

READINGS IN ENGAGED ANTHROPOLOGY



Out in Public

Reinventing Lesbian/Gay Anthropology
in a Globalizing World

Edited by Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap

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Globalizing World*

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William L. Leap



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Editorial Offices

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Out in Public

READINGS IN ENGAGED ANTHROPOLOGY

Readings in Engaged Anthropology is a series of thematic books that demonstrate how an anthropological perspective contributes to reframing the public discourse on important and timely social issues. Volumes are thoughtful nuanced treatments by a set of contributors on subjects that are publicly, ethically, and politically relevant in a changing world, and are of intellectual importance not only within anthropology, but in other fields such as law, gender, human sexuality, and health and social welfare. An important objective of this new series is not just social critique, but active engagement in the problems of broader global communities. *Readings in Engaged Anthropology* books are written primarily for students, educators and intellectuals to provide a deeper analysis of the social, political and ethical debates in which anthropological and cross-cultural analyses are vital contributions to the public discourse, and help to redefine public policy.

Forthcoming:

Gender Violence: A Reader, edited by Sally Engle Merry

Acknowledgments

Now that we have produced a third edited volume on lesbian and gay anthropology, our debts to others have accumulated to the point that they defy enumeration. Both editors have benefited from many forms of support and encouragement that our respective institutional locations have provided. Ellen thanks the University of Iowa and its Departments of Women's Studies and Anthropology; Bill is indebted to American University and the Department of Anthropology – particularly so for giving continuing support for the annual Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference, a venue whose discussions embody many of the ideas that this collection's essays display.

Some of the contributors to this volume submitted their essays several years ago and we owe them special thanks for their patience while we brought in other contributors and concluded negotiations that would make the volume a concrete reality. As has been the case with our other collections, *Out in the Field* and *Out in Theory*, this volume had its genesis in a number of sessions the two of us have organized at meetings of the American Anthropological Association and the Society for the Anthropology of North America (SANA). These were events that stimulated conversation and debate with many of our colleagues, opportunities that sharpened our arguments and helped us to clarify our thinking on many matters. We are grateful for all of these discussions, even when the outcome was disagreement with our interlocutors.

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Notes on Contributors

Florence E. Babb is Vada Allen Yeomans Professor of Women's Studies and affiliate professor of Anthropology and Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. She has numerous publications based on her research in Peru, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Her current book in progress is *The Tourism Encounter: Fashioning Latin American Nations and Histories*.

Karen Brodtkin writes about race, gender, and activism, and is beginning to write about sexuality and activism. She is the author of *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles*, and *How Jews Became White Folks and What that Says about Race in America*. She is completing a book on an environmental justice struggle in South Los Angeles. She teaches anthropology and women's studies at UCLA.

Héctor Carrillo is a faculty member in the Department of Sexuality Studies, San Francisco State University, where he teaches courses on the cross-cultural aspects of sexuality and gender, sexual identities, and sexuality and public policy. He is the author of the prize-winning book *The Night Is Young: Sexuality in Mexico in the Time of AIDS*. He currently conducts ethnographic research on sexuality and HIV among Mexican gay and bisexual immigrant men in California. He is co-chair of the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Science track of the 2008 International AIDS Conference in Mexico City.

Elijah Edelman is a PhD student in anthropology at American University in Washington, DC. His work focuses centrally on varied elements of post-transition FTM experience in North America. Elijah currently sits on the board of the Association for Gender Research, Education, Academia and Action.

Rudolf Gaudio teaches anthropology and media studies at Purchase College, State University of New York. His current research focuses on language (especially

Pidgin English), performance and space in Nigeria's "modern" capital city of Abuja. He is the author of an ethnography, *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in an Islamic African City*, forthcoming from Wiley-Blackwell.

Mark Graham is associate professor at the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. His research interests and publications cover refugee studies, immigration, gender and sexuality, diversity and the European Union, and most recently the community, gender and affective dimensions of sustainability. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Ethnos*.

E. Patrick Johnson is professor, chair, and director of graduate studies in the Department of Performance Studies and professor in the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University. He is the author of *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), and *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South – An Oral History* (2008) and co-editor (with Mae G. Henderson) of *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005).

William Leap is professor of Anthropology at American University and author of *Word's Out: Gay Men's English* and other publications on language and sexuality. He coordinates the annual Lavender Languages Conference, the longest running lesbian/gay studies conference in North America.

Ellen Lewin is a professor in the Departments of Anthropology and Women's Studies at the University of Iowa. She is the author of *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture* and *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment*. Her most recent book, *Dreaming the Family: Gay Fatherhood: Narratives of Family and Citizenship in America*, is forthcoming from University of Chicago Press.

Scott Morgensen is the author of *Welcome Home: Settler Sexuality and the Politics of Indigeneity* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming), a comparative cultural history of non-Native queer desires for indigenous roots and Native two-spirit activism. He is assistant professor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Macalester College.

Esther Newton is Term Professor of Women's Studies and American Culture at the University of Michigan and professor of Anthropology and Kempner Distinguished Professor Emerita, Purchase College, SUNY. She is the author of *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*; *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: 60 Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town*; and *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas*. She lives in Ann Arbor and Manhattan.

Lavinia Nicolae is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of New Mexico. She is currently conducting dissertation research on the move towards domestic

partner recognition in New Mexico, examining how gay, lesbian, and transgender couples negotiate their identities as couples and families in their everyday lives, and within legal, and political arenas. She is ultimately interested in how these negotiations lead to the formation of new types of relationships between gender, sexuality, kinship, and citizenship.

Megan Sinnott is assistant professor of Women's Studies at Georgia State University. She has taught anthropology and women's, gender and sexuality studies at Yale University, University of Colorado-Boulder, and Thammasat University and Mahidol University in Thailand. She has published on sexuality and gender in Thailand and her 2004 book *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand* won the Ruth Benedict Prize from the society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists, American Anthropological Association.

Harris Solomon is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Brown University. His areas of interest include the anthropology of science, medicine, and public health and the ethnography of urban India. His current research examines the sociopolitical dimensions of chronic disease epidemics in Mumbai.

Chris Tan is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His doctoral fieldwork, ongoing as this volume goes to press, is in Singapore and concerns national belonging among gay men.

Rachel Watkins is an assistant professor of Anthropology at American University in Washington, DC. Her research focuses on the biological and social history of African Americans living in the 19th and 20th century urban USA. Specifically, she examines the health consequences of poverty and inequality through skeletal and documentary data analysis. In addition to a focus on skeletal biology, she draws upon social theory to situate skeletal remains as historical texts as well as records of individual and collective lived experience.

Margot Weiss is assistant professor in American Studies and Anthropology at Wesleyan University, where she teaches courses in queer studies and feminist anthropology. She holds a PhD in cultural anthropology; her ethnographic research focuses on contemporary sexual cultures and politics. Her forthcoming book, *Techniques of Pleasure, Scenes of Play* (Duke University Press), explores the relationships between late-capitalism, neoliberalism, and gendered and raced performances in San Francisco's BDSM communities.

Natasha Wilson is an Ernest G. Chachere Doctoral Fellow at the University of New Orleans in the Department of Urban Planning and Regional Studies. She continues both her academic and her activist work in New Orleans with the many communities that continue to be affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

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Introduction

Out in Public: Reinventing Lesbian/Gay Anthropology in a Globalizing World

William L. Leap and Ellen Lewin

Out in Public is our third edited collection addressing the emerging field of lesbian/gay anthropology and the issues of concern to the lesbian, gay, and other researchers who are defining the ongoing direction of this field. *Out in the Field*, our first collection, examined lesbian/gay dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork, analysis, and writing. *Out in Theory*, our second collection, surveyed various efforts to build lesbian/gay related ethnographic theory. Now, in this project, lesbian and gay anthropology engages issues lying outside of the ethnographic domain, as anthropology has traditionally defined it. Instead of focusing centrally on method or theory, as such, the concern in this volume is with real-world applications. This includes particular projects where anthropological intervention has affected the everyday lives of lesbian/gay people, the strategies various anthropologists have used to create effective intervention and change, resulting in a sometimes uneasy relationship between lesbian/gay anthropology and applied/public anthropology, as well as the application of ideas drawn from lesbian/gay anthropology to the analysis of other, seemingly unrelated, phenomena.

Defining Lesbian/Gay Anthropology

We use the term *lesbian/gay anthropology* to refer to an intellectual, political, and theoretical stance that has grown out of the experiences of lesbian/gay life in the USA during the last decades of the 20th century. These experiences emerged, in part, in response to the workings of normative heterosexuality in everyday life and were shaped by other considerations defining subject position during this time period. Part of the lesbian/gay project in anthropology has been an effort to reshape anthropological research so that it engages the particulars of lesbian/gay experience more effectively. Equally important to that project has been a reluctance to be satisfied

with documentation of diversity, or what Kath Weston (1998) has aptly termed the work of ethnocartography, and an eagerness to move toward a more complex engagement with (homo)sexual politics in all domains of late modernity.

As a result, what began as studies of "lesbian" and "gay" experiences cross-culturally now regularly acknowledges a much broader range of non-normative sexualities, and anthropological discussions of those sexualities address the regulatory practices that assign them marginal status (or, at times, not so marginal status) within particular social settings.¹ In turn, these broader perspectives have sharpened the lens through which "lesbian" and "gay" experiences themselves are now being theorized, and underscore the need to examine these experiences within their social, historical, and ideological locations rather than independently of the workings of political economy.

Pursuing "broader" and "deeper" lines of inquiry have led those working in lesbian/gay anthropology to bring issues of practice, as well as method and theory, into the emerging conversation about sexuality, subjectivity, and culture.² In most cases, the anthropological engagement with practice has been unavoidable, given that assertions of same-sex identity have suggested ways of talking back to the assumptions of sexual and social normativity and the structures of power on which those assumptions are based. For years, anthropologists chose to downplay homosexuality's transgressive dimensions, focusing instead on the orientalized nature of sexual diversity or on the "deviant" nature of same-sex-related status and role. That homosexual presence and practices could be theorized more affirmatively and less exotically has become a recurring theme in lesbian/gay anthropology; such inquiry leads to a close analysis of regulation, oppression, and resistance.

Ultimately, drawing on Habermas' notion of public sphere formation, lesbian/gay anthropology is concerned with the processes through which "private [same-sex identified] persons come together to form a public, . . . [and to] deal with matters of general interest without subject to coercion" (1989:231), as well as with the processes that work against the emergence of such formations. These are questions about sexual citizenship, belonging, public morality, and social justice, as much as they are questions of desire, personal identity and erotic interest; different approaches to answering these questions provide the subject matter for the chapters in this collection.

Lesbian/Gay Anthropology and Applied Anthropology

The engagement with practice that has become integral to lesbian/gay anthropology in recent years has also been informed by the interests in "practical problem-solving" and "making knowledge useful" that are central to the subfield of applied anthropology. However, as the essays in this collection will show, lesbian/gay anthropology is not attempting to "help" members of exotic, undeveloped

communities, or even to outline agendas leading to the “solutions” for whatever “practical problems” beset them, on the order of more conventional “applied” tasks like building water treatment plants, creating consumer cooperatives, or blueprinting better schools. The practical problems facing lesbian/gay constituencies include, in the abstract, sexual oppression and heterosexual privilege, and in everyday life, homophobic violence, employment, and job-site discrimination, along with denial of access to health care and other social services. None of these “problems” can be “solved” through “application” of lesbian/gay anthropology’s benevolent wisdom, and none of them will be affected if lesbian/gay anthropology intends only to collect “more and better” research data on lesbian/gay experience. The more appropriate agenda is two-fold: (1) to expose the particular conditions through which homophobia and heteronormativity gain authority in everyday life, and (2) to demonstrate the willingness of lesbian/gay subjects (and of others on the sexual margin) to talk back to that authority rather than to become subordinated by it. Pursuing such an agenda will not automatically “solve problems” or promote social change. But it will bring into sharper focus the mechanisms of power against which lesbian/gay (and other sexual) subjects are already struggling and document the social costs (and for some, the social benefits) stemming from regulatory control. And certainly, such sharpened focus will contribute to local efforts at resistance.

In other words, for purposes of this discussion, public anthropology refers to a form of anthropological praxis that is organized differently from the older and more familiar subfield called applied anthropology. Rather than creating initiatives whose primary purpose is “practical problem-solving” or other forms of issue-oriented work directed at culture change, public anthropology recognizes that problem-solving and change are ongoing experiences at indicated sites, and that local constituents are deeply engaged within those experiences and their consequences. Public anthropology provides witness to the presence of those local experiences, not pre-empting local voices but certainly, at times, amplifying them. And as part of that witness, public anthropology explores those experiences within their regional or broader social contexts, or otherwise discloses dimensions of those experiences that local constituents may not fully observe.³ By doing so, public anthropology constructs new alliances between scholarship and activism, transforming the texture of the academic project, and the resources available to constituency-based public intellectuals and political workers, while broadening issue-centered understandings of the “public” at large.

Examples of such work include Esther Newton’s (1972) depiction of drag queens coping with low wages and bleak working conditions on the Midwest USA show-bar circuit in the 1960s, and her later (1993) analysis of community dynamics in a gay summer resort; Walter Williams’ (1986) efforts to give a human face and a historical context to American Indian “berdache” traditions; Ellen Lewin’s demonstration that commitments to parenting and family formation are not in conflict with lesbian or gay sexualities (1993, 1998, in press); Gil Herdt and Andrew Boxer’s (1993) description of US teenagers’ efforts to position “coming out” as a rite of

passage rather than an act of individual desperation; Bill Leap's (1996, 2001) suggestions that gay men's "knowledge of language" is more complex than lisping speech and camp vocabulary; Tom Boellstorff's exploration of the intersections of sexual sameness and nationalism in "new order" Indonesia; David Valentine's unpacking of the issues that make transgender disquieting for self-identified "normal" heterosexuals and queers; Christa Craven's involvement in the struggle to sanction direct-entry midwifery in the Commonwealth of Virginia; Roger Lancaster's (2003) critique of anti-gay efforts to mythologize "the gay gene" in popular press and other news media; and Leap's (1999b) studies of men having sex with men in public places, which have been useful in combating police harassment of members-only "sex clubs" in the DC area, building arguments for the defense on behalf of men arrested in police "sting operations," and also bringing some much needed clarity to the issues of sexual subjectivity that surfaced during the recent Senator Craig/Bathroomgate affair. Many of the case studies appeared in *Out in the Field* and *Out in Theory*. Consistent with the argument in this section, while some of these scholars may identify as applied anthropologists in some settings, none of them position the work described here, or any of the work in lesbian/gay anthropology, within the domain of applied anthropology. The reasons for this separation are several, as we explain in the following section.

Lesbian/Gay Anthropology, Again in the Moment

As was the case with our other collections, the impulse to assemble *Out in Public* comes at a particular moment in the history of lesbian/gay studies in anthropology. For *Out in the Field*, the moment was defined by the need to affirm lesbian/gay presence in fieldwork and data interpretation, when more conservative forces were arguing against such "partisan" inquiry. For *Out in Theory*, the moment was marked by the growing awareness that lesbian/gay ethnography needed to address a range of issues extending far beyond conventional domains of the sexual.

For *Out in Public*, the moment involves a seemingly unprecedented explosion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer visibility and, with that, equally widespread expressions of reaction and objection to a non-normative sexual presence that refuses to be discreetly contained. In the USA, we have explicitly gay characters in television programs and motion pictures, celebrities freely offering statements of their own same-sex preferences, endorsements of domestic partner benefits, and "equal protection" guarantees by private businesses and academic institutions and (in some ways, most tellingly here) the US Supreme Court's decision undermining the legal basis of anti-sodomy statutes in *Lawrence v Texas*. At the same time, contentious public debate over same-sex marriage has been raging while an increasing number of states have voted to "define" marriage exclusively in heterosexual terms. Other debates, such as those that have surrounded the ordination of openly lesbian/gay clergy and increased efforts to ban any affirmative references