

## Queer in the Field: on emotions temporality and performativity in ethnography<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Reflecting on a year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in and around a lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) community centre in London, this chapter argues that queer ethnography does more than use ethnography to research queer lives; it also takes queer theory seriously to question the conventions of ethnographic research. More specifically this includes addressing the assumed stability and coherence of the ethnographic self and outlining how this self is performed in writing and doing research. To *queer* ethnography then, is to curve the established orientation of ethnography in its method, ethics and reflexive philosophical principles.

This chapter draws on research concerned with the ways in which working-class lesbian and bisexual women experience and negotiate the meanings of their sexual identities on an individual everyday basis, and the ways identity categories are institutionalised at a subcultural level. As part of this research, I conducted ethnographic participant observation in and around a London LGB community centre. The centre functioned as a lens to see the field of sexual geographies through, rather than constituting a focus of study per-se. At the Centre, I took part in a range of activities, including volunteering at the centre, carrying out mental health outreach, running sexualities discussion groups, and a series of photography workshops with lesbian and bisexual

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of the chapter was published in *Lesbian Studies* ('Queering the Field: On the messy matters of ethnographic research', *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 13. 2. April-June 2009).

women. In this chapter, I discuss some of the epistemological, ontological and ethical dimensions of ethnographic research which were raised in this process. The chapter begins by setting out a case for an ethnographic approach to the study of sexuality working between the critique of queer theory as overly concerned with textual criticism and the attachment to methodological scientificity within some schools of sociology. This is followed by a discussion of some of the historical critiques regarding ethnographic research and of the textual normativities at the heart of ethnographic writing. The chapter then goes on to explore some of the tensions in ethnographic research and writing as the ethnographer moves from affective participant observation to a distanced writing up, offering a critique of the temporal and spatial fictions of ethnography. Against this background, I close my chapter by arguing for the queering of ethnography, appealing for an open discussion of the affective and erotic dimensions of knowledge production which continue to be written out in the writing up process.

The emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s was characterised by a shift from empirical research into lesbian and gay lives, which had been a distinctive feature of the field of lesbian and gay studies, toward readings of literary and cultural texts, often with a French poststructuralist Foucauldian and Lacanian emphasis (see for example the work of Judith Butler 1993, 1996, 1999, Teresa De Laurentis 1991, 1993, and Diana Fuss 1991, 1995). Sociological criticisms of queer theory have circulated around queer's tendency towards philosophical abstraction and textual criticism its employment of an under-developed concept of the social, and its lack of engagement with the material relations of inequality (See Seidman 1993, 1995, 1996, Warner 1993, McRobbie 1997 for further discussion). I do not want to rehearse these positions here. Instead, in this chapter I am advocating a queer sociological ethnographic perspective that brings together queer theories of sexual subjectivity and an ethnographic approach to researching identity

categories and the practices which generate them. I chose to conduct ethnographic research into lesbian and bisexual women's everyday lives in a deliberate attempt to counter the tendency towards high abstraction and a reliance on theory that had characterised queer. Queer is, after all, connected to emotions as much as it is a body of theory. This is an attempt to work in a theoretically engaged way by grounding analysis in materiality, lived experience and empirical research. This is not a question of prioritising the sexually flexible or post gay identities but one of paying attention to the complexity of intersubjectivity in constructions of the self, in terms of lives as they are lived at the level of the everyday and in the double hermeneutics (Giddens 1987) of the research and writing process. I did not want to 'throw out the (queer) baby with the bathwater' and dismiss the insights of theories of performativity and selfhood, or fail to recognise the workings of language, discourse and signification. Abstraction does have a purpose; it offers complex ways of seeing beyond the immediate, surface understandings of a situation and moves our thinking beyond the immediate confinements of empirical realities. However, there is, I believe, a strong case for a queer ethnography that hones queer theory and qualifies it within the context of everyday life.

### **Ethnographic 'Intellectual Effort': Between Methodologies and Everyday Lives**

In sociological training, ethnography is generally discussed on methods courses. However, ethnography is not merely a research method. The postmodern turn within anthropology and sociology (Geertz 1973, Marcus 1986, Clifford 1988, Atkinson and Hammersley 1989) recognises that ethnography is not defined by techniques and procedures (such as the length and intensity of participant observation, the combination of semi-structured interviews, historical analysis, questionnaires, surveys and the use of a research diary) but rather by the kind of intellectual effort it is. Geertz (1973), for instance, states that ethnography should consist of seeking to 'converse' and produce 'thick description' – that

is, understanding and describing what is going on in a culture and the meaning of what is going on to both oneself and informants. From this we can see that ethnography is an intellectual approach rather than a method; a theory of the research process which is defined by its relationship to certain theoretical positions. One of the strengths of ethnography is the way that it seeks to link structure and practice, micro and macro-analysis, historical, economic, political and cultural factors. Postmodern critiques of ethnography (specifically within anthropology) have led to what has been described as an interpretive turn (Geertz 1973) recognizing that ethnography is more than mere cultural reportage, relaying the truth or 'reality' of a situation, stressing its role as a cultural construction of both the self and the other. As Geertz puts it, ethnographic writing involves the 'construction of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' (Geertz 1973: 9). Similarly for Clifford (1988) anthropology is an invention, not just a representation, of culture. Postmodern ethnography has carefully acknowledged its limits, interrogating the politics of the research process and the conditions of the production of ethnographic texts. This has led to a reduction of and deconstruction of claims to 'knowledge' and a critique of an assumed ability to definitively represent cultures. Ethnographic truths are recognised as inherently 'partial - committed and incomplete' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 7). A parallel deconstructive turn regarding epistemology is found within feminist debates which have also interrogated the politics of knowledge production within scientific disciplines, raising questions of the relationship between the knower and the known, and the gendered nature of research, in an attempt to create new subject positions of knowing (Code 1991, 1993, Grosz 1993, Harding 1991). Both of these critiques eschew the 'god-like' position of detached, rational, objective observer and a neutral positivism, and see the production of knowledge as a discursive and

political activity. Both have demanded attention to reflexivity and intersubjectivity, addressing the researcher's own ambiguous position.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of ethnography is its relationship to theory. As Willis and Trondman (2000) argue, theory should be employed when it offers some insight into ethnographic evidence rather than prioritising theory and then seeking to find evidence to 'prove its validity'. Furthermore, they argue that ethnography should seek to promote 'theoretical informed-ness', 'sensitising concepts' and 'analytic points' as a means of 'teasing out patterns from the texture of everyday life' (Willis and Trondman 2000: 4). Ethnography then, offers the possibility of reshaping and fine-tuning theory by offering knowledge of the world of practice: the way that people make sense of the understandings available to them. It is a way of grounding theoretical comprehension in a located social context. An ethnographic approach to sexuality then, acknowledges that gender and sexual identities, and the meanings that circulate around them, are more than merely discursive formulations. They are daily realities and practices that have real consequences.

Ethnography is a methodology which has been subject to considerable criticism due to its epistemological underpinnings and its representational conventions. These have been central to the debates of reflexive anthropology (associated primarily with the work of Clifford and Marcus (Clifford 1988, 1997, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus and Fisher 1986) as well as Geertz (1988) and Taussig (1987). Matters relating to ethnography as a methodology, including issues to do with the power relations of research, the textual construction of the classed, racialised and gendered other, ethnography's assumed lack of scientific rigour, the limits and possibilities of knowing, and knowledge production, the discipline's emergence in the conditions of colonialism and imperialism, have all been thoroughly interrogated. Ethnography is a discipline which is undoubtedly

methodologically untidy, and university bookshelves are filled with some of the anxious writing which this messy methodology seems to produce. Due to its intensely social and at times intimate character, ethnographic research is filled with ontological, epistemological and ethical dilemmas. And yet, rather than packing up shop and leaving town, ethnography seems to be thriving as both a method of research and as mode of representation<sup>2</sup>. Today ethnography, at its best, continues to be a genre of sociological and anthropological writing which has the power to communicate the irreducibility of human experience with pathos. It is a mark of the skilled ethnographic scholar that he or she is able to witness and make sense of the complexity of the social world. Indeed, the best ethnographies do not just offer nuanced, up-close accounts of lived experience, they also produce socio-cultural analyses which have a grounded sense of the social world as at once ‘internally sprung and dialectically produced’ (Willis and Trondman 2000) probing the ways that social lives are caught in the flow of history, the discourses that surround us and the webs of meaning we weave.

In carrying ethnographic research into lesbian lives, I offer an account that interrogates the everyday dimensions of lived experience in an attempt to pay critical attention to the direct and subtle workings of hetero- and homonormativity. I wanted to analyse the ways in which the changing meanings of the identity category ‘lesbian’ are discursively produced in socio-historical context, and in particular the ways that women live in relationship to the meanings of the category ‘lesbian’. In an attempt to offer a productive space of praxis from which to think through the ‘necessary trouble’ of identities (Butler 1991), I aimed to combine queer, postmodern and poststructural theories of

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnography is a research method which has travelled beyond the academy, being increasingly popular with corporations concerned with matters such as the ways people use technologies, for example the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference 2005 held at the Microsoft Campus Seattle Washington.

knowledge production and the self, with a commitment to ethnographic understandings of identity categories. This approach allows me to theorise the ways in which contemporary sexual subjectivities are discursively produced while simultaneously doing justice to the ways in which identities, such as lesbian, are lived with intersubjective complexity. It is the descriptive nature of ethnography that allows for the nuanced communication of experience and enables ethnography to offer a way of exploring the intricacies and nuances of lived practice in a specific temporal and spatial context; how people live through the problems and pleasures of daily life, how they live in relationship to the identities available to them.

### **Between Here and There: The Normativity of Ethnographic Time**

I now want to move on to consider how we might question some of the normativities of ethnography. After all, queer as a body of theory is not limited to thinking about gendered and sexual subjectivities. Rather it is a philosophical commitment to contesting the logics of normativity. Queering ethnography therefore necessarily involves exploring the normative logics of ethnographic research and writing. This includes interrogating the fictions of ethnographic time and space and the intersubjective nature of the field. In a discussion of queer time and the ways in which postmodern understandings of temporality and spatiality are normative Judith Halbertsam (2005: 06) argues that our sense of time is not merely one of natural time internalised, but rather a complex consequence of living within (post) modernity which is a ‘social construction forged out of vibrant and volatile social relations’. Research practices contain their own temporal normativities. Our sense of waiting, haste, (im)patience, boredom and industry make up the everyday temporalities of research practice. One of the defining characteristics of ethnographic practice is its disciplining temporal progression as the researcher moves from periods of participant observation during fieldwork, to the process of writing up the research. This places varied

demands on the researcher: participant observation involves ‘deep hanging out’ (Clifford 1997) and immersing oneself in the field, while ‘writing up’ demands that we extract ourselves from the webs of entanglements we wove, in order to achieve the critical distance required to write up our analysis (often with externally imposed deadlines). This move into the ‘writing up’ period classically follows a scholastic convention of presenting a self who is now detached and distant from the fieldwork situation in both emotional, spatial and temporal terms. These aspects are part of the fiction and normativity of traditional ethnography. The fiction of the field being *elsewhere* is particularly apparent when fieldwork takes place close to home. In traditional ethnographies the ethnographer goes off to a distant and (presumed) strange culture, dwells amongst the people in a particular village or neighbourhood that he or she hopes to understand and describe. He or she then returns from the field changed in the process and through ‘writing up’ makes some sense of both their embodied rite of passage and the culture that it took place within. This is more problematic when the field is close to home. Presenting it as a strange, or unfamiliar culture can be a fiction. Doing one’s fieldwork close to home (both the location of home and the ontological home of comfort and belonging) problematises the idea of the field as a space/place physically and temporally bounded. It requires that we think of the field as having fluctuating boundaries which are continually expanding and contracting. (When a participant calls me six months after my fieldwork has ended am I momentarily in the field again? If I bump into a participant when I am out shopping in the local high street and have a chat is that a moment of fieldwork? Should I just ignore that last text message now that I am not in the field?) My own research, situated close to home, highlighted how the process of crossing the fictional borders between the field of the university and the fieldwork site of the LGB centre blurs the edges of what I thought of as the field.

The temporality of the field has also been interrogated by Hastrup (1992: 127) who argues that ‘the field world has neither a firm past nor a distinct future because its reality is intersubjectively constructed and depends on the ethnographer’s presence in the field’. Therefore, when the ethnographer leaves the field, she carries its immediacy, its presence, with her. The ‘field’ becomes a spatial, temporal and sensory capsule, which is constantly revisited through notes, transcripts and memory in order to make sense of it and to find its broader sociological significance and meaning. If we follow Geertz’s proposition that the task of interpretive ethnography is to find the sociological or anthropological meaning of the meaning in the ethnographic encounter. Producing ethnography requires a constant crossing between the ‘here’ and ‘there’, between the past, present and future: from being ‘in the field’ while thinking about the future point of writing up, to the point of writing and revisiting the ‘ethnographic past’. Even when we are ‘there’ we are ‘here’ and vice versa. Acknowledging this temporality is to queer an otherwise normative rational version of ethnographic time. Furthermore, this back and forth movement also leads to an existential splitting; an experience of being in two places at the same time. This experience has been interrogated in feminist debates regarding research ethics, methodologies and epistemologies. As Haraway states ‘Splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge’ (Haraway 1991: 193). Queering ethnographic temporality demands that the ethnographer finds a way to be as fully present as possible when ‘there’, while keeping a mind on the exacting demands of later being ‘here’. Similarly at the point of writing up, reflecting on the process of fieldwork and making sense of it theoretically, she is required to revisit the ethnographic past of fieldwork. If the ‘field’ is intersubjectively constructed by the ethnographer, we might argue that he or she is the *only* person who inhabits the field *as* ‘the field’. The informants may be in the same place at the same time but their experience of it is different to that of the ethnographer. The challenge

to ethnographic scholarship this brings is illustrated beautifully in the following passage by

John Berger,

What separates us from the characters about whom we write is not knowledge, either objective or subjective, but their experience of time in the story we are telling. This separation allows us, the storytellers, the power of knowing the whole. Yet equally, this separation renders us powerless: we cannot control our characters after the narration has begun. ... The time and therefore the story belongs to them, yet the meaning of the story, what makes it worthy of being told is what we can see and what inspires us because we are beyond its time. ... Those who read or listen to our stories see everything as through a lens. His lens is the secret of narration, and it is ground anew in every story, ground between the temporal and the timeless (1991: 31).

The people we write about, those whose stories we aim to tell, embody and live in their own time and their stories go on long after we have left the ‘field’. The ethnographer’s challenge is to grapple with the meaning of the story in that moment, to tell it with honesty and an ethical commitment to doing it justice. It is not so much that the ethnographer is armed with a theoretical and methodological toolbox, possessing a superior ‘objective’ knowledge. Indeed, ethnographic knowledge is ‘partial, committed and incomplete’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 7) but this partiality is a strength, not a flaw; it is a way of acknowledging and interrogating our social and political situatedness as researchers<sup>3</sup>.

### **Beyond ‘Establishing Rapport’**

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<sup>3</sup>There is an often-unacknowledged overlap between postmodern ethnography and feminist critiques of research methodologies. Both reject the stance of the natural observer, recognise the intrusive and unequal nature of research relationships in the field, are self conscious of the potential for distortion and the limitations of the research process, and both recognise that they are producing ‘partial truths’.

Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. (Butler 2003: 31)

Butler's statement above, reminds us of how our sense of self is made through the inevitability of loss, and the ways in which we are connected and indebted to each other. It points towards an ethic and ontology of vulnerability. Qualitative social research is filled with interpersonal encounters, haptic human connection, closeness, understanding and interpersonal engagement. The affective process of gathering ethnographic 'data' depends on sensory involvement which, in an attempt to convey and make some sense of embodied experience, takes emotions seriously. This challenging emotional process is described eloquently by Ruth Behar discussing her anxieties when moving from research to writing:

Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving too late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something are the stopping places along the way (1996: 3).

Scholarly ethnography relies upon this ethical connection. However, this is often at odds with the kind of distanced, rational and reasoned texts produced in a sociological discipline that prioritises distance, and offers methodological skills training that emphasises quantitative and systematised modes of data storage and analysis, combined with theoretical abstraction. In the process of conducting ethnographic research I found myself repeatedly caught between intense phatic engagement (participation) and a kind of cool intellectual detachment (observation). Postgraduate research training and sociological methodological texts had not prepared me for the complexity of these affective intersubjective encounters. I felt a deep unease when attempting to keep my feelings to myself and retain some objectivity while trying to engage and understand my informants'

experiences through an ‘ethic of listening’ which combines emotions and intellect, in what Bourdieu (1999) describes as ‘intellectual love’<sup>4</sup>.

Although much ethnographic writing has focused on emotions as culturally variant constructions – legitimate and important forms of understanding for both informants and ethnographers (see Rosaldo 1989, Coffey 1999) – little writing on the emotions of ethnographic fieldwork acknowledges the extent to which ethnography is a form of emotional work, or emotional labour, with its own hazards and difficulties. The concept of emotional labour, as developed by Hochschild (1983), was first used to describe the way in which workers (specifically women in the service sector) manage their own feelings in order to induce feelings in others. Hochschild describes various levels in the performance of emotional labour: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting entails managing outward appearances and pretending ‘to feel what we do not ... we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves’ (Hochschild 1983: 33). ‘Deep acting’ means ‘deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others. We make feigning easy by making it unnecessary’ (Hochschild 1983: 33). In order to establish these affective connections that ethnography hinges upon the ethnographer must have a degree of emotional competence, and an ability to convey genuine interest, express care and respond appropriately if the desired outcome of establishing feelings of trust is to be achieved. This is sometimes glibly described as ‘establishing rapport’ in classic anthropology texts. It is on the basis of this emotional labour, which produces bonds of trust, that informants ‘open up’ to give clear

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu’s ethical listening aims to offer the research subject an opportunity ‘to testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere; an opportunity also to *explain themselves* in the fullest sense of the *term*’ (Bourdieu 1999: 612-15). The encounter with the researcher, when framed within the ethic that Bourdieu suggests, can offer up a unique opportunity for self-examination. This is not without its problems (See McRobbie’s (2002) critique of *The Weight of the World* and the limits of Bourdieu’s project of ‘social pedagogy’).

accounts of themselves. Significantly, the self-explanations offered to the ethnographer are offered on the basis of the informants' understanding of the *kind of person* the ethnographer is. In my own research I take the standpoint that rather than inhabiting the position of 'modest witness' (Haraway 2004) I need to consciously present myself with honesty as a white working-class lesbian and a researcher. Looking back I can see that it was, in part, due to my embodied situatedness in the subject positions of 'working class' and 'lesbian' and my communicating some shared understanding of the pleasures and difficulties of lesbian lives, that informants were willing to disclose their life experiences and self understandings to me. However, whilst emphasising similarities and shared experiences was productive, it is also necessary to acknowledge that simultaneously playing down my educational background, my professional training and the class mobility this brought, also formed part of my interaction with informants, brought about by an awareness that these 'differences' might jeopardise the 'rapport' I sought to develop. This was an experience of constantly managing my outward appearances and the aspects of my self I wished to share and at least attempting to manage my own, sometimes difficult, feelings.

### **Ethnography's Epistemological Closet?**

If the emotional and intersubjective aspects of carrying out ethnographic research have often been selectively written out of ethnographic accounts, the work of the erotic dimension of fieldwork is almost invisible. Historically anthropologists and sociologists have been fascinated by the sexual and intimate lives of others, however, their own erotic subjectivity has been notably absent as a site of critical scrutiny. As Kulick points out, this has been due in part to anthropology's 'disciplinary disdain for personal narratives' and cultural taboos about discussing their own culture's sex, while constructing the often 'exotic sexualities of others' (1995: 20). This silence is productive in that it works to preserve the bounded subjectivity of the (usually male) ethnographer, set the limits of

legitimate critical enquiry, whilst at the same time suppressing ‘women’ and ‘gays’<sup>5</sup>. As Newton points out, (2000) in a discussion of homophobia in academia, this silence works to keep heterosexual male subjectivity out of the lens of critical enquiry. Sexuality continues to be the dirty secret kept in the epistemological closet of research ethics, and will remain so as long as the erotic equation in fieldwork is ‘written out’, rather than ‘written up’. In the spirit of a feminist and reflexive ethnographic project, paying attention to the work of emotions and erotics in ethnography is, in part, a push to question the way in which the ontological and epistemological boundary between the ‘knower’ and the ‘known’ is produced and maintained in the discursive production of ‘us’/‘them’. As Marcus points out, ‘the ethnographer’s framework should not remain intact if the subject’s is being analytically pulled apart’ (1994: 50).

Queering ethnography is a task which requires that we approach with caution, and make clear, the normative logics of ethnographic practice. This includes undoing some of the textual conventions which create the ethnographer as unproblematically stable in terms of their gendered and sexual subjectivity. It also requires that, as part of a reflexive research process, we examine the consequences of taking seriously the complexities of understanding queer subjectivities. As ethnographers of queer lives, while we are busy deconstructing the discourses and categories that produce our informants’ subjectivities, we might consider the extent to which we ourselves are willing to be ‘pulled apart’ or undone? Are we willing to risk relinquishing our often unspoken attachment to the categories that offer us a sense of ontological security? To illustrate, when I set out to conduct my fieldwork, I was keen to conduct feminist research which was collaborative and dialogical

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<sup>5</sup> For more discussion and examples of ethnographic texts which do interrogate these matters see Kulick and Willson (1995) and Newton (2000).

(Skeggs 1997, Stacey 1988, Stanley and Wise 1983a, 1983b, 1990, 1993). I naively assumed this would be fairly unproblematic to put into practice. However, my undeclared attachment to ethnographic distance and the comfort and authority it offered was repeatedly made obvious to me while carrying out my fieldwork. So for instance, I realised, over time that one of my ‘informants’ was friends with one of my former lovers. When in conversation she made it apparent that she knew some of the details of our relationship break-up, I realised I was comfortable to be known in some ways but not in others. What may be simply gossip in the space of a bar or a party, impacted on my identity as an ethnographer and an academic at the community centre. The field was a space where my personal boundaries and my stable sense of self were gradually undone. This is best summed up in Geertz’s assertion that ‘You don’t exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you’ (1995: 44). Such gendered and sexualised metaphor also draws attention to the sexual subjectivity of the ethnographer, a matter which continues to be surrounded by a slightly embarrassed, uneasy silence.

### **Doing Identity in the Field**

Queer theory, specifically the work of Butler (1993, 1996, 1999) and Foucault (1979), has decentred and fragmented the research subjects’ subjectivities<sup>6</sup>. However, the self that is

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<sup>6</sup>I am thinking specifically here of Butler’s theories of performativity and embodiment which imply that adopting ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ identities is to base one’s identity on a sexuality which rests upon fixed gender differences rather than acknowledging gender as performative, and as having no ontological status which stands apart from the acts that constitute it. Sexual subjectivities then are culminations of performative acts which all work to hold sexualities in place. And Foucault’s theories of the discursive production of sexual subjects whereby those adopting or claiming ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ identities within this can be understood as being caught up in what he describes as a ‘reverse discourse’, thereby accepting the labels that discursively produced them in the first place. Although this may be a simplistic rendition of the bare bones of queer theory, it does reflect the looser readings of queer theory and a reflection of a cultural sensibility

producing much cultural research still remains distant and stable. So for example, much anthropological reflexive writing has at its centre a somewhat disconnected self that is bounded, integral and stable through space and time. As Willson points out:

Many ethnographers go to the field with the illusion that their identity, like their body, is discrete and impenetrable, that although their public persona is controllable and flexible, they have an inner identity, a kind of holy ground like a silent pool of water that nothing will touch (1995: 256).

Perhaps as a way of countering this tendency, Probyn asks ‘just what exactly a self-reflecting self is reflecting upon?’ (1993: 80), suggesting that the reflexive self should be ‘both an object of enquiry and the means of analysing where and how the self is lodged within the social formation’ (1993: 80). I want to argue here for an intellectual commitment to queer theory which employs a methodology characterised by epistemological openness and attention to one’s own subjectivity, positionality and embodiment. Queering ethnography requires a methodology that pays attention to the performativity of a self which is gendered, sex, sexualised, classed and generational in the research process. It demands that the ethnographer work from an honest sense of oneself that is open and reflexive, rather than holding on to a sense of self which provides an ontologically stable place from which to enter into the fieldworld and subsequently come back to. This queer reflexivity offers a means of theoretical manoeuvring by exploring the connection between ontology and epistemology. This is a position which offers the possibility of articulating the

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which has problematically been described as post-gay and heteroflexible. See Blackman (2009) for a discussion of the methodological consequences of these tendencies for researching lesbian lives.

relationships between researcher/writer and the texts we produce, the possibilities of knowing and the worlds we construct in our writing.

Following on from writing on the emotional dimensions of carrying out fieldwork, the performativity of erotics in the field is a potentially useful source of reflection and knowledge making. Queer reflexivity requires drawing attention to the erotics of knowledge production. My own fieldwork, which had at its centre the issue of lesbian selfhood and spatiality, provided a space for reflecting on my own investment in a certain version of lesbian identity. I was in, and of, the culture I was writing about. The extent to which I could establish relationships with informants affected what I could research and the limits of my study. My access to the LGB Centre was negotiated through my cultural and social capital. I had friends who had worked or volunteered there in the past and also knew some of the workers, a little, socially. Although I was a ‘cultural insider’, inhabiting the ethnographic imagination often left me feeling like an outsider looking in. In this field I was consciously aware of the investment in, and political necessity of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities. Within the Centre’s work around sexual and mental health issues and support, questions of sexual identity were at the fore and the conceptualisation of ‘sexual identity’ was distinctly different from the discourses of sexuality in my day-to-day academic life. In the latter sexual identity often felt incidental and part of a bygone debate hinged on identity politics that perhaps we as good postmodern scholars should have moved beyond. Outside of the academy and in the ‘field’ I was self-conscious of my performing of my lesbian credentials and the ways that my participation in discussions of sexuality and sex, my camp sensibility and bawdy sense of humour, demonstrated a certain ontological security. These conscious repetitive performative displays of my lesbian cultural capital (Rooke 2007), which I had accumulated through years of practice in bars, clubs and

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working in women's projects in the past, contributed to my acceptance and inclusion. To illustrate, while helping out in the Centre's office, I became acutely aware of the quick repartee, casual flirtatiousness, and sexual innuendo that constituted the sexuality of the office space. The conditions of my inclusion in this space were contingent on my ability to join in on it or willingness to be the butt of jokes. My lesbian identity had been formed in a specific place and time: London in the 1980s and 1990s. At the start of the fieldwork situation, I felt that I had a stable sense of myself, the meaning of my sexual identity and a future trajectory based on that ontology. However, throughout my fieldwork experience, I was forced to examine my own presumptions and consider the extent to which my particular sense of my lesbian identity, which reflected my experience of the cultural politics of the lesbian feminist culture where my lesbian identity had been formed, was colouring my perception of the issues coming out of the research; whether the issues of importance to me were actually relevant to the women I was engaging with. These difficulties were often guiding principles in pushing my analysis forward. And, more generally, they challenged my preconceptions of contemporary lesbian identity. By thinking and writing reflexively and through a queer lens, I became increasingly vigilant to the ways in which the ontological category of lesbian that I inhabited was not universal. This is not simply a case of 'lost objectivity' or 'bias'.

[C]ould it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once 'outness' is claimed? Who or what is it that is 'out', made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as a lesbian? What is it that is now known, anything? (Butler 1991: 15).

Substantial groups of women and men under this representational regime have found that the normative category 'homosexual', or its more recent synonyms, does have a real power to organize and describe their experience of their own sexuality and identity, enough at any rate to

make their self application of it (even when only tacit) worth the enormous accompanying costs. Even if only for this reason, the categorization demands respect (Sedgwick 1991: 83).

One of the challenges and possibilities of engaging with queer theory is the ways in which it challenges epistemological and ontological comfort in and coherence of identity categories. As Butler and Sedgwick illustrate, the category ‘lesbian’ is as necessary as it is problematic. The category continues to have salience and political import, as well as the power to oppress. This resonates with my reflections on the performativity of my subject position as a lesbian researcher during my fieldwork and how it could be seen as productive in that it enabled the connection I was seeking in the research process. However, about halfway through the fieldwork process, and quite suddenly, the security and perceived authenticity of my subject position as a lesbian was questioned by myself and others when my own subjectivity was somewhat ‘queered’. I began a relationship with a female-to-male transsexual, who was in the process of transitioning. I met this man in the research process and initially mistakenly read him as a lesbian. Our erotic relationship flourished over discussions of lesbian, gay and queer theories, conversations of gender norms and queer communities in the course of my fieldwork. Concurrently my theoretical interest in the logics of exclusion within contemporary lesbian cultures was experienced with more immediacy. These difficult changes brought about a new basis of understanding with some participants as well as associated ethical dilemmas. For example, several months into my fieldwork, I began facilitating a ‘sexualities discussion group’ for women beginning to come to terms with their sexual desires for other women. I facilitated this group with Centre staff and other volunteers. The women who attended the group were mostly working-class. Several of them were mothers who were either married or divorced. On a weekly basis in group discussions women struggled with the stigma they associated with lesbian identities. I found myself experiencing a fresh sense of empathy in this space. In group discussions I

shared my experience of coming out as a lesbian, albeit twenty years earlier; however, I now felt a more immediate appreciation of the anxieties of many of the women in the group. I was also struggling with coming out again to friends and family. Discussions that focussed on fears of telling family and friends, anxieties about being misinterpreted and possibly rejected by friends and the fear of social stigma now had more urgency and resonance for me. I was acutely aware of the necessity of identity and the enormous personal costs that go with identifying with the category and yet I was simultaneously conscious of the ways in which identity is an unfinished narrative, that the coherence that it offers does not do justice to many queer lives which are often conflicted, contradictory and defying the coherence these categories offer. While I knew I had a lot to offer women who were struggling with the shame and stigma of being a lesbian, I also felt my participation in the group was somewhat inauthentic because I was presenting myself as a lesbian supporting other lesbians when actually I no longer felt that I fitted easily within that category. My self-presentation began to feel increasingly like a partial, unfinished narrative. I was encouraged by the other facilitators to share experiences of my first coming out and remain silent on the second. However, my growing awareness of, and commitment to, trans politics meant that I was uncomfortable about being evasive about my partner's trans identity (and more generally this was not always possible due to his gender ambiguous appearance while he was going through his transition). Overall, these circumstances caused me to question the status of my insider knowledge and what it *does*. I began to feel more marginal and less a 'cultural insider'. I asked myself, what conflicts of meaning would be overlooked if I denied my ambivalent situation? I wondered whether I should present myself as the confident secure lesbian role-model that some of these women sought? What would I say in the group if people asked whether I was in a relationship? Should I confuse the apparent coherence and authenticity they sought from me? By writing about these

dilemmas would I be indulging in ‘banal egotism’ (Probyn 1993: 80)? Was I merely reflecting on others in order to talk about myself? My ethnographic fieldwork brought my sexual subjectivity, and that of the informants I worked with, into sharp focus. It forced me to ask myself whether the personal cost of being on the margins of some of the more conventional understandings of lesbian identity would be too great and jeopardise my project.

These dilemmas point to an understanding of the ethnographic self which is as contingent, plural and shifting as that of many of the informants we are concerned with. Paying attention to this provisionality is a matter of questioning the self at the heart of ethnographic account found in the social sciences, asking how we connect with others, the purpose of reflexivity, and the importance of honest and rigorous considerations of the vulnerability of the observer (Behar 1996, Moreno 1995). Reflexivity then, is not merely intellectual and epistemological ‘navel gazing’ (Babcock 1980, Okely 1992) but rather a matter of acknowledging one’s subject position in the power relations of research, and interrogating ‘a discursive arrangement that holds together in tensions, the different lines of race, and sexuality that form and reform our senses of self’ (Probyn 1993: 1-2). This is a ‘theoretically manoeuvring’ self rather than a stable, coherent and impenetrable individual.

### **Conclusion**

A central task of queer ethnography is writing and researching in a way that does justice to the ways that people live their gendered and sexual subjectivities with complexity. It is also an undertaking which requires that we question the conditions of knowledge production when theorising queer lives. One of the challenges of the craft of ethnographic writing is finding a way of clearly articulating what the, often hidden, work of ethnography involves. Integral to this task is an account of what goes on within the field *and* within the ethnographer. This is not the kind of sociology that one finds by looking in the ‘how to do

it' textbooks on sociological qualitative methods. The craft of ethnographic research is often what is left out in sociological texts. My argument for queering ethnography can be located within wider debates about the nature of the sociological imagination. In this chapter I have set out some of the ethical, methodological and ontological difficulties of researching the meanings of lesbian identities ethnographically with a commitment to queering some of the scholastic conventions of ethnography. The issues raised by the discussion of queer ethnography set out above; its temporality, the ethics of intersubjectivity, the emotional nature of research, the limits of the queer self, and reflexivity and, more broadly, the relationship between ontological and epistemological locatedness. The professional 'rite of passage' that is the ethnographic journey is not merely a matter of stepping out of the academy and into the messy social world of the 'field'. We bring the academy with us, in the form of our understandings and our aspiration to develop what Mills described as a sociological imagination<sup>7</sup>. An ethnographic journey is one which requires that we embrace the queerness of the situations we often find ourselves in. This can lead to an ethnography that recognises experience as a nodal point of knowledge, providing useful information about the self, subjects, and the spaces they inform and are informed by (Probyn 1993). Often, my experience of ethnographic fieldwork has been one of journeying without a map, moving within and between categories, slipping out of the comfort that the identities 'lesbian' and 'researcher' offer. It is also an experience that requires that I engage with the instability and challenges that this brings and the

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<sup>7</sup> C. Wright Mills, writing in 1959, made a plea for the development of the kind of sociological imagination which pays attention to the relationship between private troubles or the traps of everyday life, and those matters which become public issues. One of the strengths of the sociological imagination (Mills 1959) is that it can ground postmodern philosophical speculation in the materiality and intimacy of everyday life (see also Back 2007).

consequences for theorising: emphasising the importance of being able to move beyond that location, out of our mindset, theoretical orientations and preconceptions.

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