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Critical Ethnography as a Collective Feminist Project

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Introduction

Ethnography, often considered to represent the essence of anthropological research methods, has contributed greatly to feminist debates and theorizing, if only to complicate assumptions and modes of knowing. If feminist theorizing has had a wider impact on anthropology, then ethnography as part of anthropological epistemologies is related to gender and sexuality studies in the form of debates that connect anthropology to these studies.

In this chapter, I argue that ethnography as practiced, understood, and discussed by anthropologists offers insights into the questions that feminists, and those interested in gender and sexuality studies, are grappling with, while being equally haunted by questions around positionality, postcolonial and racial differences, as well as the replication of normative discourses, as any other empirically grounded and critical methodology. From the very early engagement of feminist anthropologists with the ethnography of gender symbolism, gender relations, questions around dominance, hegemony, and exploitation, to the ethnography of gender and sex systems, multiple gendered subjectivities, and questions relating to sexualities in their different temporalities, ethnographies have pushed feminist theorizing to critique rarefied, modernist perspectives which tend to reproduce a version of liberal feminism that is based on a singular reading of power relations and their effects on everyday lives through the lens of often Eurocentric categories.

In this chapter, I will focus on selected debates based on grounded and critical ethnographic work, to argue that rather than rarefying complexities and ambiguities toward an authentic true representation of “other” realities, anthropologists engaging ethnographically with questions around gender and sexuality have complicated matters, in terms of both the questions asked, as well as the status of ethnography as a mode of knowledge production. Consequently, what constitutes relevant knowledge, who

produces it, under which circumstances, and for whom have become more complex questions.

To start with, feminists employed ethnography to work through questions of gender inequality from the margins, and to contribute to feminist theorizing informed by an ethics of responsibility toward those considered to be subordinated, initially defined as “women.” Gender, as a field of study, was constituted through ethnographies focusing on women’s roles in different domains of social life, and such ethnographies bear testimony to a sense of commitment to moral principles that made feminist scholars search for answers to questions of social change. Second, and equally important, such ethnography of gender and later of sexualities was committed to empirical methodologies as a means of challenging regimes of perceived knowledge about gender. The “partial truths” or fragments that emerged pay tribute to the way feminists have combined anthropology, gender, and sexuality studies and interrogated some of the underlying assumptions on which much anthropological theorizing, and more generally social science research, is based – for example, the separation between political, social, economic, and intimate relations, or the linear development of modern, secular selves under processes of capitalist expansion.

Gender and the Many Sources of Inequality

In many ways, it is through ethnography that anthropology has contributed to debates on gender and sexuality, and while ethnography is not limited to anthropology, anthropologists have consistently employed it as a method to push debates, especially where these needed to move between the specific and the general, the singular and the universal, between the marginal and the hegemonic, and beyond the opposition of theory and practice.

Contrary to the impression that anthropology was mostly sought out by feminist activists and scholars to provide insights into “other” women’s lives, ethnographies written by feminist anthropologists working from the 1970s onward set out to engage with questions considered at once anthropological and crucial to feminist theory building (Moore 1988). As Ortner observes, at its most basic ethnography has “meant the attempt to understand another life world using the self” (Ortner 2006: 43) and is closely associated with empirical traditions, especially fieldwork. In relation to questions of gender and sexuality, ethnography was initially employed as a method of investigation of complex inequalities, and emphasized intersections between gender and other discourses, for example, the notion of clear-cut separations between different domains of investigation as reflected in disciplinary conventions distinguishing between economic and political anthropology and the anthropology of kinship and religion. The women’s movement and its challenging of “patriarchy” encouraged feminists to reconsider ethnographic work they had been doing, either by revisiting

their own earlier data or by motivating them to engage in fieldwork with new questions. This agenda of thinking across domains through regional comparison lies at the heart of the much cited collection "Woman, Culture and Society" edited by Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Rosaldo et al. 1974), which contains articles based on fieldwork in a wide range of contexts, including Black neighborhoods in the United States and villages in Guatemala. It attempts to understand the ideological logics of unequal gender relations and challenge the limitations of culturalist explanations by discussing relations of production and the politics of reproduction. In collections such as this, ethnography serves as a means to challenge two assumptions: first, that what can be considered a social sphere as described in myths, depicted in art, or sketched by interlocutors in conversations about abstract orders is congruent with gendered lives and experiences "on the ground" or serves as blueprint to be acted out, as role theorists suggested; and second, that such ideological constructs, usually perpetuated by those in power (ritual experts, often male and older, for example), circumscribe every possible gendered position conceivable.

During this period debates centred around the assumption that women are "universally" oppressed through ideological constructs that oppose two genders within a hierarchical structure. It is at this particular juncture that the widely discussed article, Sherry Ortner's (1974) "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?," is located. Ortner's seminal paper argued that women's subordination was universal as all gender symbolism linked femininity to a sphere of reproductive activities related to maternal bodies and childbirth. It has been widely criticized on different counts mainly by Marxist feminists interested in the genealogy of male dominance as related to modes of production and the expansion of capitalist domination, which had preoccupied early 1970s debates about the nature of domination and the status of ideology in the reproduction of inequality. This is evident in many ethnographies of gendered divisions of labor (Meillasoux 1981 [1975], among them explicitly feminist collections (see Etienne and Leacock 1980). A related debate on how gender inequality was reproduced but focused on ideology was sparked by the publication of Maurice Godelier's ethnography "The Making of Great Men" (1986 [1982]) the reproduction of male authority, which suggested that gendered ideologies, internalized by women and men, supported women's subordination in Baruya society. Ahead of its time, the debate ensued by his provocation focused on various forms of violence, and their role in domination, with his most eloquent critic Nicole Mathieu arguing that "yielding is not consenting" (Mathieu 1989 [1985]).

The second set of critics, who argued with and against notions of gender relations as perpetuated through ritual and symbolism, engaged directly with structuralist assumptions about gender. They proposed that "nature" as a separate sphere was a culturally and historically specific construct. Based on ethnography they argued that gender asymmetry was not necessarily based on a classificatory distinction between "nature" and "culture" and

thus this dichotomy could not be interpreted as the basis for male dominance across the globe. Due to the use of ethnography this criticism turned out to be extremely pervasive, as is evident in the success of Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern's (1980) edited volume entitled *Nature, Culture and Gender*, which, unlike earlier collections, focuses on the ethnography of gender relations as a means to decenter Western categories, in particular, the notion of universal "nature." As the editors point out, the collection was intended to push the implications of the "discovery of 'women' as an analytical category" (viii). The latter was clearly conceived as concerned with a cross-cultural comparison of data collected in the context of extended fieldwork, an ethnographic inquiry into categories and gender relations in a wide range of settings – often within so-called unstratified societies, but importantly also contained historical studies on science and philosophy questioning the implicit epistemological assumptions that drove anthropological knowledge production about gender. Ethnography serves here as a means to allow comparison of gender systems in a wide range of social setups, including a number of rather small-scale societies, and the focus of the ethnographies is on mythologies and conceptual schemes. Its immense influence lies in the direct opposition not so much to Ortner's search for universals, but to the way she employs structuralist classifications stemming from Western epistemologies to read gender systems in non-Western and noncapitalist contexts. Gender, the contributors assert, is not simply a matter of classification based on concepts translatable as "nature" that are associated with femininity, an understanding that still informs a range of populist feminist positions, including strands of psychological research into parenting and eco-feminist standpoints. As the authors suggest, binary oppositions of only two clearly demarcated gender roles do not map onto Indigenous notions of reproductive activities, which are shown to often not constitute the main marker of femininity, nor do they suggest a sphere constituting "nature" to be dominated and exploited.

Ortner elaborated on her earlier distinction between nature and culture in the light of these criticisms by commenting on the complex relationship between ethnography and analysis that undergirds her stance. Rather than, as the contributors to *Nature, Culture and Gender* seem to suggest, arguing through case studies, she suggests that concepts such as nature or culture cannot "be found through ethnographic scrutiny; it is an assumption of a relationship that underlies a variety of ethnographic 'surfaces'" (Ortner 1996: 178). This echoes Strathern's complex analysis of Mount Hagen notions of "domestic" and "wild" and the way she relates these to classifications associated with gender, which as she states "acts as a symbolic operator, though not in a uniform manner" (Strathern 1980: 191). Strathern's ethnography suggests that gender can be enacted, but on the basis of "common similarity," within which Western notions of the relationship between classification, sex, and gender assert nature as the basis of gender dichotomies based on sex: "For us, nature is given and

innately differentiating. Thus we locate the ultimate difference between the sexes ‘in nature’” (Strathern, 1980:190).

It is this insistence that feminist ethnography does not document, or showcase, variations on a theme, but that comparison and careful ethnographic writing enable theorizing based on ways of constructing gender that are radically different from those that Western models of knowledge suggest, which marked the first phase of ethnographic interventions into debates about gender. While earlier writings were openly questioning the status of anthropological knowledge production as it had been canonized by asking how anthropologists could speak about inequality as a matter of multiple social relations, especially those of production, many of the arguments that followed in the period before the reflexive turn, narrowed the debate down toward a focus on gender symbolism and gender “systems.” Research on gender, broadly conceived, is in these early collections concerned with crucial questions related to the nature of inequality, which fed into debates anthropology is still engaged in: what can be considered politics, what is the role of ideology, how can we study economies on different levels and with different forms of value in mind – and, importantly, what structural constraints shape behaviors, imageries, and possibilities.

Centering Gender, Rethinking Institutions

As suggested above, ethnographies focusing on women’s various roles in society began to push against the paradigm that one singular explanation for gender inequalities could be found. They also argued against structuralist concepts of gender difference based on the simplistic opposition of nature and culture and the – powerfully encoded – pan-disciplinary assumption that women are in a fundamental way, through reproductive activities, closely associated with nature across the globe. Following the initial enthusiasm of revisiting material that was often implicit in existing accounts of symbolic and/or political economies productive of unequal gender relations, the question of how gender asymmetries related to other sites of subordination and exclusion brought the reproduction of normative discourses and their transgression into focus. These studies were initially directed toward in-depth studies of stratification and group-based identities, and it soon appeared that the cultural construction of gender could not easily be separated from kinship roles. Gayle Rubin argued powerfully in her article “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975) that sex/gender systems were and are based in many contexts on kinship systems, which rely on the exchange of women in marriage transactions. The essays in this volume discussed, as Rubin does, the way such transactions, enforcing compulsory heterosexuality and the domination of individual women and women as a “class.” The volume *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (1975), in which it was published and that was edited by Ryana Reiter, explicitly addressed the political economy of gender.

This kind of concern with multiple forms of oppression that feed off and into each other was in some contexts addressed early on, as the example of studies on caste in South Asia – a group-based community identity but also a complex set of social, economic, and political relationships between groups – demonstrates. Some of the earliest, and most remarkable, ethnographies on caste already focus on the congruence of women's roles in kinship, the division of labor, and the way ritual created systematic and ideological exclusions for women. Such studies suggested that the existing discrimination of women related to discourses on caste did affect all women, and linked women's roles within the household and wider society, which could not be separated from (sub)caste-based shared identities, with marriage as the crucial institution propping up a variety of arrangements. Early ethnographies documenting the way marriage and caste are interdependent supported Levi-Strauss's notion that the exchange of women (in this context strictly stratified) establishes relations between families and wider kin groups and institutionalizes normative (legitimate) sexual activities. The implication is that it also determines the lived experience of women and their relatives. Much early ethnography like that of Nur Yalman (1963) showed how caste depended on equating rights in women with rights in land, and that endogamy as well as the control over women's sexuality provided the basis for those rights to be circulated among groups of related men (see, e.g., Dube 1997). Further studies of caste and gender delved into the ideological and symbolic discourses enacted and focused on how notions like honor, respectability, and purity are employed in order to exercise direct and indirect control over women (see, e.g., Chatterjee 1981; Kolenda 2003; Omvedt 1980; Ram 1991).¹

The search for universally valid explanations of male dominance led to a reconsideration of existing ethnographic writing, but it did also encourage ethnographies trying to address the complexity of patriarchal domination through an analysis of the division of labor and its sites, of local understandings of gender relations and their basis, and of the way ethnography could support a reworking of gender as a theoretical tool.

However, as Henrietta Moore argues, a persistent problem with the analysis of gender through a focus on women's subordination remained that "[t]he social and the symbolic while never completely convergent resisted any easy theory of reflection and could certainly not be said to determine each other. Some of the best anthropological work during this period was concerned with investigating the refracted relationship of these different aspects of gender" (Moore 1999: 152), a problem she attributes to the use of Marxist notions of ideology, which were focused on an analysis of the reproduction of power, rather than theorizing this crucial relationship between the social and the symbolic.

¹ Due to the nature of my own academic engagements and expertise, many of the ethnographic example provided will be referencing South Asia, but similar arguments can be made for and in other regional contexts, including "Europe."

Gender, sex/Sex, and the Question of "Natural Facts"

Ethnographers of gender relations like those concerned with caste and feminist theory insisted with structuralists that gender and kinship cannot be treated separately. Where initially theories of gender assumed that gender differences were perceived as built on the naturalized truth of sexual difference, and needed no explanation, kinship studies and studies of non-normative sexualities and gender positions both worked against this assumption. Two challenges – one by scholars concerned with kinship and deconstructing hidden Western assumptions in anthropological theorizing, the other(s) concerned with feminist ethnographies of gender and its theorizing of gender in relation to sex – enabled ethnography to highlight problems implicit in theorizing about gender. A concerted challenge posed by feminist ethnographers emerged in the aftermath of David Schneider's (1984) critique of kinship studies as an independent cultural domain based on "natural facts" of reproduction, which was circumscribed by symbols and meanings that drew on binary oppositions between nature and culture, biology and nurture, blood and law, and institutionalized gender as based on sex. Schneider argued through his ethnographic exploration of meanings constructing "kinship" in Euro-American culture that not only was it constituted as separate from other domains but that folk models inadvertently informed any study of kinship, European or other, by assuming that ultimately "natural facts" enabled reproduction and thereby the making of genealogically related kin. Analyzing the symbolism employed to describe procreation, he demonstrated that kinship as a domain of meaning making in everyday life naturalized what were essentially social relations and culturally specific assumptions – about bodies, about procreation, about gender and sex – through which kinship was mapped onto human reproductive processes, thereby effectively "naturalizing differences" between women and men.

Earlier, scholars concerned with gender took issue with anthropology's overreliance on structuralism with its emphasis on marriage and kinship where theories of gender were concerned, including Gayle Rubin (1975), who had highlighted precisely those fallacies by focusing on heteronormativity as imposed through the grid of kinship that such analysis employed. It is in the next phase of theorizing about gender and sexuality when ethnography comes into its own as a means to push theorizing of normative and hegemonic discourses on the basis of kinship and simplistic understandings of sex/gender. In a collection, which draws on a wide range of ethnography, Jane Collier and Sylvia Yanagisako (1987) argued for a "unified analysis of gender and kinship" in order to overcome the artificial separation of "domestic" and "politico-jural domains" taken for granted by many ethnographers of kinship. Building on classic studies of women's spheres and non-Western gender ideologies, they laid out their argument using feminist scholars' ethnographic evidence to show how the underlying

ideas about reproduction as a basis for gender and therefore assumptions about sex implicitly informed those writings. They spoke of a habit of scholars in gender studies who were “continuously rediscovering gendered dichotomies” to assume rather than discuss “biological differences.” These, they argued, were treated as the basis for gender, as ethnographies of kinship privileged “coitus and parturition as the moments constituting masculinity and femininity” (Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 49). What the authors suggested is in line with much current post-Butlerian theorizing, namely, that gender could be theorized entirely independently of sex because reproductive processes or “natural facts” do not constitute the universal basis of gender.

While ethnography suggested that in non-Western societies a wide range of gender-making domains could be found, Shelley Errington (1990) pointed out that ethnographies of Southeast Asia (Atkinson and Errington 1990) suggested sex still needed to be analyzed. She argued that sex as biologically defined sexed bodies, Sex as the cultural construction of sexed bodies, and gender needed to be distinguished. Exciting as this suggestion may seem, as Moore points out, Sex, understood as culturally specific readings of the sexed body, and gender as the culturally specific understandings of sex, cannot easily be distinguished due to the problematic status of sex – always already a culturally specific notion (Moore 1999: 154). Nevertheless, ethnographers moved toward a recognition that the link between sex and gender was complex and that sex was equally culturally constructed as gender. This arguably also represents the gist of Judith Butler’s approach to gender as performative elaboration of already gendered ideas about sex (Butler 1990). Ethnographies, which seemed to support Butler’s claims, stemmed from two separate areas of research. On the one hand, there were studies of complex notions of the body, sex, and gender, for example, Cecilia Busby’s ethnography of ideas about personhood and procreation circulating in a Kerala fishing community (Busby 1997). Villagers are shown to think of gendered bodies in terms of confluences of gendered substances, but that these (sexed) bodies’ possibilities of procreation are also worked upon within a framework that puts the married couple and the household at the heart of the local economy. While gendered substances are transmitted between generations, and gendered bodies contribute differently to procreation, it is clear that substance without the elaboration of meaning attached through work and social relations does not make gender. This and other such studies suggest that binary systems, in which femininity and masculinity are clearly demarcated, are not limited to “Euro-American” contexts (or related to Abrahamic religions and the Enlightenment), but that these may be porous and shot through with other ideas. While reliance on the aspect of sex, or the “fact that people have bodies that present in a differentiated form” (Moore 1999: 157) may constitute a common way of thinking about gender – dragged out into different domains, including ritual and spiritual lives and economic exchanges to prop up politics (see Strathern 1988) – such rigid

ideas about gender coexist with other concepts or rather with a range of sites for making gender(s). Ethnography had long established that highlighting gender by performing gendered roles in often contradictory ways or fluid sexual practices, including same sex, moved away from the overdetermination of sexed bodies. Moreover, depending on what ethnographers focused on – the gender symbolism employed, the politics of public and private spheres in postcolonial societies, or the status of reproductive activities – such ambiguities had been erased and alternative meanings and readings of gendered worlds had been left out.

Sex, Gender, and Nation

Much of this criticism stemmed from a renewed ethnographic interest in alternative family forms and, in particular, as Kath Weston's ethnography *Families We Choose* (1991), focusing on gay Californian communities, showed, nonnormative gendered personhood and different sexual identities. Earlier, John Borneman had critiqued anthropologists' tendency to subsume sexuality in writings about gender via kinship, because this had limited the scope of anthropological theorizing. As he expressed it "sexuality became derivative of marriage, marriage of kinship, kinship of gender, and gender of prestige and power" (Borneman 2001: 30). Building on ethnographies concerned with lesbian and gay subcultures, the 1990s saw global debates about sexuality and identity becoming a new theme in anthropology and beyond. Previously ethnographers had charted how colonial "civilizing regimes" suppressed a wealth of heterogeneous understandings of sexual practices and the way they are constituent of personhood. This work had shown how gendered nationalist ideologies become entangled with notions of modernity and practices of governance through the institutionalization of heteronormativity by regulating marriage as the most legitimate form of sexual relationships. Work, for example, by Jean and John Comaroff shows in an exemplary way not only how minute details of gendered everyday practices became the focus of missionary reform in Southern Africa, but how these promoted heteronormative forms of monogamous sexuality through advice and laws on conjugal relations, and also led to multiple forms of resistance against such hegemonies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). These colonial interventions were based on complex notions of "primitive" sexualities and sites of desire to be curbed and were differentiated in terms of racialized "others" (Stoler 1995). For ethnography this implied that acknowledging the complex interweaving of local understandings and colonial as well as postcolonial state practices required a recognition of how "Western" concepts of sex/gender, including binary oppositions, sexed bodies, and reproductive practices were imposed (Manderson and Jolly 1997; Ram and Jolly 2010). This invited more detailed feminist analyses of how gender, the body, and sexual difference are understood in non-Western societies, but also encouraged investigations into how

modernity promotes a framework of biomedical and psychological understandings of sexuality, which have become what Ong refers to as global forms “modern knowledges, technologies, institutions, and practices,” ‘universalizable,’ or capable of being disembedded and re-embedded in a variety of politico-cultural environments” (Ong 2016).

Early theories of sexuality based on ethnography had challenged “scientific” universalism related to sexualities, for example, Freudian assumptions about the Oedipus complex were discredited by Malinowski (2001 [1927]) or assumptions about adolescents’ sexuality famously debunked by Mead (2001 [1928]). At this point, differences and variations, rather than universals, became the focus of attention, with ethnographers paying attention to feminist discourses on gender and sexuality, but also pushing debates around sexual identities and LGBT activism. Initially, much of this work focused on women’s bodies in the constitution of community, as for example in Nur Yalman’s work on purity, gender, and caste on the Malabar coast (Yalman 1963) had done very early on. This is only one of the many contexts, in which group boundaries (here caste, but often framed in terms of ethnic, racial, or religious identity) are based on the collective control of sexual relations, usually through control over women’s bodies and the stigma attached to same-sex relationships. Describing the complex power relations, which enable such control within a wider system of patriarchal domination, Janice Boddy argues, based on ethnography from Northern Africa and the related diasporas, that the cultural construction of femininity linking bodies, religious practice, and patrilineal descent made women complicit in gendered forms of subordination (Boddy 1989). In a similar ethnographic study, this time based on fieldwork in a rural region of Turkey, Carol Delaney analyzes how local idioms of procreation drawing on the seed and the soil metaphor link villager’s ideas about gendered sexualities, the body, and households to discourses of the nation and policy intervention (Delaney 1992). Here the relationship between policies that enable male domination and ideas about gender relations on the ground provide an understanding of how state agencies perpetuate ideologies that reproduce unequal gender relations based on ideas about male and female sexuality.

In all of these examples sexual relations are part of processes of becoming a full member of society, and women’s procreative powers depend on a range of physical and mental practices that make moral selves. It is also clear that a wide range of gendered sexual practices map a body politic (community, ethnic group, nation) onto real life bodies, as for example in the “honor and shame” systems common in the Mediterranean region, which as Michael Herzfeld’s (1985) and Stanley Brandes’s (1980) works suggest, use symbols of male potency, which enter everyday lives, to demarcate gendered “public” and private spheres. Expanding on this, ethnographers working for example in the former Yugoslavia and witnessing the civil war have elaborated how the relationship between local patriarchies represented in gendered idioms

of sexual domination found in folk songs, stories, and proverbs predate the genocide but gain new traction during conflict. Tone Bringa's (1995) study of a Bosnian village uses these sources to show how such genres were during times of peace transmitted, to be mobilized in political discourses as part of civil war rhetorics. Maria Olujic (1998) points out that local sexualities, which in peacetime were focused on penetrative sex and the domination of women, are key to understanding the role rape played in the conflict. Here as elsewhere, conceptions of "heterosexuality" and of "territorial sovereignty" were created and enacted on the basis of male collectivities, and men rallied around the notion of women's chastity as a metaphor of the community to engage in acts of genocide understood as revenge for violations of the shared purity of "their" women. In a rare example, Elissa Helms's (2013) study of feminist activism in the aftermath of mass rape and ethnic cleansing links such local ideas and histories to global agents, who enforce the gender logic that marks men as active, aggressive perpetrators and women as victims – enshrined in the work of NGOs. Similarly, Laura Ring's ethnography "Zenana," which features female neighbors' relationships in a multi-ethnic Karachi apartment building, shows how women's "innate" qualities are employed in practical, everyday peace-keeping activities designed to contain male sexuality (Ring 2006).

As Foucault suggests, modern nation-states pedagogize sexuality and socialize reproduction in the name of population management. The contribution of ethnographies to debates on sexuality and the state lies in complicating the understanding of which sites could be seen as producing knowledge about sexuality, with a special emphasis on kinship and community.

Commonly, notions of a body politic are employed by the modern state beyond periods explicitly demarcated as war (but nevertheless often in explicitly violent and discriminatory ways), usually within the framework of family policies, birth control, and discourses on marriage. While these politics are stratified according to race, class, and ethnic or religious community as well as sexual identity, ethnography suggests that citizens themselves engage with such policies actively and in multiple ways in the context of global circuits of value (e.g., Rapp and Ginsburg's collection *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* [2005]). Ethnography has contributed to a better understanding of how the promoted notions are inserted into everyday lives, for example, how audiences appropriate ideas about sexual morality through the consumption of TV series in India and how globalization encouraged new erotic desires across Asia (Mankekar 1999; Mankekar and Schein 2012) or how reproductive technologies are used by the Israeli state to make same-sex parenthood based on shared genetic connections possible as part of racialized policies (Kahn 2000). In a different example, John Borneman's ethnography of sexualities as part of wider political discourses on difference between the two German nations before 1989 details the different trajectories of encountering legitimate and

illegitimate sexual sites within shared patriarchal kin norms (Borneman 1992). Similarly, Gloria Wekker's ethnography of sexual encounters among and between female migrants belonging to the Surinamese diaspora shows how her subjects refuse the reduction of their intimate relationships through idioms of consanguinity, by insisting on the value of companionship and support between same-sex partners (Wekker 2006). In an outstanding example of attention to historicity, temporality, and local context as well as global processes, Stout charts the complex understandings of different sexual encounters, affective ties, and economic entanglements in queer post-socialist Cuban subcultures (Stout 2014).

This body of ethnographic literature concerned with the multiplicity of gendered discourses coexisting in any given context also provides insights into agentive aspects of gendered identities and the possibilities for transgression of normative and hegemonic discourses. Ester Newton's classic ethnography "Mother Camp," which was published in 1979, informed Judith Butler's evocative theory of gender performance, published two decades later (Butler 1990). Butler and those building on her work pushed gender theory toward a recognition of how unstable gendered identities are, and what different modes of resistance to normative performances could contribute to theorizing. A similar argument had been made by Black feminist authors, exemplified, for example, in Gloria Anzaldúa's autoethnographic writing *Borderlands/Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), which foregrounds that the intersections of class, ethnicity, and race produce differently situated gendered performances and genres of articulation. Following on from postcolonial critiques of gendered subjectivities, ethnographers began to seek out sites of resistance to patriarchal gender relations by exploring subaltern genres, for example, in Gloria Raheja and Ann Gould's volume *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (1994), which documents oral performative traditions that provide an alternative view on marriage, kinship, and sexuality. They meticulously trace counternarratives to official accounts of patriarchal values present in songs performed by women, which make use of satire, irony, and wordplay. Saba Mahmood's ethnography of women engaged in Cairo's piety movement pushes the question of agency and different modes of resistance to patriarchal norms further by focusing on the way participants engage in gendered performances of modesty but simultaneously mobilize common idioms of modernity to challenge gendered regimes of power (Mahmood 2005). Agency is here interpreted as "capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2005: 27). Though her generalizations about Muslim societies and the role of Muslim women have been criticized (see Sehlikoglu 2018), this intervention into debates about hegemony and resistance brings out the value of critical ethnographies for gender and sexuality studies as it challenged underlying assumptions about the dichotomy of "traditional" and "modern" modes of subjectivation. Further, it demonstrated that challenges

to normative codes of behavior are not necessarily related to progressive or emancipatory agendas – thereby critiquing the modernization narrative implicit in much feminist theorizing and probably even more in debates around sexuality. The limits of these approaches that shaped Western epistemological frameworks and informed a politics of liberation become even more pronounced in work on sexualities informed by LGBT+ politics where ethnography time and again emphasizes the instability of the relationships between power, gender, and sexuality.

Sexuality beyond Ethnographic

After an initial interest in sex and sexualities, evident, for example, in Malinowski's and Mead's widely discussed and debated work, anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century moved away from studying sex comparatively, and the field was left to sexuality studies (Lyon and Lyon 2006). If studied at all, sexuality was part of broader ethnographic work on kinship, and it took the women's movement in the 1970s to rekindle an interest in the ethnography of sexuality, with a push toward ethnographies that studied sex in relation to gender. In 1987 Pat Caplan suggested in the introduction to an edited volume, *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, that Western philosophy and psychology prioritize sexual desire as a source of identity when discussing gender and sex, while multiple ethnographic examples pointed toward much more flexible notions of the way gender and sexuality are related. Many of the contributions to this early volume focused on gendered roles that incorporated a range of sexual practices, but these were not seen as main markers of either gender or identity. Outstanding works pushing beyond the framework of kinship are Gilbert Herdt's ethnographies (1981, 1982), which question the concept of "ritualized" homosexuality, and Evelyn Blackwood's edited volume *Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior* (1986). But these studies were limited by the "ethnographic" approach they adopted; that is, they construed a synchronically circumscribed object to be documented. As Kath Weston (1993) asserts in her review of LGBT studies in anthropology, such ethnography, though important and well-intended, did nevertheless lack a stringent theorizing of sexualities, and at best tried to challenge notions of "classifications, which privilege sexuality above all other criteria" and "impose a peculiar rigidity on our conceptions of gender" (Caplan 1987: 22), but at its worst engaged in often ahistorical comparisons between sexual practices in so-called traditional societies thereby reinscribing differences in an orientalist and essentialist manner. It was also suggested that gay and lesbian studies and sexuality studies more generally, suffered homogenizing and universalizing tendencies of representations, with a bias toward Western/Northern understandings of key terminology. The anthropology of gay and lesbian lives, or gay and lesbian studies in anthropology, reignited debates around gender,

sex, and theorizing (Lewin and Leap 2002). As Weston (1993) suggests, studies of (homo)sexuality had inherited Western epistemologies strongly influenced by nineteenth-century categories, which not only relied on binary sex/gender distinctions, but also related sex, gender, and the body in a triage of identity. The underlying and assumed concepts like “true selves” appeared static rather than negotiated. In comparison, ethnographies of non-Western sexualities often argued in favor of local idioms that recognized a multitude of gendered positionalities. The translation of local notions into debates around “homosexuality,” “Third Sex,” “transvestite,” and “transsexual” identities, while emphasizing the multiple sites and practices contributing to gendered personhood beyond sexual practices, has been one of the hallmarks of ethnographies that went beyond the earlier “ethnocartographic” mode (see, e.g., Robertson 2005). Nevertheless, the issue of translation and the hegemony of English as well as American scholarship and movement histories is, as Lunny very recently pointed out, still very much with us (Lunny 2019). To counter this tendency, feminist anthropologists have pointed out that not only are terminologies localized, but a transnational ethics of collaboration can only emerge where an ethic of mutuality and ambivalence is employed (see Dave 2011 and Nagar 2014).

Earlier attempts to discuss the multitude of gender/sex systems documented in non-Western societies not only tended to reiterate the notion of “us” and “them” but mapped this onto a dichotomy between “traditional” and “modern” practices. While documenting, and often challenging, Euro-American constructions of sexuality, such studies did take recourse to a rigid explanatory framework, which often insisted on classifications of persons in relation to sexual practices or nonbinary gender terminologies. This preoccupation with “genera” of persons (rather than practices, stages of modes of being, fluid positions), which would relate sexualities to gendered personhood, is partly linked to the problematic mode of writing ethnography based on the assumed isomorphism between culture and place (Gupta and Fergusson 1997). Earlier scholars writing about non-Western and apparently nonbinary constellations of gender, sexuality, and Sexuality embraced the notions of a “third gender” which became better known as transgender personhood. Ethnographies like Don Kulick’s *Travesti* (1998) or Mark Johnson’s ethnography *Beauty and Power* (1997) of transgender male lives in the Philippines provide insights into the complexity of such sex/gender systems. Where debates around “third sex” had been successful was in the attempt to deny the easy availability of descriptors or clear-cut classifications, and challenge the translatability of “Indigenous” categories in anthropology. These problematics were faced by feminist anthropologists early on, as Uni Wikan’s (1977) refusal to simply translate the local Omani Arab term “xanith” as “transgender” demonstrates. But as demanded by Rubin (2011), it took sexuality studies to overcome a focus on heteronormative practices as the starting point for ethnography of nonbinary gendered personhood to underpin that transgendered practice and lives did not fit the “third gender”

category. Like earlier work that insisted upon multiple sources of subjectivation, Gayatri Reddy's (2005) ethnography of "hijra" communities in Southern India suggests that in order to understand gender in this context theories must look beyond sexuality and interrogate the many different sites of subject formation, including sexual desire, but also kin roles and community and consider the role of colonial histories (Manderson and Jolly 1997) that produced shared meanings still feeding into identity at play. It demonstrates that ideas about bodies, desire, and normative sexuality play a crucial role in how subjects constitute themselves, but also how the subject of ethnography is constituted. Scholarship on nonconforming gendered persons and practices brings concepts of stigma, flexible corporality, and debates around alternative modernities in postcolonial discourses into sharp focus and disrupts a linear historical perspective on movements and theorizing. The value of ethnography in such debates around the role of identification with categories, transgender in particular, is discussed in David Valentine's monograph of the way Manhattan drag queens use the term situationally (Valentine 2007). Ethnographies of transgenderism and nonbinary gendered identity add to work on normative debates around suitably modern subjectivities (see Mahmood 2005), but crucially also refined discussions around political communities.

As Ken Plummer suggests, the earlier decade had been one in which "the Grand Narrative of Sexuality came to an end," while currently "human sexualities become essentialized, decentred and de-essentialized," which, he argues, necessitated that notions of a shared gay community were revised (Plummer 2012: 45). This is reflected in the way the field of queer studies interrogates sexualities as a major way to question from the supposed margins any theories of liberal subject formation held dear by political science and sociology. Related ethnography has also complicated anthropological notions of "personhood" and of separate domains, in particular, the way a political sphere was often conceptualized as separate from the religious and kinship, and have pushed "economies of desire" to the center. As the term "queer" indicates, ethnographies emphasize that any identity is more complexly constructed than the categories attributed suggest and that fluid rather than fixed sexual and gender identities are not the exception, but the norm, even where self-identification may refer to binary notions of sex/gender systems. By focusing more specifically on sexual transgression and sexual dissidence scholars engaging in queer studies have pushed notions of the legitimate and normative in academia and challenge gender as a category of knowledge production.

However, as critics, many of whom are explicitly identifying with LGBT+ movements and scholarship, have noted, queer studies is not usually based on empirical data and therefore tends to be limited by philosophical modes of reasoning as Butler's example demonstrates. Commenting on the development of queer and sexuality studies in the 2000s Anjali Arondekar notes that "if there is a sea change that has marked queer/sexuality studies in the

past decades, it has been the turn to globalization, variously understood through rubrics such as the transnational, geopolitical, international, global, and diasporic” (Arondekar 2007: 337). Tom Boellstorff, among others, argues along similar lines in his influential review paper on queer anthropologies (2007), where he encourages ethnographers to not assume a community as the subject of ethnography, and instead to focus on how nation, globalization, and capitalist expansion shape gendered and sexual subjectivities. Taking the critiques of traditional ethnographic modes – based on the representation of “a community” and postcolonial feminist critiques seriously, such ethnography does account for the historicity of any sexuality or gender configuration as an outcome of complex power relations. The latter loom large in his own work, where he explores the relationship between nation, gender, and sexuality from a comparative perspective through detailed ethnography of gay and lesbian lives (Boellstorff 2005). Elisabeth Povinelli’s *The Empire of Love* (2006), based on her long-term engagement with lesbian collectives in the United States and Indigenous Australian interlocutors, moves in a similar fashion across different ethnographic sites in order to discuss how the postcolonial state recognizes certain kinds of intimate relations as legitimate, while specific ones are rejected and dismissed as belonging to racialized “others.” It is in this sense that queering anthropology questions our understanding of sexualities and identity formation and refuses to map identities onto the multiple ways gendered personhood relates to nodes of power including colonial body politics, medical and scientific discourses, technological innovation, and direct or indirect governance interventions, all of which are productive of sexuality. Queer theorizing based on ethnography, however, not only highlights structural constraints in the way that individuals can make and remake sexual selves, but shows that gender plays a major role in the way sexualities are conceived and lived in most contexts. Thus, ethnography may emphasize how, for example, religious meanings frame sexual relations, and are infused with patriarchal gender ideologies even where nonhuman actors are involved (Ramberg 2014), or how same-sex practices, rather than being coded as a basis for transgressions of heteronormative categories, are the basis of stable, gendered identities (Kulick 1998).

Resisting easy definitions, queer anthropologists working on sexualities insist not only that what Rubin referred to as the “enchanted circle” no longer prescribes what anthropologists can write about, but that online discussions, politics of protest, and media representations of queer identities and lives need to feed into debates on sexual rights and ultimately visions of livable futures.

It is, however, crucial to note that while scholars working in the context of Anglophone, or even more precisely US American academia, have become canonized for rewriting the ethnography of sexualities and thereby gender, they are by no means the only ethnographers who have brought such multiplicities of sites into conversation. While not diminishing the fresh

thinking they represent, such more encompassing and complex ways of writing ethnography occurred concurrently in many different academic contexts, which were and are often considered peripheral or understood as “regional” representations. Taking South Asia (and acknowledging the omission of the rich body of academic writing in vernacular languages) as my example, such scholarship includes Sanjay Srivastava’s *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes: Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia* (2004) or Jyoti Puri’s *Sexual States: Governance and the Struggle over the Antisodomy Law in India* (2016), which go beyond earlier concerns with mapping and classification of LGBT+ communities or movements and are committed to adding the voices of those living in the Global South but taking part in globalized discourses on sexuality and identity seriously. Instead of mapping, they present multi-sited ethnographies that understand sexualities as co-produced through different actors and agents, and focus on a multiplicity of genres, media, and social relations that shape gendered desires and bodies, patriarchal discourses, and the by-now established politics of identity. These ethnographic examples can much easier deal with the ambiguities, the material, affective, and sensory aspects of non-normative sexualities and relate those back directly to the everydayness of livelihoods, kinship, gendered roles, and identity politics than other genres.

This is also apparent in the long-standing history of ethnographies that chart African American family, kinship, and sexualities, often not in anthropology but in sociology or women’s studies (see Bolles 2016). Sexuality studies, more so than anthropology, made good use of ethnography here as a way to interrogate the impact of racialized categorizations of sexual practices and gendered roles, in direct relation to other forms of subordination and exclusion, especially class. In common with drag and other forms of “deviant” practices, non-normative family forms had long been studied as modes of survival and centers of collective resistance by feminist ethnographers, many from Black and Indigenous backgrounds. Both bodies of work contributed to “the controversies over the stability of the category of sex” based on empirical studies of intersectionalities in complex and often activist-led ways (Silverstein and Lewin 2016: 16). It is the multiplicity of voices, of stories, or experiences and expressions that resonate in ethnography that makes it such an engaging tool to create counternarratives to normative discourses. Or as Boyce et al. argue:

Anthropology as a discipline and ethnography . . . [is] centrally concerned with describing lived everyday lives, in ways that are – or at least can be – particularly attuned to life worlds shaped by marginality and otherness. Anthropology and ethnography therefore can render – or indeed actively participate in producing and “worlding” – the multiple transivities and relationalities that nestle under the term “queer” (see Sedgwick 1994) in forms of engaged critique.

(Boyce et al. 2018: 843)

Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide a perspective on the collective project that constitutes critical ethnographies as part of feminist theorizing on gender and sexuality. Few disciplines have undergone as much scrutiny by post-colonial critics as anthropology has; and ethnography as a mode of knowledge production has been interrogated in the course of these debates. Starting with Judith Stacey's "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" (1988) leading to Kamala Visweswaran's (1994) suggestion that there could only be "fictions of feminist ethnography," feminist anthropologists working on gender issues were particularly radical in their critique of ethnography as a method. This critique has probably been less forcefully employed with reference to sexuality studies outside anthropology, which suffer from similar problems related to modes of representation and knowledge production and are arguably equally inflicted by Eurocentric assumptions. Within anthropology, ethnographies, as the long form of bringing empirical data into an extended conversation with theoretical frameworks drawn from across a wide spectrum of disciplines, rather than using data to support or to reject a major claim, slowly moved from discussing gender/woman as sign toward accounts of lived gendered experiences. Ethnographers achieved this shift by writing lives, rather than categories, into such debates, which first implied an engagement with women's and men's roles and experiences of political, religious, and economic domains. Such ethnographies honored the complex entanglements of gender with institutions that perpetuated women's subordination, for example, marriage, and challenged the suggestion that gender roles replicated gendered representations in a simplistic manner.

A common misinterpretation associates critical interventions in gender theory with sociology, and not anthropology. As Lynn Bolles points out in her comments on the relationship between feminist anthropology and women's studies, "the intellectual relationship between interdisciplinary women's studies and feminist anthropology became tenuous due to the dominance of a disciplinary emphasis from the humanities with an overlay of sociology," but her contribution also charts the many ways in which feminist anthropology has enriched and informed the methodology women's studies' scholars employed, including the focus on positionality, on multiple sources and archives, and on lived experiences (Bolles 2016: 99). With reference to sociology, scholars often assume overlap between the two disciplines, and in some contexts, for example, Indian academia, sociology and the anthropology of contemporary formations have merged. But as disciplinary traditions, they are, as Ghassan Hage points out, different in that

sociology, history and psychoanalysis work critically through giving us access to forces that are outside of us but that are acting on us causally, continuously constituting us into what we are (the social structures, the

past, the unconscious). Anthropology on the other hand works critically through a comparative act that constantly exposes us to the possibility of being other than what we are. It makes that possibility of being other act as a force in the midst of our lives.

(Hage 2012: 289)

Anthropology allows us to see ourselves through the encounter with the other (understood here as intersubjective engagement), and constitutes its subject through the acceptance of interdependence, a possibility that feminist anthropology in its search and criticism of universals acknowledges, and that is increasingly recognized in work on interspecies relationships.

As the brief detour through early ethnographic engagements with questions of gender shows, far from being relevant only as a site to present counternarratives to Western ideas about gender and sexuality, feminist ethnography started out as an intervention that put gender at the heart of theorizing, not only as an addition to existing bodies of literature. These interventions were right from the start interested in intersections – though incompletely so as the multiple criticisms articulated by Black anthropologists and scholars from the Global South have shown. In common with Black feminists' accusation that mainstream feminism set out and remained exclusively white, scholars including Chandra T. Mohanty (1988) and Lynn Bolles (2013) addressed the way ethnography othered on the basis of race. It is in the critique of “woman” as common denominator across differences that such criticism has been most influential; and it has moved ethnographers toward thinking about gender in terms of ensembles of historically unstable categories, practices, and experiences. This critique also brought a turn toward transnational feminisms that is particularly informed by postcolonial feminist scholarship from the Global South but situated in Global Northern academia. Writing on the question of methodologies embraced by transnational feminist scholarship, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that “we need to articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-judicial oppression on multiple levels” and explicitly embrace the need to undertake “comparative work” that recognizes the complexity of oppressive structures and their different scales (Grewal and Kaplan 1994: 18). Clearly, critical ethnography has been embraced by those who took on the task of transnationalizing feminism and make it more inclusive and methodologically rich, as the editors of a recent journal issue on transnational feminist research recognize (Hundle et al. 2019: 3).

This theorizing of gender across borders and differences was critical in both the senses Hage mentions, on the one hand, acknowledging that the globalization of specific kinds of knowledge produces difference (inside and outside academia), which structures individual desires, collective engagements, and identifications, but, on the other hand, crucially also lasting

constraints; and it links the intersubjective experiences that ethnographies are based on directly to spheres of governance, policy-making, and economic conditions. This allows for a recognition of alterities that turns simplistic narratives of gender, of identity, and of desire on their heads. While critical ethnographies of sexualities and gender have highlighted how discourses on gender and sexuality travel as global assemblages (Ong and Collier 2005) as part of regimes of governmentality i.e. in the shape of HIV-prevention programs, same-sex marriage, or reproductive justice, critical ethnography provided by anthropologists also linked such movements to the way they were appropriated, understood, and experienced, often with unexpected and surprising results. Very importantly, a critical ethnography of gender and/or sexuality cannot but be concerned with intersectionality, in particular, the intersection between gender, class, and racialized categories, co-constituent in any given setting, but also the disparate histories – those found in colonial archives, as well as those subaltern voices drowned out by official narratives associated with colonialism, nation-building, and capitalist expansion.

Given that much of this ethnographic practice relies on intersubjectivity, it often carries the weight of a method that zooms in on particulars. And its representational mode, however well intended and collaborative an outcome may be, inevitably provides a reductionist picture of what is in reality a multitude of possibilities. Thus, a range of ethnographies concerned with the relationship between gendered identities and the politics of race highlight the way in which both produce cultural logics of embodiment, economies of desire, and radical exclusions, but also how the everyday experience of such processes leads to unexpected identifications, alliances, and forms of resistance (Nagar 2014; Stout 2014). Following Foucault, Ann Stoler interrogated histories of sexuality through the lens of empire (1995), which leads to an investigation of nationalist policies and ideologies and the ways they created difference through “untraceable identity markers” in the form of race, introduced to seal economic and political fates. Ethnographies of gender and sexuality allow us to engage with the way such processes play out in people’s everyday lives; but critical ethnographies of gender and sexuality, marked as they are by attention to ambivalences and the multiplicity of positions inhabited and the different registers and genres the ethnographer engages with trying to bring out what makes sense, may agree with Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) reference to *choque*, a cultural collision as a major experience of modernity. To appreciate this rupture as productive we must acknowledge that theorizing takes many forms, or as Barbara Christian writes, that “theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in the riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (1987: 57). Ethnographies of gender, specifically in anthropology, bring such narratives to wider audiences, while insisting that knowledge production takes many forms as this kind of theorizing is taking place.

It is therefore not by “giving voice” more generally, but within and through interactions with other fields like queer studies that critical ethnography, produced from and focusing on global entanglements, comes to the fore as a major critical tool. This may be related to the way normativity of specific kinds of gender and sexualities is produced across a huge number of sites and at different scales, but more often through the recognition that a multiplicity of positions exists that cannot be captured with reference to “alternatives.” Where it is strengthened through the critique of Orientalism and postcolonial feminism, queering as a mode of knowledge production has been more successful in sexuality studies than other fields. However, these other disciplines, in which queer sensibilities coexist, are, as Boyce et al. (2018) point out, nevertheless often more embedded outside Anglo-American academic worlds. What these works have in common is not so much a Foucauldian take on historicizing sexuality, or a simple understanding of how hegemony of normative sexualities is established, but the need to open up an opportunity to challenge the way such kinds of knowledge are produced in the first place. Ethnographies of queer lifeworlds and queering ethnography based on earlier debates on sex and gender trace the journeys of concepts, but also make concepts travel in the same way that earlier critical work on gender had attempted to do.

This may happen in an autobiographical mode, linking, for example, explorations of class and the way it shapes sexual subjectivities, as Didier Eribon’s *Returning to Reims* (2013) and, probably even more analytically focused, Édouard Louis’s (2017, 2018, 2019) work on masculinity, class, and race do. But queer theorizing mobilizes a wide range of registers in ethnographic experiments. The work of German anthropologist/writer Hubert Fichte, which remains largely untranslated (see Haus der Kulturen der Welt 2019 and Diederichsen 2018 for overviews and Neumann 1991 and Gundermann 1999 on Fichte as ethnographer), provided a very early example of such theorizing across experience, ethnography, and sexual identity, rooted in continental critical theory and emergent social movements and articulated through autoethnographic experiments with and across various genres (see Fichte 2018 [1990]), as does T. Minh-Ha Trinh’s monograph *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1994) and her visual work. Both provide ethnography that exposes the cultural logics of gender/sexuality/race while pushing the boundaries of inquiry by dragging ethnographic sensibilities across modes of representation, and both recognize the role of intimacy in doing ethnography. In a very different tradition, that of engaged/activist ethnography Richa Nagar and the Indian Sangtin Collective’s *Playing with Fire* (2006) asks what happens when scholars and concepts traverse different geopolitical and social spaces to engage with vernacular notions of gender, sexualities, and politics in order to challenge patriarchal power relations. This is particularly relevant where the ethnographical question of “translation” is one that also needs to take local power relations and inequalities into account and relate those to

global formations of race, class, and ethnic community. Such ethnography turns debates on categories and definitions and the many layers of language implied in identity formation into material questions of livelihoods, rights, and citizenship. There are certainly many vantage points from which individuals and collectives can achieve insights into how shared meanings are constituted, and a recognition that any account will always be partial in the double sense of the word, a fragment, comes with the turf. But critical ethnography's strength lies in an interrogation of how one comes to the questions posed rather than where answers lie; it implies a displacement of selves and a rupture to what is already assumed to be known. Needless to say, it takes the ethnographer's positionality as well as hierarchies between subject and researcher, institutions, and discursive formations of representation into account, but uses a reflexive mode to question common sense. Speaking about rereading Ann Oakely's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), Sara Ahmed argues that "feminist archives were from the beginning queer archives, derived from the case studies of those whose bodies do not line up. I think this is important, and I speak here as someone located in queer as well as gender studies, because, work in queer studies often seems to forget earlier feminist work in gender studies" (Ahmed 2013). It is to this end that I have used the work of early feminist anthropologists, debates around gender and sex traced through ethnography, to illuminate what else they tell us, for example, about specific domains, including religion, politics, and the economy, and then moved toward a discussion of institutional sites of subordination and the accompanying cultural logics.

While debates around complex concepts, including resistance, agency, and desire, which became more relevant the further we moved beyond charting variations in gender identities and sexualities toward a recognition that these categories are only ever nodes in broader narratives, are important, rereading and rethinking the ethnography of sexuality also invites theorists to take seriously the notion of "assemblage." Highlighted by Richard Grusin, the editor of a collection on Anthropocene feminism, it suggests such feminist research may be understood as "an ethos of disruption" enabling the "claiming responsibility for all human and nonhuman actants" (Grusin 2017: xi). This, as ethnographers are only too aware, marks a space of inquiry rather than creating some truth. By ethnographically exploring a variety of archives, genealogies, institutional settings, and subjectivities that make a particular field, we can think through conditions of gendering as a process, as well as the possibility of decentering gender, and thereby also reflect on practices of knowledge production. However, some problematic dichotomies, which first haunted feminist ethnography but made their way into gay and lesbian studies and queer and sexuality studies, are still present and pertinent: in much of the former, as Lisa Rofel points out, the Marxist-derived so-called materialist studies and studies analyzing cultural logics have remained largely separate (Rofel 2012). Rarely did theorizing on gender/sex systems draw on both theoretical positions in the way

that Rubin's (1975) pathbreaking paper did. For some time afterward scholarship on sexuality and economies of desire remained firmly in the domain of approaches based on psychoanalysis or history. It is with explorations on the way that colonial formations subordinated sex/gender to Sex in Errington's (1990) sense that ethnographies become relevant again to the study of sexualities. Some collections (see, e.g., Manderson and Jolly 1997) were early on committed to link the analysis of sites of desire to questions around political economy under which subjectivities emerged, and other collections, for example, Aggleton et al. (2012), relate ethnography of sexual subjectivities directly to sites of policy-making. However, much work to link these approaches to contemporary feminist scholarship that engages with theories of value, of capital, and of the wider regimes productive of erotic subjectivities and gendered sexualities remains to be done. In a theoretically most sophisticated example of this necessary bridging work, Kumkum Sangari takes transnational surrogacy as her ethnographic example to explore how cultural logics are determined by neoliberal market relations and transnational circuits of value, which reframe meanings of gendered roles produced via kin and community discourses (Sangari 2015). Or, in another example, Elizabeth Povinelli invites us to rethink how intimacies and sexualities are established through regimes of knowledge that draw on racialized categories to produce specific subjectivities based on the logic of sexualized alterity (Povinelli 2006). Such a genealogical approach allows for ethnography to traverse space and time, therein lies the chance and the challenge for an ethnography of gender and sexuality today, as it speaks of the complex articulations of bodies, intimacies, and affects within the dynamics of histories of global capitalism and specifically modern forms of sovereignty. Unless we want to stay within an avant-garde ghetto, which may be rewarding in the short term but lacks epistemological impact, we may as Boellstorff (2007) puts it engage in "ethnographically unasking" the relationship between sexuality and gender. In order to do so, ethnographers return to Lila Abu-Lughod's (1996) demand to "write against culture" in order to open a "third space" that overcomes the separation between ethnography, theory, and popular debate as proposed by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004). Critical ethnography can enable us to engage with others – including nonhumans – in a way that is "responsible" in the sense Gayatri Spivak (2004) demands, responsive to their lifeworlds, values, and needs – a paradigm that may allow us to write in defence of collectively imaginable planetary futures.

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