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Introduction to *The Cambridge Handbook for the Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality*

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Introduction

This handbook documents the impact of the study of gender and sexuality upon the foundational practices and precepts of anthropology. It explores how the tense, productive, but enduring engagement between the discipline and Gender and Sexuality Studies (GSS) has had profound transformative effects upon anthropological theory and practice. The volume challenges the assumption that GSS's main contribution is to have enriched anthropology topically, leaving its essence unaffected. Rather, it shows that anthropological work taking inspiration from feminist and LGBTQI movements has created, absorbed, disputed, and otherwise grappled with GSS, and in so doing changed the discipline profoundly.

This process is ongoing. Key frameworks and practices within the discipline are being transformed. Evidence of this is everywhere. One cannot do fieldwork only by talking to male elders; one cannot study kinship without taking gender and sexuality into account, nor study capitalism without considering the role of domestic labor; one cannot ignore moral economies of gendered personhood when investigating public politics. Anthropologists now recognize that biological body processes are simultaneously social and historical; sexuality is not limited to a universal urge that generates myriad differing cultural expressions, but treated as biosocial, a situationally emergent complex of desire and physicality. To arrive at the normalization of these research practices and analytical concepts required far more than mere topical innovations. These shifts in the epistemological and ontological grounds of the discipline itself are due, in large part, to the energy generated through friction with GSS, often coming from what would seem like the fringes of the discipline.

The deeper contribution of GSS to anthropology has often gone without due recognition. One only need consider how contemporary textbooks on anthropological theory frequently mention feminist-inspired work in a short section, alongside such topics as postmodernist and interpretivist approaches, to which it is associated. Even as credit is given (for problematizing key analytical categories, for instance), GSS is relegated to the status of a “special interest trivia” and “expendable ‘add and stir’ elective” (Harrison 2010a: 7); as one area among many, or as a particular style of critique or deconstruction alongside others. Moreover, it is treated as practiced by a specific kind of anthropologist – for example, by members of queer minority communities – to immediately downplay any “broader” theoretical insights. Some critics consider that feminist anthropology self-marginalizes, participating in this process of delimitation and limitation. But more is involved here than meets the eye. There are specific underlying processes in operation, which give rise to the curious syndrome whereby, as advances occur, their genealogy is compacted to a point of fade-out.

Communication between Domains of Activities

Whenever feminist or queer studies produce substantial methodological and theoretical work that resonates sufficiently to alter the terms of anthropological debate, these alterations are absorbed within a relatively short time frame and their origins are disavowed and often expurgated from the record. As the story is told and retold or, to use Roy Wagner’s terminology, as the resulting innovations upon conventions are absorbed and applied, the memory of their creation is progressively wiped clean. We cite as an example of this syndrome the manner in which Marilyn Strathern’s concern with gender is frequently omitted when discussing and drawing upon her ideas. Rather than a mere male bias at the root of the problem, it seems, another dynamics is at work here (or an additional one – since no doubt, androcentrism has not disappeared). The misrepresentation of the unsettling, transformational effects of feminist and queer anthropological work reflects the way that what counts as “theory” within cultural and social anthropology is framed, created, sanctioned, and perpetuated. Erasures can occur also, as Faye Harrison observed, whenever contributions of women and of “minorities” are “cited for reasons other than their theoretical import” (Harrison 2010a: 7). At stake are the dynamics involved in constructing particular notions of “proper theory” – or proper theorists – as hegemonic, and then maintaining them as such.

If one thinks of “doing anthropology” (rather than simply “anthropology,” as in a *fait accompli*) then these dynamics come into greater focus. Doing anthropology involves engaging in processes of communication, and the sub-plot of this engagement is work of continual purification. At the interface where communication between anthropology and GSS is the most

intense, at the many points of direct contact, the stage is already set for readjusting the lens, so to speak, leading to subsequent misrecognition. Thus, when ethnographers examine questions raised by GSS during their fieldwork, the tendency is to frame their analysis in terms of the currently influential cultural theories they absorbed before heading for the field. At other moments, when a fresh look at their old data is required, or mobilization of their ethnographic sensibility is demanded by the contemporary debates within GSS, they are *force majeure* required to do so via a reformulation of established anthropological theory.

Yet though convergences play out as a form of purification, this process of communication between anthropology and GSS is a recursive one. This means that when an impetus to rethink a theory in GSS is inspired by ethnography, it sets in motion a new chain of ethnographic inquiry and theoretical development. Thus, Judith Butler's work, in part built from Esther Newton's ethnography, influenced thinking about gender and sexuality within anthropology. As Sarah Franklin observes, Butler's *Gender Trouble* is a turning point that simultaneously expressed ideas that were being developed in parallel by feminist scholars, especially in science studies, at the time: "it made something appear before your eyes even though you knew it was already there" (Franklin et al 2020: 171). Subsequently, thanks to a certain "legitimizing effect" (Rubin 2002: 40), a theorist's conceptual apparatus becomes incorporated into general anthropological theorizing and vocabulary, refocusing ways people look at their ethnographic data. Rubin discusses this "legitimizing effect" that causes "an all-too-common and oversimplified attribution of many ideas" (Rubin 2002: 39–40), in relation to the reception of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* within US academia in the 1980s. During the period "many scholars were arriving independently at similar formulation" on the social construction of sex, however. Rubin suggests that Foucault's reputation as the originator of an approach has to do not only with Foucault's reputation as a major thinker and with the undoubtable quality of his work, but, more insidiously, also with the fact that "concurrent developments within gay history were sexually stigmatized, intellectually segregated, and more readily ignored by mainstream academicians" (Rubin 2002: 40).

The history of anthropology of gender and sexuality is replete with such stigmatization, segregation, disavowal, and consequent genealogical purification, and these extend into the present. Queer organizing within professional associations, from the Association for Queer Anthropology (AQA), which is part of the American Anthropological Association, to the European Network for Queer Anthropology (ENQA), which is part of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), has historically sought to address the marginalization of queer scholarship within the discipline, in contexts where queer studies, including anthropological approaches, have had very varied degrees of institutionalization. In this respect, queer and trans scholarship continue to largely lack any degree of

institutional recognition within anthropology academic units across Europe. When this scholarship gains recognition, it is often as a result of the legitimating effect of an endorsement extended by a prominent figure.

The creative process of doing anthropology therefore depends on constant acts of recursive communication, often at the margins of the discipline, through which the difference between anthropology and GSS is ever reasserted. When Strathern famously differentiated feminism and anthropology (1987), the purpose was not to identify pure types and origins but to relate them better through bringing forth their operating principles; thus did she raise new questions. More commonly, however, reassertion of this difference is done without making the moves explicit. This takes place, largely, through the medium of ethnography, as part of the process whereby theoretical discussion is bound into the doing of research and writing. Indeed, as Michelle Rosaldo (1980) observed, the most explicit interventions (expected) from anthropology in GSS usually take the form of either challenging or substantiating particular claims (such as universal male domination) on the basis of “ethnographic evidence,” which in turn reifies the ideal of empirical data and its separation from theory and analysis (Weston 1998).

Of course, other kinds of evidence, such as archival records or statistical data, may also be deployed, but these gain relevance by being subjected to an anthropological focus – one that is heavily marked by the perspective gained through doing and reading ethnographies. This focus leads to a number of recognizable habits: thinking comparatively, considering context, presupposing the systemic inter-locking of different social domains considered in the present tense, highlighting total social facts, searching for specific cultural logics, respecting difference, reflecting on one’s positionality, and so on. This focus is how one arrives at the “anthropological ground”: a terrain forged, in short, by the historic centrality of ethnography.

About This Book

On considering how to structure the book, we came to realize that it is important to develop these ideas and awkward relations explicitly at the outset. For this reason, Chapters 2 and 3 are of a more general nature than those that make up the bulk of the volume. Chapter 2 explores the relation between methodology and epistemology and Chapter 3 covers that between ethnography and theory. The remaining twenty chapters are concerned with thematic areas within which research and writing from feminist and/or LGBTQI perspectives have resonated out into anthropological theory and practice more widely. As they survey specific thematic areas, and discuss particular topics, authors examine the transformative work of GSS upon the foundational practices and precepts of the discipline. Throughout, they ask: What difference does it make (to an account of anthropological theory and

practice) to bring to the foreground the way GSS research and writing has reshaped it, not just in terms of what anthropology takes as its object, but also how such objects are framed?

Since ethnography provides the anchoring point around which the dynamics of recursive communication between anthropology and GSS turn, chapters approach questions of theory through discussion of the ethnographies and related studies that deal with particular regions, peoples, and topics. Many focus on one specific geographical or ethnographic region in greater depth: Amazonia (Chapters 6 and 20), South Africa and the Zulu-speaking region more specifically (Chapter 8), the Circumpolar North (Chapter 14), the United Kingdom (Chapter 21), South Asia (Chapters 9, 12, and 18) or the US and the Atlantic African diaspora (Chapter 13). Other chapters adopt a comparative or thematic approach to consolidated and emerging areas of anthropological debate and scholarship: anthropological perspectives on the biosciences of sex (Chapter 5); the postmodern moment in gender studies and anthropology (Chapter 7); debates on gender, language, and performativity (Chapter 10); masculinities (Chapter 11); the gendering of global approaches to poverty in historical perspective (Chapter 17); multispecies and more-than-human worlds (Chapter 19); transgender studies (Chapter 22), and anthropological futures (Chapter 23). Overall, the book reviews a wide range of ethnographic studies that provide insight into key topical areas in the social and cultural anthropology of gender and sexuality, within a framework articulated around central debates in anthropological theory and through the established methodological practice of ethnographic analysis.

Since this is a field marked by political inspirations as well as disciplinary concerns and academic logics, we aspired to include authors from diverse backgrounds: from a variety of geographical regions, nationalities, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and with distinct approaches, understandings, and interests in the social and cultural anthropology of GSS. With this in mind, we brought together authors from a range of locations and traditions of anthropological scholarship in the hope of contributing to the project of a global anthropology. Invited authors had considerable autonomy. Some chose to write a revision of the literature (e.g., Donner in Chapter 3, McCallum in Chapter 6, Green and Pulkkinen in Chapter 7, Scheibelhofer and Monterescu in Chapter 11, or O'Laughlin in Chapter 19); others approached their topic from the perspective of analysis of their own original ethnographic research (Rudwick in Chapter 8, Channa in Chapter 9, Tschalaer in Chapter 12, Barnes in Chapter 13, Rivkin-Fish in Chapter 15, Boyce and Khanna in Chapter 18, Belaunde and McCallum in Chapter 20, and Edwards in Chapter 21); while others placed greater focus on an exploration of theoretical questions raised by particular anthropological and/or GSS debates (Mulla and Davis in Chapter 2, Cruz in Chapter 4, Cova and Swanson in Chapter 5, Leap in Chapter 10, Ulturgasheva in Chapter 14, Broch-Due in Chapter 17, Gonzalez-Polledo in Chapter 22, or Sanabria in

Chapter 23). The standpoint and situatedness of each author shaped the contents and arguments in their chapter, in some cases explicitly, and in others less obviously.

Cross-Cutting Themes, Recursive Debates

Across this collection contributors explore a number of broad cross-cutting themes. They address partial connections and frictions in the anthropologies of gender and sexuality. They reconfigure genealogies of analysis and theorizing by querying how sex, gender, and sexuality have emerged as objects of anthropological knowledge (Moore 1988, 1994). An important set of concerns rests on the ways postcolonial, decolonial, and intersectional perspectives have crisscrossed anthropological analysis historically, and on how these intersections are animated today, and in visions of the future. They generate particularly resonant debates at present, when renewed calls for decolonizing the anthropological enterprise have emerged (Allen and Jobson 2016; Harrison 2010b). These demands insist on the treatment of counter-hegemonic anthropologies as legitimate and authoritative, but also on concrete action for change in institutional practices and alignments. Student-led movements that call for higher education institutions to address the colonial roots of scholarly traditions and rethink epistemological foundations, methodologies, and pedagogies accordingly have galvanized these critical projects. Protests against British imperialist Cecil Rhodes's statue at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in 2015, highly symbolic of local struggles and broader political upheaval, led to its eventual removal. Demonstrations subsequently emerged on campuses across the Global South and North, such as at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, or in Bristol, where students toppled the statue of slave trader Edward Colston.

Within anthropology these events echo long-standing debates that have acquired renewed urgency in the wake of demands for a radical rethinking of how the discipline is framed, taught, and practiced. As the epistemic authority of anthropological knowledge has progressively eroded, and the divides between academia and activism and between injustices “inside” and “outside” academia have been questioned, anthropological scholarship on gender and sexuality has provided new avenues for a reflexive critical engagement with the discipline's past, as well as vibrant new propositions for the future. In the anthropology of gender and sexuality more specifically, these debates have been fraught yet generative, as Mulla and Davis (Chapter 2) and Ulturgasheva (Chapter 14) show by tackling genealogies of Black and Indigenous feminist anthropological scholarship, respectively, and as Tschalaer (Chapter 12) and Barnes (Chapter 13) address through a focus on strategies of resistance and empowerment inspired by Chicana and Black feminist theory and activism, drawing on Afro-Caribbean feminist transnational and diasporic frameworks.

These chapters also discuss points of friction that arise because the discipline is associated with colonial epistemologies seen to be inextricably tied to oppression. They became manifested, for instance, as tensions or moments of incommensurability between anthropological enquiry and Indigenous studies and Native studies (Todd 2018). From this perspective, an anthropology of gender and sexuality provides one entry point into epistemic violence (Spivak 1988), revealed in the analysis of the proximity between anthropological knowledge and settler knowledge formations and settler knowledge practices. Native studies challenges Indigenous dispossession and social scientific discourse simultaneously, including “forms of ethnographic entrapment” (Simpson and Smith 2014: 5) that have been the foundations of anthropological accounting. Decolonizing anthropology – and the ongoing, open-ended project of decolonizing the anthropology of gender and sexuality in particular – therefore entails confronting deeply entrenched as well as residual assumptions that are steeped in “colonial common sense” (Stoler 2009) and settler colonial knowledge formations (Morgensen 2011). In this respect, Jobson (2020) poses a number of related and equally urgent questions, arguing that anthropology should move beyond liberal presuppositions, and that settler colonialism and chattel slavery are the underpinnings of liberal humanism and hence central to the anthropological enterprise.

This is a moment of reckoning with anthropology’s colonial roots, of challenging ongoing complicities with militarism and with (neo)imperial and settler projects in diverse historical contexts globally. Thematic foci might have shifted, but problems with questions of positionality endure. As the chapters in this collection show, anthropologists increasingly seek to address colonial epistemologies and their persistence in anthropological knowledge formations. Colonial epistemologies continue to haunt the anthropological enterprise, notably as it engages the domains of gender and sexuality. In turn, transnational feminist scholarship (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; McClintock 1995; Mohanty 1988) continues to inform many critical efforts. Several contributors to the volume directly foreground such critical perspectives on the anthropology of gender, sexuality, and personhood in Lowland South America and the Circumpolar North (McCallum in Chapter 6, Ulturgasheva in Chapter 14, and Belaunde and McCallum in Chapter 20), in multispecies thinking (O’Laughlin in Chapter 19), and the future (Sanabria in Chapter 23).

A related problematic connects to emerging challenges to anthropological liberal humanism in the context of a fundamental reappraisal of the exclusionary character of conceptualizations of the human, as incisively argued by philosopher Sylvia Wynter (2003) and extensively discussed by scholars working across the interdisciplinary fields of Black studies, Science and Technology Studies (STS), multi-species approaches, and nonrepresentational ethnographically grounded research (e.g., Atanososki and Vora 2015; Jackson 2021; Kind 2020; McKittrick 2015; Shange 2019; Weheliye 2014). These areas have intersected critically with sociocultural anthropology to

renew feminist and queer theorizing. They have opened up spaces for trans- and interdisciplinary endeavors where anthropology, with its emphasis on ethnography and recursive knowledge practices, can make a distinctive contribution, as Donner (Chapter 3), O’Laughlin (Chapter 19), Gonzalez-Polledo (Chapter 22), and Sanabria (Chapter 23) show. Debates over the legitimacy of the anthropological enterprise have broad contemporary resonance; they also evoke past controversies over the “proper object” of feminist and queer anthropological analysis as questions of theory, method, pedagogy, and ethical and political commitment (Allen and Jobson 2016: 129; Harrison 2010b; Moore 1994; Weiss 2016). As Allen (2016) has argued with reference to articulations of race and sex more specifically, the process here is one of “renarrativizing anthropological analysis”.

In other words, work undertaken through the prisms of Black studies, Indigenous studies, and queer studies has periodically reoriented the anthropological enterprise by generating alternative accounts and reworkings of traditional genealogies of anthropological theory. In turn, feminist and queer anthropologies have been at the forefront in experimentations in the remaking and reimagining of genealogies of research and theorizing through, for example, scholarly and political practices of citation (Smith 2021; Smith et al. 2021) as part and parcel of broader struggles toward structural transformation in the discipline and the academy. This volume explicitly builds on this important work and responds to the challenges associated with frictions and partial connectivity, looking to reimagine disciplinary domains through plural genealogies of anthropological research.

Several chapters address shifts in focus from an emphasis on identities, subjectivities, and performance toward a renewed interest in “thinking sex” (Rubin 1984). In her landmark essay Rubin set out an agenda for sexuality studies, stating boldly that “the time has come to think about sex . . . Disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties . . . consequently, sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress” (1984: 137–8). Reflecting on the significance and impact of this intervention, Rubin (2010: 40) has noted that “Thinking Sex” can be considered proto-queer, in that it anticipated a move away from a single-issue approach to sexual politics and toward the intricacies of a multiplicity of shifting positionalities and cross-identificatory dynamics that came into sharper focus through queer theory (Sedgwick 1993). Rubin’s ground-breaking work remains a key point of reference for ethnographically grounded perspectives on sex in the anthropology of gender and sexuality. In our volume, the contributions by Scheibelhofer and Monterescu (Chapter 11) and Caroline E. Schuster (Chapter 16) explicitly suggest sideways readings of Gayle Rubin’s oeuvre, while also marking the enduring legacy of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. They restage important generative intersections that emerge from a rereading of Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* (1985), with its focus on sexual politics, sexual meanings, gender asymmetry, and erotic triangles, through Rubin’s

“The Traffic in Women” (1984) and “Thinking Sex” (1975) and subsequent work on gay and lesbian leather sexual cultures on the eve of the AIDS pandemic in San Francisco (Rubin 1991).

A rich and textured archive of research on sex, sexual cultures, and subjectivities has since emerged in a wide range of ethnographic registers and sensibilities, suggesting fractal modelling of race and sex, and vernacular idioms for a multiplicity of queer relationalities and desire beyond anti-normativity. In Wekker’s ground-breaking analysis of the “mati work” (Wekker 2006), for example, an Afro-Surinamese sexual culture based on self-fulfillment and not on sexual object choice engages working-class Afro-Surinamese women’s sexual subjectivities in the diaspora. Wekker shows that mati work is a locus of agency across sexual, economic, and political domains. Wekker writes powerfully about the importance of the erotic subjectivity of the ethnographer and the task of writing across positionalities and locations. For Wekker, the “politics of passion” in anthropological research must therefore also critically confront the sedimentation of racist stereotyping that marks the representation of Black sexualities; and writing should develop narrative registers that connects to Creole working-class women’s figurations and aspirations. As Hendriks has argued with reference to research with same-sex-loving men and boys in contemporary urban Congo, the knowledge practices of queer anthropology are therefore not explicitly or exclusively concerned with documenting sexual diversity and local sexual taxonomies; rather, they engage in thought experiments to think through them (Hendriks 2018).

These broad themes and associated problematics are variously addressed by the volume’s contributors and they foreground conceptual and political points of friction. In an influential contribution, Tsing (2011) suggests that friction marks intersections of the local and global encounters, unsettling assumptions about universality while at the same time challenging a reduction of “the local” to particularist logics. Tsing asks how one might hold on analytically to interconnecting without resorting uncritically to universality and liberal humanist projects – questions that resonate with ongoing challenges to conventional anthropological categories and ways of knowing. Partial connections, as Strathern (2005) has argued, are another way to frame the work of anthropological analytics and forms of accounting and continue to offer a generative entry point into ethnographically oriented approaches to the study of relations, modes of sociality, and knowledge formations.

Next, we turn to a description of the five parts that comprise the volume, through a brief account of each chapter’s contribution.

Openings and Orientations

The chapters in Part I, discuss “Openings and Orientations” in the anthropology of gender and sexuality with reference to a range of contexts,

themes, and approaches. The part opens with a powerful essay on methodology by Black feminist scholars Sameena Mulla and Dána-Ain Davis (Chapter 2) that recenters feminist scholars traditionally excluded from the anthropological canon. By restaging and rewriting histories of the discipline to take account of these perspectives, Mulla and Davis illustrate the potential for transformative anthropological knowledge practices as political praxis to challenge oppression, notably white supremacy. The analytical strategy here is one of “remixing,” that is, intersecting different interventions and propositions in new configurations that accentuate the situated character of knowledge claims and their rootedness in experience. Emphasizing the importance of reflexivity, Mulla and Davis illustrate the ground-breaking contribution made by Black feminist anthropology in experimentations with auto-ethnography as “self-inscription” as key moments of epistemological and methodological innovation. Reconfiguring the field/s of the anthropology of gender and sexuality in the way Davis and Mulla suggest entails a fundamental reframing of the discipline/s as already constituted by those cast in the position of the “observed” in colonial anthropology’s imaginaries.

While such reconfiguring has been at the heart of feminist, gender, and sexuality perspectives in anthropological scholarship from the very inception of the discipline, the critical thrust of these perspectives intensified at particular moments. It is possible to trace exemplary “critical events” through a review of landmark volumes and debates such as the crucial response to the postmodern turn toward reflexivity and formal experimentation in ethnography, *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon 1995). This collection of essays directly harnessed feminist, queer of color, and more specifically Chicana scholarship, as well as a range of other minoritized subject positions that, when considered together, in fact constitute a sizeable, albeit heterogeneous group. Students of anthropology and anthropology faculty, the editors of the collection argued, found themselves negotiating masculinist academic structures of power and prestige, and their interests and contributions were often largely unacknowledged, undervalued, or deemed to pertain to less prestigious sub-fields, peripheral research areas, or overly interdisciplinary remits (Behar and Gordon 1995). Ruth Landes, whose ground-breaking research on gender, race, and Candomblé religion in Brazil (Landes 1947; see also Cole 2003) continues to influence the field, held precarious appointments throughout her career. In the same period, Zora Neale Hurston’s pioneering anthropological research into Afro-American lives in the South of the United States, her auto-ethnographic writing, and her literary work achieved some recognition, yet she remained marginalized and eventually died in poverty and obscurity (McClaurin 2001). Esther Newton, whose field-defining early work established the foundations for queer anthropology, has written powerfully about the experience of marginalization within institutional disciplinary spaces (Newton 2000, 2018; see also Boyce et al. 2016; Mohr 2016). Invoking ancestors is not an innocent