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Book Review

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Method in Queer Anthropology

Margot Weiss

Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America
Mary L. Gray
New York: New York University Press, 2009. xiv. + 279pp.

Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality, and AIDS in the Dominican Republic
Mark Padilla
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xvii + 294pp.

The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora
Gloria Wekker
New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xvi + 313pp.

In his 1997 essay "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men," C. Jacob Hale notes:

> Contemporary queer theory sees gender as a regulatory construct, a site of shifting power relations. Although queer theorists have made many claims about the power of queerly gendered bodies and performativities to disrupt enforced normative sex/gender systems, theory lags far behind community discourses here. In sexual minority communities, such as queer leather communities, there are rich and subtly nuanced discourses of gendered

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> pleasure, practice, desire, and subjectivity . . . that resist and exceed any simple categorization into *female*, *male*, *woman*, *man*, and thus into *homosexual*, *bisexual*, or *heterosexual*.[1]

This essay takes this problematic as a jumping-off point—but not, as is most often the case, to issue a call to queer studies for deeper or more complex theoretical understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality; social norms and subjectification; categories and their productive effects. Rather, I want to explore the desire for queer knowledge that can exceed the conceptual simplicity of our theoretical categories, that is closer to the "rich and subtly nuanced discourses" available within queer communities. This desire is one of the key epistemological foundations of queer studies; in this essay, I suggest that this theoretical problem is instantiated through method. I turn to Hale precisely because of his call to recognize, anew, what we *already know*: the complexity of social life—embodiment, practice, desire—"on the ground." This phrase—on the ground—will be familiar to any ethnographically inclined readers, as it is commonly used in anthropological writing to denote precisely the richness, or "thickness," to follow Clifford Geertz, of sociality. "The ground" is both our particular field site—the communities within which we study and about which we write—and also the epistemological ground on which we stake our claims.

To explore these questions of epistemology, of knowledge and method, of truth claims and generic conventions, I examine three recent queer ethnographies. In doing so, I develop a point made by Kath Weston in 1998: social science is seen as a latecomer to the queer studies (humanities) party because the hostess gift anthropology brings is *data*—"how the natives do it." This voyeuristic fantasy of the anthropologist as empiricist (a "documentarian, a purveyor of distilled data ready to be taken up into other people's theories and analyses") simultaneously marginalizes anthropology within queer studies and, more importantly, consolidates a data-theory divide that maps on to the social sciences–humanities divide in terms of academic labor.[2] As Weston notes, this reproduces the fantasy of data as "raw" data, with no attention to the ways data are used, derived, or produced—the way the "facts" of what "'the X' *really* do in the privacy of the shack, the hut, or the boudoir" is subject to "the desire for mastery bound up in the written word . . . the selection or interpretation of what [the anthropologist] 'finds' . . . the multiple ways in which 'data-bearers' carry with them the histories of disciplines."[3] For these reasons, I am not claiming, as Lorraine E. Herbst and Tom Boellstorff have recently argued in these pages, that queer studies ought to pay more attention to the richness ethnography reveals.[4] It is not only that "anthro-

pology can offer queer studies much more than empirical data," that anthropologists have theory, too, or that data is always also "moral, theoretical, political, and analytical."[5] Rather, I aim to cast more light on several key paradoxes of ethnographic method to illuminate the broader epistemological assumptions about data and theory, context and interpretation—the what and the where of epistemological grounds—embedded in interdisciplinary queer desires for richer knowledge about sexuality.

The Ethnographies in Brief

Gloria Wekker's ethnography *The Politics of Passion* focuses on the sexual subjectivities of working-class Afro-Surinamese women. She explores "the mati work": a practice of often simultaneous sexual relationships with men and women (and occasionally with only women). For these women, the mati work is about sexual pleasure, desire, and excitement, rather than sexual orientation or marriage. *The Politics of Passion* interweaves several life histories, many bawdy and vibrant stories culled from interviews, Wekker's textual analysis of working-class Afro-Surinamese cultural proverbs and songs, and a discussion of Winti (a predominantly working-class, Afro-Surinamese religion). In drawing attention to the mati work as a practice of pleasure, Wekker dislodges conceptions of static sexual orientations; by emphasizing these women's fluid and multiple selves (as each person is inhabited by multiple Winti gods), Wekker unsettles a rigidly gendered understanding of subjectivity. A major contribution to the study of Afro-Caribbean women's sexual pleasure (a topic with a limited archive), *The Politics of Passion* analyzes the interconnections of class, colonial and postcolonial history, racialization, gender, and sexual desire, practice, and pleasure.

Caribbean Pleasure Industry, Mark Padilla's ethnography, is focused on *bugarrones* and *sanky pankies* in the Dominican Republic—men who have sex with men, mostly foreign and often white gay tourists, for money. These men, Padilla shows us, see themselves as "normal men"—*hombres normales*—who combine various work within the tourist industry to get by, or "look for life" (48). As in other parts of Latin America where penetrative status dictates gender, in the Dominican Republic *bugarrones* and *sanky pankies* maintain their masculinity by claiming to take only the insertive role in sex with clients. This form of same-sex sexuality is often seen as "traditional" (and opposed to "modern" or "global" gay configurations), yet Padilla shows that these practices are produced by the demands of a growing international gay tourist economy. With lengthy interview excerpts from *bugarrones* and *sanky pankies* on their identities, their motivations,

their families, their female partners, and their feelings about their work, Padilla brings these men's complicated racialized, classed, and gendered social locations to life. Taking as its central concern the transformation in the local and regional economy that gives rise to particular labor positions and with this, racialized and gendered possibilities, *Caribbean Pleasure Industry* reveals the dense connections between economic change and sexual subjectivity.

My third ethnography, Mary Gray's *Out in the Country*, explores queer, rural youth in Kentucky and along the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Gray's ethnography, the first of queer rural life in the United States, addresses two major lacunae. The first, in queer studies, emerges through an (over)emphasis on urbanization in the generation of LGBTQ identity and community; this emphasis is also reflected in queer activism that takes urban experiences and social location as a false universal to set political goals. The second elision, in media studies, retains a simplistic understanding of a media text's "reception" or "effect" on youth in particular as either positive or negative; this is especially prevalent in studies on new media (especially the Internet). Instead, Gray shows us the complicated ways queer youth in small towns produce queer communities and identities that are simultaneously local and (imaginatively) expanded, often through their selective use of queer media (television, Internet, e-mail, film) and national LGBTQ organizations. Gray gives sustained voice to these young people, introducing the reader to the dilemmas, aspirations, experiences, and identity-construction of individual youth in each chapter. Focusing on the multiple ways youth navigate organizations and social spaces, *Out in the Country* exposes the struggles and also the joy in young queer lives in archetypical rural America.

As these short summaries make clear, these three ethnographies make important interventions in queer studies: linking local sexual practice to global capital flows, disrupting static notions of self and sexual subjectivity, and showing the mobile and active processes of queer community production. And they make these interventions through method: not only anthropology's hallmark field method of participant observation but also our methods of interpretation, of reading and writing our fieldwork. Although the former, what I call "method-as-method," is marked and promoted as method, the latter, what I call "method-as-hermeneutics," is equally important to our claims. Both, I show, are methods, and both rely on and reproduce differential epistemological grounds. As Boellstorff argues, "All methods (like all theories and all bodies of data) are perspectival, partial insights into the human project."[6] Yet ethnography, by explicitly marking some methods as method and other methods as "analysis," participates in, while also obscuring, a data-theory binary. In other words, marking method as method both reveals and

masks certain kinds of knowledge production. I hope that focusing on this paradox within ethnography—the epistemology of ethnography—will enable critical contemplation of the dynamic ways knowledge is produced through method in queer studies more broadly.

Method as Method: Queering "Situated Knowledge"

Nearly all ethnographic texts include a section called "method." Here the reader will find, with more or less detail, what you did, how long you did it, and who you did it with. In *The Politics of Passion*, for example, Wekker explains that she took six trips between 1990 and 2002 to Suriname. During that time, she lived in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, returning regularly to develop what became a longitudinal, interview-based study of twenty-five working-class Afro-Surinamese women, aged twenty-three to eighty-four at the start of the research (xii, 80). Padilla tells us that he spent three years in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, doing multisited ethnographic fieldwork between 1999 and 2001. His method, due partly to his collaboration with a local HIV/AIDS organization, includes not only ethnography (informal interviewing and participant observation) but also quantitative or formal research including surveys (with two hundred sex workers), focus groups, and in-depth interviews with ninety-eight men (10, 13–14). Gray spent nineteen months driving to small towns across the "Central Appalachian Region" between 2001 and 2003, with follow-ups in the summers of 2004 and 2005 (22–23). Her mobile ethnographic research entailed participant observation at youth meetings, parties, and other local events, along with formal interviews with thirty-four mostly white youth (three trans-identified), of an average age of sixteen and a half (24–27).

These descriptions are "method-as-method." The delineation of time in the field—the classic mark of "being there"—remains a generic convention. [7] And each of these ethnographies reflects relatively standard ethnographic methods (although Wekker's life histories, Padilla's quantitative research, and Gray's online interviewing are twists on the standard). Central to this method is participant observation—a method notoriously resistant to definition—coupled with more or less formal interviews. Participant observation, or "deep hanging out," as James Clifford, citing Renato Rosaldo, puts it, is still the privileged method of cultural anthropology, despite much disciplinary debate about postvillage, global, multisited research.[8]

The "method" section also includes a now de rigueur discussion of positionality, reflecting some of the crises since the mid-1980s in the anthropological

project (the problem of the ethnographic text, writing culture, and feminist and postcolonial critiques). Although we may imagine ourselves as past the "reflexive turn" in ethnographic writing, a discussion of the author's positionality—the self-identity and social locations guiding the anthropologist's work—is offered in most new ethnographies.[9] Situating the author in the text performs complicated rhetorical work: it simultaneously acknowledges the situatedness and partiality of all knowledge while conveying to the reader that transparent self-representation is both possible and crucial to evaluate the truth claims of the ethnography. Boellstorff argues that "the situated data produced through ethnography blurs the distinction between data and theory"; that ethnography can produce "truly situated knowledges that destabilize still-unacknowledged parochialisms of queer theory itself."[10] Focusing on the productive limitations of anthropology's disciplinary "accountability," he cites Marilyn Strathern's claim that "the value of a discipline is precisely in its ability to account for its conditions of existence and thus as to how it arrives at its knowledge practices."[11] On the level of the text, however, this is paradoxical. The requisite "positionality" discussion is belied by the staging of such self-disclosure in the text and awkwardly mirrored in the project of ethnography itself, insofar as ethnographic method entails noting (and notating) what it is that other people say about themselves. And here, we are folded right back into Weston's remark: the epistemology of ethnography relies on, even as its generic conventions obscure, the presentation of "raw data" as knowledge, a situation that requires an anthropologist-as-author to simultaneously perform and deny the structural position as the one who knows.

Wekker takes the idea of her own "situated knowledge" the furthest. She tells the reader that she is the child of first-generation Surinamese migrants to the Netherlands. Her research interest in diasporic African women's sexuality is motivated by her own identity as an "Afro-Surinamese anthropologist who loves women" (4), enabling her to return to Suriname not so much as a field site but as a homeland. Asked what she did in the field, Wekker tells us, she is able to "truthfully and simply say: I lived. I lived with gusto, with passion, with curiosity, meaningfully connected with illuminated parts of myself and with significant others" (54). This locatedness is part of Wekker's desire to disrupt a more traditional ethnographer-as-bearer-of-knowledge, informant-as-informer dichotomy; the epigraph that opens the book reads, in part: "Ethnographic research, whatever else it is, is a form of human relationship. When the lines long drawn in anthropology between participant observer and informant break down, then the only truth is the one in between; and anthropology becomes something closer to a social art form" (1, citing Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola*). Thus Wekker strives for a

text where her informants "speak in their own words about their sexualities" (5), where the narrative is cocreated, and where Wekker doesn't "play the god trick" of third-person narration (3).

Yet such revelations, writing strategies, and goals exist in tension with the fact that Wekker was in Suriname doing dissertation fieldwork, not just "living." This boundary is continuously blurred in the text, most pressingly through erotic attachments. *The Politics of Passion* begins with the life history of eighty-four-year-old Misi Juliette Cummings. Wekker describes moving into a house in Juliette's backyard and, over the next few months, developing what became an important field and personal relationship. The relationship started when Wekker began to ask Juliette more direct questions about sexuality and the mati work, and, as Wekker puts it, "the dams broke" and the mati work stories "came tumbling out" (12). Yet, as she immediately notes, it was her work as an ethnographer, her "ceaseless questions" and her desire "to know everything about her [Juliette's] life and hear her stories" (4), that solicited these stories. This desire to know becomes even more complicated when Juliette decides she wants a sexual relationship with Wekker. Wekker writes about her difficulty deciding what to do: she is unsure, she writes, whether she "eroticized Juliette's knowledge" or was "'simply' and genuinely attracted to Juliette," and she struggles with her own ageism (16). In the end, Wekker becomes Juliette's lover; writing about the complicated relationship, Wekker explains that Juliette was not simply a lover but also her "most important informant, collaborator, commiserator, supporter, friend, mother substitute" (22). Juliette gives Wekker the gift of ethnographic knowledge *alongside* social and erotic knowledge of the mati work and mati relationships (as does Wekker's later lover and collaborator Delani McDonald, another Afro-Surinamese woman).

I am not questioning the ethics of intimate field relationships; rather, they show, in heightened form, the erotics of knowledge—ethnographic and otherwise—that might be illuminated, but not settled or dismissed, by reflexive situatedness. Such situatedness can be mobilized in a text to reveal the contingent production of ethnographic knowledge: for example, Juliette's jealousy prevented Wekker from talking to some women, which hindered aspects of her fieldwork, but also gave Wekker insight into the function and role of jealousy and age-graded power dynamics within mati relationships. But such reflexivity functions at the level of the text. Indeed, Wekker focuses on herself as an informant; her ethnography is organized around her own growing understanding of the ways mati relationships eroticize age and power inequalities, in opposition to the white, European standards of lesbian power-sharing in Wekker's native Netherlands.

Padilla's ethnography is less self-reflexive, although his own positionality

does, as he notes, greatly contribute to his research. Padilla originally went to the Dominican Republic as an HIV/AIDS consultant; he was also working with the HIV/AIDS organization Amigos Siempre Amigos (ASA), an NGO funded by USAID. He developed his project in consultation with ASA, and the research thus centered on an understudied group of MSM (men who have sex with men) in the context of HIV/AIDS outreach and prevention: the *bugarrones* and *sanky pankies* who have sex with men but do not identify as gay (and thus are not addressed by safer-sex outreach to gay-identified men). Padilla's positionality as, at least initially, an HIV researcher made some suspicious; he recounts Antonio, a *bugarrón*, telling him: "I know why you're doing this study . . . you want to protect the tourists from getting AIDS" (34). Padilla uses this painful field moment to reflect on how his own relative privilege—his skin color, class, and nationality—positioned him, structurally, alongside foreign gay tourists, and not *bugarrones*. This kind of situatedness, then, uses a moment of reflexivity to give the reader a better sense of the social hierarchies that locate *bugarrones* and *sanky pankies*; Padilla's own location gives way to an analysis of the men with whom he works.

Although Gray opens *Out in the Country* by telling us that she is from California's rural Central Valley and was an active queer organizer in her youth, Gray's focus is on the situatedness of the youth she studies. As she argues, youth construct their queer identity in their small towns, within their families—in situ, as Gray puts it, not by fleeing to the big city (126). Her text combines thick description of meetings and events all over the region—Louisville LGBTQ youth group meetings, fund-raisers, prayer services, a Grayson County Homemakers Club discussion held in the town library—with interview excerpts. This has the effect of situating these youth while also exploring the dynamic ways that youth construct and create queer identity and community. For example, chapter 6 introduces the reader to Ashley and AJ, two young trans people who rework the documentary on transsexuality *What Sex Am I?* as part of their own process of self-understanding. Chapter 5 focuses on John W., a white middle-class college student whose self-identity as gay is complicated by his kinky desires (for bondage, in particular), desires mediated by online personal ads, and Brandon, an African American middle-class college student who finds in Gay.com, personal ads, and online coming-out stories both an outlet for his bisexual feelings and the entrenchment of a divide between African American and queer social and political commitments. These narratives complicate any single or simple access to these youth's self-identification, showing, instead, the dynamic relationship between desires, identities, social spaces, and social imaginaries shot through with race, class, and gender. Gray explores the myriad ways these youth use queer resources,

online and off line, to "craft identities from queer desires" (167)—fitting for youth whose social spaces, networks, and belongings are, themselves, fragile because of poverty and lack of resources. As she explains, their uses of media are "constellations of active moments of engagement saturated in histories and contemporary experiences of raced, classed, and placed identities" (15).

In addition to raising complicated questions of knowledge and stable identification (reflected in self-disclosure), these forms of situatedness also raise questions about ethnographic evidence. Wekker, for example, notes that oral histories are shaped by the mutual encounter between interviewer and interviewee, and thus reveal less "the absolute 'truth' of a life or of history" and more a person's "own interpretations of her experiences" (6). Padilla's use of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies necessitates a more complicated negotiation of the truth claims of his methods. Although he asserts that combining quantitative with qualitative ethnographic research enables the "triangulation and verification of data, as well as the contextualization of particular findings" (14), and while he includes survey results throughout the text and in an appendix (unusual for an ethnography), it is the ethnography that contextualizes and validates the survey data. For example, in a discussion about these men's sexuality and sexual behavior, Padilla presents a table reporting average "prices per sex act." The prices, he notes, of "passive" (receptive) oral and, especially, anal sex are "grossly inflated," based on what Padilla heard from both sex workers and clients in the field (98). This inflation, he notes, is due to the "symbolic cost" of receptive sex within a larger gendered system—the "price" of violating masculinity's borders. This conclusion is instantiated by ethnographic interviews. As Alfonso explains:

> Once a foreigner offered me $500 for me to penetrate him, and later he told me . . . "I'm going to give you $500 more now for me to penetrate you." . . . But I didn't let myself be penetrated! I never want to be penetrated. Because I'm going to tell you the truth: I'm not a *maricon*. I look for life out of necessity, but I don't feel anything back there. Here in front, around my dick, yes. . . . But for them to penetrate me?! No, I don't feel anything back there. (96)

And from Julio, several pages before: "I consider myself a man in sex, always a man. It doesn't matter with whom—women, of course, and men. . . . I consider myself a man always in sex. Always the man. Nothing more" (92). In this way, it is the ethnographic excerpts and stories that shed light on the quantitative data, giving it a social context and a grid of cultural meanings through which truth claims might be evaluated.

This, of course, raises some questions about the veracity of what people say about themselves to ethnographers. For Padilla, "idealized" reporting was an issue with survey questions. Asked how often they used condoms, for example, many men reported "always." Asked if they could love a client, *bugarrones* and *sanky pankies* said no; asked the question of whether a (generalized) *bugarrón* or *sanky panky* could, they said yes (150–52). This kind of "lie" is unpacked deftly in the ethnographic interview—in the gaps and elisions within the interviews, where the density of affect and shame, desire and social location, becomes palpable. In this way, Padilla shows that these "errors" in self-reporting have as much to do with labor conditions and material need as they do with the desire to conform to the researcher's ideal, with a sexual meaning system that produces shame around sex with men—insertive or otherwise—as they do deception. Padilla concludes that ethnography is more accurate than quantitative methods in registering the actual, in-process meanings people ascribe to practices and acts (189). While this may be true, it is perhaps more true to say that the particular methodology of ethnography provides a way to critique the truth claims of standard epidemiological methods and the positivist claims of quantitative research.

"Situatedness" focuses attention on anthropologists *and* the people with whom we work as dynamic, idiosyncratic, placed, and in context. But a focus on how and when ethnography rhetorically claims to produce situated knowledges enables us to see how such a claim relies on special access to something like raw or real "data." Queering this conception, then, illuminates how ethnographic method (in the field and in our texts) smooths out its epistemological paradoxes. This does not, I would argue, yield a privileged "accountability," as it cannot account for the generation of its own knowledge. Rather, these ongoing processes of knowledge production are paradoxical: constructed and validated in the contingent yet structured process of ethnographic fieldwork and writing in ways that expose and conceal the actual process of ethnographic knowledge work.

Method as Hermeneutics: Contested Interpretive Grounds

Anthropologists, myself included, often make a semistandardized claim about ethnography: it is only through ethnographic method that we can see on-the-ground, deeply located cultural meanings, beliefs, or perceptions. This claim rests on a kind of ethnographic hermeneutics, in which the ways our own interpretations render our ethnographic material intelligible or understandable are simultaneously framed as, and separated from, a problem of *methods*. Here anthropology enters a second paradoxical ground, for this is where we are most likely to consolidate

a data-theory binary. A "thin" ethnography, for example—an insult among our kind—is an ethnography lacking the density of ethnographic stories that gives us a feel for a place and time, a tactile and "experience-near" sense of the culture at hand. But thickness—the long descriptions, moving interview excerpts, and well-told ethnographic stories that distinguish each of these ethnographies—tends to fall back into the category of data. Ethnographies with little data but lots and lots of dense analytic prose are thin *on the ground*. This "ground" effaces the ground of theory or analysis, how we know what things mean. The methodological problem is relatively straightforward and deeply familiar to every anthropologist: how do we link the words of Juliette or Alfonso to something larger without (simply) contextualizing their words within their own (situated) location? This linkage, in other words, encodes a demand for ethnography to be more than itself, which is why, I suspect, we typically call this "analysis" (with the ghostly echo of the preceding "data"). Here, again, the recurrent problem of the data-theory binary appears, and alongside it a tension between the evidentiary conventions of data and theory in which the former could never entirely evince the latter.

Wekker and Padilla both tell us that their ethnographies are a "political economy of sexuality," a phrase that Wekker uses to point to the ways that sexuality is not natural but rather "something that people shape collectively on the basis of their cultural archives and changing political and economic circumstances . . . there is a politics to passion" (67). Wekker links the situated lives of these women to large-scale shifts in politics and the economy, reading these women's sexual subjectivity against the background of changing gendered, sexualized, and racialized family forms during slavery and colonization as well as contemporary migration between Suriname and the former Dutch metropole. So, for example, she explains that these women's tendency to avoid marriage to men, preferring independence, may be a historical effect of the "dual marriage structure" where white men would marry white women while maintaining concubinage relationships with Creole women during the early years of the colony (119–20, 161–67). This history, Wekker suggests, may have produced motherhood, and not marriage, as the central goal of Afro-Surinamese women's lives; this would explain, she argues, why the working-class women with whom Wekker lives and works seek men for nonmarital, but child-producing, relationships and also financial support.

Although this historical argument is tricky to instantiate *through* ethnography, Wekker goes on to offer an even more speculative one: she argues that several distinctive features of Afro-Surinamese working-class women's sexual culture—"full sexual subjectivity," "the necessity of sex," "active sexual roles" for men and women, "the centrality of parenthood," the emphasis on "sexual ful-

fillment" and not "the sex of one's partner(s)," and "preferred independent status by women from men" (168)—all derive from common "West African grammatical principles" that underlie and produce current cultural configurations (120, 168, drawing on Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's *The Birth of African-American Culture*). As Wekker herself notes, it is impossible to "excavate the 'grammatical principles' underlying the cognitive orientations of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Africans" (215), much less, I would add, to show that the current cultural systems of Afro-Surinamese have to do with "common basic assumptions (which will often be unconscious) about, for instance, social relations or the workings of the universe" across the entirety of the African diaspora (214). But my point is less that this argument is speculative than that this tension between history and culture, "unconscious principles" and oral narrative, is itself produced by the split between ethnographic data—on the ground in the here and now—and dislocated theory or history. Coupled with the demand to make ethnographic anecdote matter, this produces a situation where method and analysis, ethnography and theory, *must* be separate—in order to be ethnographically enjoined.

Another approach to this dilemma is evident in Padilla's work, where "large-scale structural transformations" serve as the context for cultural meanings (205). His use of political economy links "macrostructural trends" (globalization, the growth of the tourism industry, the global division of labor) to the "subjective experiences and local meanings in specific cultural settings" (23). He ties this approach to critical medical anthropology (CMA), a departure from more traditional epidemiological approaches where the focus is on the micro politics of "risk" and harm reduction. Instead, CMA combines attention to larger-scale structures of inequality with ethnographic attention to the meanings and belief systems that animate local sexual practices and cultures (215). Like Wekker, Padilla argues that colonial-era labor conditions, and the gendered, sexual, and racialized hierarchies within them, have affected the current situation in the Dominican Republic; unlike Wekker, Padilla is more centrally concerned with how postcolonial changes, particularly the growth of the tourist industry, globalization, rising unemployment and structural adjustment, and internal migration/urbanization, have produced new sexual subjectivities. Padilla's approach contextualizes his fine-grained ethnographic material on these men's sexual practices, motivations, and affect within changing economic and historical conditions: the men who move to the city to find work and end up "looking for life" as *bugarrones* are part of a larger process of urbanization and economic change; foreign gay tourists' desire for these virile, masculine, and *not gay* men is a form of commodification produced by a global gay tourist market. In this way, these larger political

and economic processes situate the ethnographic stories, serving as backdrop or contextualization for a local sexual culture.

Although Gray terms what she does "deep contextualization" (16), her framework is less focused on historical context or political economic structure, and more on a mobile, contingent emplacement. Socioeconomic changes—defunding of education, Kentucky school reform, rising unemployment, the instability of local spaces because of poverty—delimit queer community and possibility. Yet her ethnography offers no final structural relationship between context and narrative, theory and data, enacting both closures and openings between nonlocal LGBTQ organizations, the Internet, and media and the texture of queer life within these small towns. So, for example, Gray uses the phrase "boundary publics" to describe the "iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that circulate across the outskirts and through the center(s) of a more recognized and validated public sphere" (92–93). This phrase draws attention to the interface between national, urban, online spaces and the local organizations, places, and kin structures that mediate these youth's lives. But it also gives a more supple and, indeed, ethnographic framework to the memorable story of the drag shows at the Wal-Mart in Springhaven, Kentucky. As one youth, Clay, explains, "Most gay people around the county, we all go to Hardees's or the new Backyard Burgers . . . and then most people all haul up together in big carloads, put on some drag, runway walk the Super Wal-Mart in Springhaven and walk around for about five hours" (97). Wal-Mart is the only twenty-four-hour business within eighty miles; it also has the material for drag ensembles and serves as a "safe public space" for these youth (98). But it is not always safe. Gray recounts a Wal-Mart drag scene that turned into harassment when members of a local LGBT group, the Highland Pride Alliance (HPA), staged one of their regular Wal-Mart drag nights and were gay bashed by a high school bully (108–9). In these stories, the possibilities afforded by new groups like HPA and spaces like Wal-Mart face the contingencies of being public in terms of not only a hostile, heteronormative social world but also an "increasingly privatized and impoverished" rural America (28). Gray adeptly challenges an emphasis on a politics of visibility (whether articulated in terms of coming out or in terms of political representation) by presenting the more complicated ways these rural youth use a strategy of familiarity (and family) in a place where kin networks, being of a place, and being known are crucial to both economic survival and social recognition. In the end, we are left less with a case study or instance of a larger political economy and more with a sense of the fragilities of constructing new queer lives and worlds, a fragility and in-processness that mirrors ethnographic method itself in its fleeting contingency.

These ethnographies showcase the strengths of ethnographic method, a method attuned to the "hybrid, messy, on-the-ground" complexities of everyday life (Wekker, 255). The conflicts and tensions embedded in the phrase "participant observation" already point us to the possibilities and risks of situated knowledges. But I do not want to argue that anthropology has a particular gift to offer queer studies—that of an "enriched," "richer," "thicker" description of social life—because this "gift" always turns out to be the gift of data. Nor do I want to simply argue that our data ought to be seen as theory, that all theory is theorized from somewhere, or that truly situated knowledge is more possible with ethnographic methods.

I mean, instead, to turn to a point Gray raises at the very end of her ethnography, in an appendix on methods. She writes, "Ethnographies of sexualities—like all ethnographies—are ironically most limited by our logistical, methodological need to name and find what it is we are trying to understand" (190). She means this comment to point to the contingencies of ethnographic research—whom you talk to, whom you fall in love with—the truly messy part of method. But I think this remark opens to a broader consideration of how we see what we name, how we try to know what we have already demarcated. In queer anthropology, it is our own research categories and scholarly debates—is sexuality best framed as desire, practice, act, or identity?; is homosexuality an emic or etic category?—that drive our research projects, but these commitments are only ever articulated as the "analysis" part of our texts (they remain silent, for example, in the section on our methodological positionality).[12] And so we produce a final ethnographic paradox: we know that etic categories, like sex worker and MSM, do not capture the lives of *bugarrones*, but also, in a deeper way, we know that understanding Padilla's ethnography as one about "heterosexuality" or "bisexually behaving men" does the same epistemological violence.[13]

And so I return to Hale's call to recognize what we already know and enact in our regular (nonanthropological) lives, in our "street theory," in our dungeons and play scenes: that the social field is far more complicated than our theories can comprehend. But here I want to hold open this problematic a little bit longer rather than position ethnography as the bearer-of-data that might finally resolve this problem. It is my hope that critically assessing the production of ethnography's privileged access to, and ourselves as the bearers of, local knowledge might enable us to pay a bit more attention to the production of all knowledge. The difficulties ethnographers have in linking data and analysis, the way cultural meanings and situated negotiations sit awkwardly with political economy or large-scale social structure, might point us to the gaps in the epistemological frameworks that pro-

duce both method-as-method and method-as-hermeneutics in ethnography. This is more than a problem of scale; it is, more profoundly, an epistemological problem where what we know and how we know it is simultaneously obscured and revealed in our texts themselves. That this is contemporary anthropology's stumbling block means that it incites our best work, including the three ethnographies I discuss in this essay. But I wonder if this might be queer studies' stumbling block, too—the desire for a real of grounded data, rich because in situ, perpetually deferred by the epistemological commitments embedded in our theorizations of sexual categories and their formative effects.

Notes

1. C. Jacob Hale, "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men," *Social Text*, nos. 52–53 (1997): 223. Iconic work on the categorical complications of sex-gender-sexuality systems includes Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance (Boston: Routledge, 1984); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
2. Kath Weston, "The Bubble, the Burn, and the Simmer: Locating Sexuality in Social Science," in *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 12. See also Kath Weston, "Theory, Theory, Who's Got the Theory? Or, Why I'm Tired of That Tired Debate," *GLQ* 2, no. 4 (1995): 347–49.
3. Weston, "Bubble, the Burn, and the Simmer," 25, 23.
4. Lorraine E. Herbst, "Imagined, Desired: Coming of Age with Queer Ethnographies," *GLQ* 15, no. 4 (2009): 627–41; Tom Boellstorff, "Queer Studies under Ethnography's Sign," *GLQ* 12, no. 4 (2006): 627–39. See also Tom Boellstorff, *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
5. Boellstorff, "Queer Studies under Ethnography's Sign," 627; Weston, "Bubble, the Burn, and the Simmer," 11.
6. Boellstorff, "Queer Studies under Ethnography's Sign," 628.
7. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 23. See also Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
8. Clifford, *Routes*, 56.
9. James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

10. Boellstorff, "Queer Studies under Ethnography's Sign," 628 and 627.
11. Boellstorff, "Queer Studies under Ethnography's Sign," 628 (citing Marilyn Strathern's *Commons and Borderlands*.
12. "Emic" is the analysis of a culture from an "insider's" perspective; "etic" is a detached observer's view.
13. All three ethnographies won the Association for Queer Anthropology's Ruth Benedict Prize in their year of publication, an award given at the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting "to acknowledge excellence in a scholarly book written from an anthropological perspective about a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered topic." Wekker's book was also published in Columbia University Press's Between Men ~ Between Women series, a "forum for current lesbian and gay scholarship in the humanities and social sciences." Publishing Wekker's ethnography in a gay and lesbian series is another articulation of this problem, since these women do not have a sexual orientation anything like "lesbian." In this way, it is not only the conventions of ethnography but also scholarly publishing and the marketing of texts that produces knowledge about queerness or LGBTness through categorical collapse.