cannot stand in for political activism. But academic work, like cultural production, often has political effects in the public sphere.” Over a decade after di Leonardo’s claim, Dahl seems to be directly challenging it. In her article, Dahl shows us how an anthropologist can be not only a political activist and make a difference in the public sphere but also a respectful scholar who is fully able to intellectually reflect on her own work. She brings to the fore that what is “hidden in the plain sight” but she also brings it into the curriculum of the scholarship as part of her own desire and her own creation.¹⁵

Being a straight woman in a patriarchal culture, as **Venetia Kantsa** in Greece, doing a fieldwork on lesbian women makes her, as a queer anthropologist, ponder on how to answer questions of the “sexual you”. During her fieldwork, these questions were directed to her not only by the observed lesbians but also by the straight environment of the observer herself, equally from her academic anthropologist colleagues and her acquaintances in the private life.

12 Geertz 2000, ix. Geertz is actually referring to the relationship between anthropology and philosophy, but, in my view, the quote can be applied to current relations between anthropology and queer studies, too. See Lyons and Lyons (2004, 292–306) on the history of queering anthropology.

13 Marcus and Fischer 1986.

14 See Kulick (1995) on the development of queer feminism in Sweden.

15 di Leonardo 1998, 367.

Kantsa's work on lesbian sexuality and lesbians in Greece do not make value judgments of the sexual identities or practices of others and rejects any notion of hierarchy in relation to sexuality. She looks at a local sexual culture and sexual practices and places them interestingly in much wider discussions of ideas about kinship, procreation, gender, friendship and intimate bonds in Greece.¹⁶ Her approach is neither "domesticating exotics" nor putting the word 'culture' in the shoulders of erotic 'others' but showing that culture is not "a foreign microbe run wild".¹⁷ In Kantsa's approach, the dominant culture consists of plural and overlapping local sexual cultures, some of them organised around women's same-sex desires in the overtly patriarchal context.

What are the characters in our national and sexual morality play?

Harri Kalha looks in his essay at a different 'home' than the two above-mentioned anthropologists. Being a queer scholar of visual culture, Kalha questions the meanings of 'design' and the nomination of his hometown, Helsinki, as the design-capitol of the world. Kalha engages with the antisocial theory and Lee Edelman's intellectual thought. He questions familiar or familial narratives of reproductive futurism in design. Kalha shows how *design* is not a value neutral term but a field that has been centrally used to the maintenance of Nation, Home, Family and Capital. Further, he suggests that design constructs in surprisingly powerful ways our ideas of gender, sexuality and the body. Kalha claims that "there is something dubious about design perfection."

Harri Kalha has also co-written, together with **Tuula Juvonen**, a report on a seminar on The Future of Queer Studies that was organised by the Society

¹⁶ Cf. Montgomery 2007, 344.

¹⁷ Cf. di Leonardo 1998, 8–9.

For Finnish Queer Studies at the University of Helsinki in November 2008. SQS had invited a number of key figures from the University, the state and private research funding institutions to answer critical questions about the sad funding situation in Queer Studies in Finland. Queer Studies is still seen as some kind of contra-research in Finland, whereas in Sweden it has been secured in the Academy through long-term job positions. In Finland, the concept queer has not become an everyday political or social concept used by party leaders and mass media like in Sweden.¹⁸

In Finland, queer researchers have often been forced to opt to go abroad or to "lie" in their funding applications. By 2011, the situation has been somewhat bettered but the overall economical cuttings from "small" disciplines means that not only Queer Studies but also Gender Studies are facing serious new threats as they cannot produce such "results" that can be directly meted by standards adopted from the Natural Sciences. One strategy to resist this oppression suggested here is that queer researchers become more engaged in politics, that is, to start actively offering their insights as experts of sexualities and social questions to media and to parliamentary committees and other scenes of the preparation of new legislation.

Queering art and academic thinking

In the Queer Lens Art Gallery, we can enjoy an art exhibition by a Finnish artist **Heidi Romo**. Her photographs depict anorectic aggression and transformative moments of a young female body. Her photo-series *The Lust* tackles in a tragic but also in a deeply humoristic way our implicit assumptions about the highly political relationship between food, sexuality and the idealisation of the queer body. Romo's visual project engages, like

¹⁸ See Berg & Wickman 2010; Kulick 2005.

that of Kalha's in a textual field, with a re-articulation of the Edelmanian idea of the reproductive futurism.

The two reviews in this issue of the SQS Journal approach 'home' in interesting ways. **Lisa Downing** reviews the book *Femmes of Power* that is also the topic of Ulrika Dahl's critically self-referential research article. Downing points out how Dahl reconciles her as a social scientist and a queer femme activist, subject and lover exactly by refusing to reconcile them. The book's focus is on queer notion of plural selves and plural positionalities from which we speak and act, writes Downing.

Salla Peltonen looks in her review on Tim Dean's ethnographic work on barebacking culture, *Unlimited Intimacy*, from a philosophical angle. Peltonen argues that even though Dean is neither a trained anthropologist nor doing ethnography in any straightforward way, it is one of the best anthropological ethnography she has ever read. In her view, Dean observes an "outsiders' culture" from within and does not take any moral stance on how one should judge this distinct sexual culture. Instead, Peltonen says, Dean really *thinks* while he writes and by so doing genuinely reflects on his own presuppositions.

Conclusion

This special issue of the SQS Journal draws together several disparate threads and shows some of the challenges that queer anthropologists and other queer researchers have found in trying to tackle issues of 'home', 'exotics' and 'the field'. The stance of "native ethnographer" still poses a challenge in the profession of anthropology that expects its subjects to occupy distant spaces and times.¹⁹ The contributors in this issue show how

¹⁹ Weston 1998.

we can go beyond the question of observing others and, instead, shift the question of the 'Other' to the question of diagnosing othering of desire as a question of power and politics.

Recent, even though irregular, connections between the 'fields' of Queer Studies and Anthropology have erased some, but far from all, of the earlier powerful tensions concerning the definitions and politics of 'Home' and 'Elsewhere'. The critical self-reflective work offered here poses serious questions about research ethics, positionality and, last but not least, about the political and economical reliability and accountability of Queer Studies in the Academy.

Welcome to indulge yourself in these fascinating and surprising contributions on the issue of Queering the Home!

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