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## The Politics of Identity in Lesbian and Gay Anthropology

Andrea Kleinhuber

**Abstract:** This paper provides a review of the anthology *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* (Lewin and Leap 1996a). In discussing their experiences as gay men and lesbians involved in anthropological work, the contributors to this volume address issues of identity management, ethical dilemmas, questions of representation, and the implications that their sexual identity has on the way they conduct fieldwork, particularly on how they relate to their subjects. The authors argue that lesbian and gay anthropologists have a different subject position, a different perspective on their work, and different ways of practicing anthropology than their heterosexual colleagues. The focus of this paper is an examination and critique of these claims and the politics of identity on which they are based. I argue that this politics is based on a problematic understanding of identity that remains trapped within a binary construction of sexual identity and uncritically applies labels such as 'gay' or 'lesbian' to people who do not understand themselves in these terms. Its emphasis on sameness obscures significant differences between researchers and researched and avoids dealing with questions of power in research. I conclude with a brief outline of a 'queer' commentary on such lesbian and gay identity politics and its failure to provide an effective critique of heterosexism and normative identity constructions.

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### Introduction

The following paper is a review of a collection called *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* (edited by Ellen Lewin and William Leap [1996a]) that I presented at the 2nd Student Research Forum of the McMaster Anthropology Society. On that day, I spent twenty minutes talking about 'politics of identity in lesbian and gay anthropology' without ever making a statement about my own identity or situating myself in relation to what I was discussing. I am not sure how many listeners noticed this at all; my guess would be that most people assumed that I was a lesbian, since it is rather uncommon to hear heterosexuals present papers on lesbian and gay issues. In fact, the reason why I chose not to address the question of my own identity in this presentation was because I would not have been able to make a straight-forward statement

about it. Should I have said that I was 'lesbian,' 'queer,' 'just Andrea is fine,' or 'leave me alone with your labels, thank you very much!?' I identify myself in all of these ways, depending on the situation. Faced with the time constraints of a conference-style presentation, I decided not to address in detail the issue of how messy questions of identities can get. However, I think that these are important questions and they certainly informed my perspective on the book that I was critiquing. I am now taking advantage of the opportunity to add to the original paper some reflections on this issue and to explain the context in which I was reading *Out in the Field*.

Given the opportunity to present a paper at the Student Research Forum, I chose to talk about *Out in the Field* because I supposed that few people in the audience would know it (or even anything at all about lesbian and gay studies within anthropology). The book had been recommended to me by two friends who identify as heterosexual. Neither of them had read it themselves, but they let me know about it because they assumed that it would interest me. They evidently thought that a book on lesbian and gay anthropology was of interest mainly, if not only, to lesbians and gays. This reinforced my decision to make a presentation about this book to an audience, many members of which were unlikely to read the text themselves.

As I was reading *Out in the Field*, I developed numerous objections to what many of the contributors had to say. Most of these had to do with assumptions concerning questions of identity and with the authors' own identity politics. These issues are addressed in the main part of this paper; at this point I just want to make a few statements in order to make explicit my own take on questions of identity/identity politics.

I had considered placing these comments after the original paper rather than before it. Self-reflection is still often dismissed as egocentrism or self-indulgence. I virtually heard a voice saying '*When will she stop writing about herself and start with the actual paper?*' Perhaps I am expecting such reactions because of the many times I heard people make statements such as '*I do not really have anything against gays, but why do they have to make such a big deal about their sexuality?*' Well, the issue rather is that heterosexuals do not have to make a big deal of theirs; they see it reflected in almost every movie, advertisement, or song lyric and legitimized through institutions and laws. The pressure to locate themselves and account for their positionality is always greater on those who do not belong to the 'norm.' However, there are no neutral positions; everybody is always speaking from somewhere specific, and I will now try and explain my position in talking about sexual identity.

I have learned a lot about the politics behind questions of identity through working as a peer counselor and as external affairs person for the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Association of McMaster University (GLBAM). When I first started going to GLBAM I only knew that I was not heterosexual but I was unable to say what I was instead. Neither calling myself lesbian nor bisexual rang true to me. I

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did not feel that these terms had anything to do with me. With time, however, I started to apply the term lesbian to myself. It is very hard and tiring to refuse to label oneself in a society in which most people cannot deal with ambiguity when it comes to the salient categories by which they distinguish between 'us' and 'them.' I never saw the term 'lesbian' as describing my 'true' self, but it comes closest to describing how I am living with and relating to others. However, even among those who identify as lesbians, the exact meanings of this term are highly disputed. What about women who say they love women but do not have sex with them? Do you have to have sex with women in order to be "allowed" to claim that you are a lesbian? Can you have sex with men and still claim to be a lesbian? What about women who choose not to have sex with anyone at all? What exactly counts as "having sex"?

A related question, and one that also causes much controversy, is that of whether we all have one 'true' sexual identity or whether sexual identity is mutable and can change over the course of one's life. At one point I was witness to one friend changing her identity from lesbian to bisexual while another friend, who had previously identified as bisexual, declared that she now felt that she actually was lesbian and yet another friend, who had lived as a lesbian for many years, came out as a female-to-male transsexual. Such personal transformations tend to cause much discussion within the communities in which they occur. At the heart of these debates is most often the question of whether sexual identity (or gender identity respectively) is a matter of being born a certain way or a matter of choice. My personal opinion is that it should not matter if we are born or choose to be who we are in terms of sexual identity. There are people who strongly feel that they are who they are by nature as well as others who vehemently claim their identity to be their choice - who is to say which experience is more valid than the other? The problem is not *why* people are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, the problem lies with a society that declares these people to be abnormal and discriminates against them.

While I do not experience my identity as unified and stable, I do realize that it can be useful and empowering to embrace such a notion of identity. In certain situations it can be more practical to name oneself in such terms; for example, when I am invited to a class to give a talk about homophobia and I only have half an hour or an hour, I might decide that it would take too much time and energy to discuss the limitations of labels and the fluidity of identity. I might choose to leave the labels unquestioned in order to be more focused in the presentation and to have more time to talk about issues around homophobia and heterosexism. However, in other situations I might find it more important to critically address the labels themselves. There are people who did not feel comfortable at GLBAM and others who would not even come to the office or to meetings because they thought that they had to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual in order to be legitimate members of the group. Since they neither understood themselves in terms of these identities nor as heterosexual, they felt like they did not belong anywhere. In order to make room for these people and validate their experiences we need to be cautious about the categories we use and how we use them. At

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GLBAM we usually agreed that we must not try and fit people into categories but rather make the categories fit us. This implies that they always have to remain open.

Whatever I would tell you is my identity might tell you something about the way I see things or about my politics, but you cannot know that for sure. It is never as simple as 'I am X, and therefore I think, believe, feel X.' There are occasions when it is politically necessary to make certain claims based on identity. But it might be that we always remain accountable for our politics, be they rooted in notions of identity or not. My own perspective on the material I discuss in the following paper cannot be explained simply through reference to an identity X, but it is informed by political commitments that result in a certain way of engaging with questions of identity. I have attempted to be open about my politics, but I refuse to explain my positionality in terms of any fixed and stable notion of identity.

### **The Politics of Identity in Lesbian and Gay Anthropology**

While anthropologists have written about homosexuality in various cultures for several decades (see Herdt 1997), the anthology *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* (Lewin and Leap 1996a) is the first compilation of work that focuses on personal experiences and reflections concerning what it means to be a lesbian or gay man doing anthropology. The central question underlying these texts is how are lesbian and gay anthropologists different from heterosexual anthropologists and how does this difference shape their work? In this paper, I review the answers to this question that can be found in *Out in the Field*. Following that, I discuss the problems and limits of the politics of identity inherent in these texts and conclude by providing a brief outline of a 'queer' critique of such 'traditional' lesbian and gay identity politics. First, however, I want to sum up the account of the emergence of lesbian and gay anthropology as narrated in *Out in the Field*, since the contributors to this collection construct this as integral to the way in which they see and position themselves.

For a long time, homophobia in the discipline and Western society in general has kept anthropologists from writing about homosexual behaviors they observed at the sites of their research. Although some of the grand figures of anthropology have long been suspected or known to have been gay, lesbian, or bisexual (for example, Ruth Benedict or Margaret Mead [Burkhart 1996:44; Jacobs 1996:229]), lesbian and gay anthropologists have generally chosen or were forced to stay in the academic as well as the private closet, passing as straight and taking up traditional topics in their research (Burkhart 1996; Jacobs 1996; Lewin and Leap 1996b).

This situation began to change in the wake of the international gay pride movement following the Stonewall Rebellion in New York City in 1969. However, the strongest catalyst for opening anthropology and other disciplines for

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work on (mostly male) homosexuality was likely the AIDS pandemic, which created a sense of urgency with regard to filling the gaps in existing research on homosexuality and sexuality in general (Bolton 1996; Jacobs 1996).

At the same time, certain developments in the academy, and specifically in anthropology, further paved the way for an emerging lesbian and gay anthropology. On the one hand, there was the feminist critique of male bias in the discipline and a new emphasis on questioning ethnographic distance and objectivity (Lewin and Leap 1996b:8; see also Moore 1988). Feminist anthropologists revealed the extent to which women's realities had been ignored in anthropological work and showed the need to account for gender on every level of research and theoretical analysis. On the other hand, growing numbers of 'native' anthropologists first of all deconstructed the stigma connected to studying one's own culture and, moreover, established the notion that native anthropologists have a kind of special authority to talk about, and on behalf of, the people they study; second of all, they problematized the dichotomization of 'native' and 'outsider' by their being, to some extent, both at the same time (see, for example, Trinh 1997; Weston 1996a). Feminist and native anthropologists drew attention to the value of particularistic representations and disrupted the prevailing tendency toward representing cultures as seamless (Lewin and Leap 1996b:7-10).

These developments met with what has been termed the "literary turn" in the social sciences. Anthropologists who were striving to apply a 'postmodern' framework to their discipline also emphasized positionality and called for more reflexivity in anthropological writing and fieldwork (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986). Traditionally, the need to qualify as a science had resulted in a denial of reluctance to reveal the extent to which fieldwork was a subjective process, since 'subjective' equaled 'unscientific' for most people until recently (Lewin and Leap 1996b:1). With the demise of the modern fiction of a rational and objective science, an anthropologist's personal attributes or social locations, mainly her or his gender, race, ethnicity, and class background, came to be seen as highly significant in ethnographic work and writing. It is no longer generally acceptable to conceal or deny how these factors shape one's work (Weston 1996b:276). Fieldwork is increasingly seen as a "situated and negotiated process," and ethnography should therefore "constitute itself in a more self-reflexive mode" (Lewin and Leap 1996b:2).

Nevertheless, sexual identity seems to represent a "final frontier" (Weston 1996b:276) in this movement toward reflexivity and explicit positionality. While more and more anthropologists include in their writing discussions of how their gender or ethnic identity influenced their fieldwork, it is still extremely rare to find anthropologists reflecting upon their sexual identity and how it might have limited or enabled them in their research (Lewin and Leap 1996b:3). Sexuality is still a taboo topic in Western societies and elsewhere, and rarely have anthropologists of any sexual orientation been open about their sexual desires and experiences in the field. Many also see sexuality and sexual identity as irrelevant to most research<sup>1</sup>. However, this perspective is closely related to heterosexism,

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which leads people to assume that everyone around them is heterosexual until proven to be otherwise. Lesbian and gay anthropologists find it much harder, if not impossible, to view their sexual identity as irrelevant to their work, not the least because of the heterosexism in the societies in which they work and live.

By the late 80s to early 90s it became increasingly possible - that is, somewhat less devastating to their careers - for gay and lesbian anthropologists to be open about their sexual orientation and its relation to their anthropological practice. In fact, some would see this openness as almost imperative and certainly beneficial. Theorists of lesbian and gay studies in other disciplines started to call for "a gay perspective" on culture and society in general. Gay and lesbian scholars began to see themselves as capable of providing a view from a different angle on virtually any issue proceeding from their "gay sensitivity" (Wafer 1996:261). Consequently, in lesbian and gay anthropology, the anthropologist's identity as a lesbian or gay man is now integral to and explicit in fieldwork and writing. It is taken for granted that their sexual identity inspires them to ask certain questions and chose certain settings to work in. In short, it is expected to shape their research at every stage (Lewin and Leap 1996b; Wafer 1996). By acknowledging their positionality and putting it to productive use, Lewin and Leap argue, gay and lesbian anthropologists reflect upon the similarities and differences between them and their heterosexual colleagues and "suggest new answers to old questions." What qualifies lesbian and gay anthropology at the current stage is "our willingness to identify ourselves as lesbian or gay and our commitment to adding this aspect of our experience to growing debates about the nature of the ethnographic enterprise" (Lewin and Leap 1996b:22).

The story of how lesbian and gay anthropology came about as it is told by the contributions to *Out in the Field* already touches upon the answer to the question of what is special about lesbian and gay anthropology. This centers around the notion that the sexual preference or orientation of lesbian and gay anthropologists results in a different perspective on and/or a different way of doing anthropological work. Generally, according to Lewin and Leap, fieldwork is seen as necessitating a sort of identity management that, it is assumed, anthropologists do not have to undertake in daily life in their home communities. However, gay men and lesbians constantly have to engage in a similar kind of identity management, in the field as well as at home (Lewin and Leap 1996b:11p.). Sue-Ellen Jacobs (1996:289) refers to this with what she terms a "dual consciousness" or "double-sightedness gained through the process of adjusting to stigma and having been marginalized in society at large as well as within the discipline." She raises the question whether gay and lesbian anthropologists approach research differently because they are already "other" when they go into the field, write up their results, and work within the academy or elsewhere (Jacobs 1996:299). Claiming that gays share a "fundamental experience of being outsiders," Will Roscoe (1996:204) describes lesbians and gay men as "participant-observers in heterosexual culture, whether in the field or at home." Esther Newton (1996:213) points out that "women and gays, less credible [than heterosexual men] by definition, are suspended between our urgent sense of

difference and our justifiable fear of revealing it.” Nevertheless, most of the contributions to *Out in the Field* imply that this difference is actually a strength which lesbian and gay anthropologists should affirm rather than deny. Viewing themselves as specialists in crossing borders and managing ambiguity, writes Roscoe (1996:202), “can help lesbian and gay anthropologists identify both the obstacles and opportunities they face in developing ethnographies of sexual diversity.” The boundary between self and other, he declares, becomes quickly blurred when anthropologists and their “subjects” identify with each other on the basis of their sexual orientation:

*The subject of lesbian and gay anthropology becomes both other and not-other. The result, depending on one's point of view, is either a violation of the 'objectivity' that makes anthropology a 'science' or the attainment of a dialogical relationship with the subject that is the goal of postcolonial anthropology (Roscoe 1996:203; emphasis in the original).*

But not only are gay and lesbian anthropologists apparently at an epistemological advantage, Roscoe (1996:206) even assigns them a superior sense of ethical behaviour:

*Coming from a community that has itself been the object of uninvited scrutiny, lesbian and gay anthropologists simply don't have the stomach to subject others of their kind to the invasive gaze of social science or to write about them in detached or exoticizing style (emphasis mine).*

Reading work by lesbian and gay anthropologists, however, I found much that contradicts such an idealized view. Some of these authors are perfectly capable of ‘othering,’ exoticizing, and exploiting their “subjects”<sup>2</sup>. The circumstance that researcher and researched share a sexual attraction to their own gender does not erase existing differences between them or the fact that they are situated within unequal relations of power. This reduction of gay and lesbian anthropologists to their sexual identity and ignorance or denial of such forces as, for instance, race, class, gender, age, or geographic relations can be found repeatedly throughout *Out in the Field*, although some of the contributors provide evidence for the conclusion that their locations within various social hierarchies sometimes had a stronger influence on their work than their being lesbian or gay.

Sabine Lang (1996), for example, had to confront issues of race and power in her fieldwork and accept the fact that the Native American lesbians she wanted to work with saw her first and foremost as a white woman. Her being a lesbian did not turn out to be much of an advantage in overcoming the overwhelming mistrust she encountered. Indeed, she had hoped that being a lesbian herself would facilitate contacts with Native American lesbians. However, some of the women



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she spoke to did not even apply the term 'lesbian' to themselves. For instance, one woman told her that she "identified as Indian rather than in terms of her sexual orientation" (Lang 1996:93). Lang (1996:93) writes that this taught her "an important lesson about different priorities in establishing one's own identity and involuntary ethnocentrism."

Lang's account seriously calls into question the notion that lesbians and gay men around the world can be considered to belong to a kind of global community as well as the assumption that shared sexual preference would result in a shared identity, shared experiences, concerns, and goals. Such an idea is formulated, for example, by Ralph Bolton (1996:147), who describes his coming out in terms of a "voyage in discovery of self and in search of his own tribe from which he had been separated since birth." It is a rather privileged position as a white, male, Northern academic from which he claims this "tribal" identity, and he does not engage with the significant differences between the supposed members of this "tribe." Further, it is disappointing to see with how little reflection many contributors to *Out in the Field* export the terms 'homosexual', 'gay', or 'lesbian' into all kinds of cultural contexts and take for granted that they can make statements of cross-cultural significance based on assumed identity or similarity of experience behind these categories. However, some of the articles mention resistance to anthropological attempts at pigeonholing other people's sexualities and rejections of such labels that come out of a particular, Western tradition. For example, affirming themselves as 'two-spirited' people, rather than gays or lesbians, and rejecting the pejorative term 'berdache' is essential to some Native Americans' attempts to reclaim their cultural identity and particular sexual subjectivity (Lang 1996; Jacobs 1996). This casts doubt over Williams's (1996: 81) claim that by "being personally involved in this subject, a researcher is better able to understand the issues facing informants and is more likely to be able to put data in their proper social context." Rather than presuming such privileged access to other people's experiences, we should deal critically with the issue of who gets to construct cross-cultural visions of same-sex relations and what assumptions and investments inform these constructions. For example, we need to ask who benefits from such notions as that of a 'global tribe,' whose realities and self-concepts are represented and whose are made invisible? The emphasis on sameness is highly problematic because it not only serves gay and lesbian anthropologists to establish authority in speaking about the people they study, it also allows them to draw attention away from issues of power in research and to cover up significant differences between researcher and researched.

By largely leaving unexamined the Western notion of sexual identity, *Out in the Field* further avoids addressing the contingency of this very construct. This particular concept of sexuality as an "identity-based, individualistic experience" (Blackwood 1996:197) does not hold true for all contexts and is thus not universally applicable; rather, it is a historically and culturally situated formation. For instance, James Wafer (1996:268) found in his fieldwork in Brazil that a binary notion of heterosexuality versus homosexuality was not part of the framework of local discourse, "people's sexual tastes did not lead them to see



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themselves as fundamentally different kinds of beings.” This points to the limitations of applying concepts of sexual identity cross-culturally. Using foreign concepts might render invisible different understandings of sexuality which would shed a critical light on the way in which we think about sexuality in our own culture and the basis on which certain people are constructed as ‘other’ or ‘abnormal’ because of their sexual activities.

The simplistic notion of identity that is implied in much of *Out in the Field* is troubling because it hinders the achievement of a more comprehensive understanding and possibly a critique of the ways in which identities are constructed and of the exclusions they rely on. The construct of lesbian and gay anthropology in *Out in the Field* itself incorporates a rather vexing exclusion: that of bisexual and transgendered people. Although some of the ‘subjects’ described in this volume seem to identify rather as bisexual or transgendered, not once are such identities included or accounted for. This might have to do with their destabilizing effect on the assumptions that the reification of the homo-hetero dichotomy relies on. In any case, this exclusion discredits *Out in the Field*’s commitment to ending the silence around non-heterosexual identities in anthropological work.

The politics of identity that most authors in *Out in the Field* formulate is largely one of affirming lesbian and gay identity and establishing a specific subject position for lesbian and gay anthropologists, one that some even construct as a privileged one. This construction of lesbian and gay identity does not question its ‘other,’ that is heterosexual identity. In fact, heterosexuality is treated as self-evident, not in need of explanation. In that sense, this politics of identity relies on and reconfirms heterosexuality as the norm to which others are the abnormal.

There has been much debate around ‘identity politics’ in the wake of the deconstruction of essentialistic notions of identity that came along with postmodern theorizing. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault (1978) or Judith Butler (1990) showed identities to be products of disciplinary complexes of power and knowledge; they claim that we need to ask how identities are fashioned in specific power relations, how they are regulated, and how they function to control or exclude certain groups of people. Such an approach to identity has been taken up by a new generation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered persons, and others who all call themselves ‘queer,’ thereby reappropriating this formerly derogatory term. They are directly opposed to conventional lesbian and gay identity politics, which centers around a minority model (comparable to ethnic minorities), is mostly reduced to demands for equal rights, and does not question the normative regime that constructs heterosexuality and homosexuality as essentially different and unequal. Such a politics is seen as complacent to and consolidating existing power relations. Queers are dissatisfied with the exclusion within mainstream lesbian and gay politics of subjects who are different, not middle class, white, ‘respectable’ homosexuals. They aim at contesting and transcending any normative and exclusive constructions of identity and at forming new alliances across differences without obscuring these differences. Admittedly,

the extent to which the queer movement and its theories and practices have been successful in realizing their own ideals is open to debate, but to adequately address this is beyond the scope of this paper<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, I think that this queer critique is justified in pointing towards the ways in which gay and lesbian identity politics limits itself as it tries to affirm a special, positive, or even privileged status for lesbians and gay men while failing to formulate an effective argument against heterosexism and exclusionist tendencies in academia as well as in society in general.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> However, see Kulick and Wilson (1995) for some accounts which contradict this view.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent example, see Don Kulick's highly exoticizing and unbalanced representation of Brazilian *travestis* (Kulick 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Readers interested in this discussion may find the following texts to provide useful starting points: Bristow and Wilson 1993; McIntosh 1993; Smyth 1992; Warner 1993; Watney 1994.

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