

In 1997, the University of Illinois Press, at the request of Professor Fran Markowitz, asked Walter Williams to write an “Afterword” for their new book being published:

SEX, SEXUALITY, AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST edited by Fran Markowitz and Michael Ashkenazi

Williams’ contribution to the volume, and his critique of the chapters, underscores the conservatism of anthropologists when it comes to the question of sex. The press never responded to his submitted manuscript, and this Afterword was not published. It is included here as an example of how censorship of unpopular ideas occurs in the United States.

EROTOPHOBIA IN THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY: AN AFTERWORD

by Walter L. Williams

From its beginnings the profession of anthropology has prided itself on its ability to free itself from the cultural confines of the dominant mainstream Anglo-American norm. At the beginning of the twentieth century anthropologists started going out, mainly from Northwestern Europe and North America, to every far corner of the world. They searched everywhere for the strange and exotic. With the first generation of ethnographers, trained by pioneers like Franz Boas at Columbia University, every aspect of another culture was ripe material for analysis and discussion. This included topics related to sex and gender as well as other important aspects of peoples’ lived daily experience.

At a time when academia was largely a conservative bastion of inherited thought, the new discipline of anthropology was a notable exception. In the early twentieth century, anthropologists were at the forefront of Western intellectual thought in questioning the rigid

repressions of sexuality that were typical of the Victorian era. Many of the pioneering ethnographers who mentioned sex, and brought it out of its hidden recesses of secrecy within academia, seem to have been inspired by their own personal sexual nonconformity. Although they dared not go so far as to write openly and honestly about their loving relationships that did not fall within the boundaries of middleclass respectability, they used these personal insights from their own lives to enlighten their thoughts on anthropology.

For example, we now know that the famous anthropologist Ruth Benedict had sexual relationships with other women (including with Margaret Mead, while she was Benedict's student, no less) (Bateson 19 ; ref. biog. of Benedict). Edward Westermarck, professor of anthropology at the University of London, devoted an entire chapter of his 1908 book on moral ideas to "Homosexual Love." This bold title would dwarf the circuitous titling of later anthropological works on the subject. The anthropologist Omer Stewart recounted to me in an interview I did with him in 1984 that acquaintances of Westermarck were aware that he was actively homosexual, and knew that he enjoyed relationships with his male informants in North Africa where he did his fieldwork. Westermarck's major works (1908; 1929) can be read more valuably with this information in mind. It is clear that many of the influential insights anthropologists like Benedict, Mead, Westermarck, and others have brought to light stem directly from their own personal awareness of sexual variance.

One early German anthropologist at the University of Berlin who was openly homosexual and active in the pioneering Institute for Sexual Science, Ferdinand KarschHaack, even went so far as to devote his career to gathering information on homosexual behavior in non-Western cultures. His book on same-sex love among the native peoples of Africa, Southeast Asia,

Oceania, and the Americas (1911) stood as the preeminent source on this subject for most of the twentieth century.

Building upon this and other early anthropological scholarship, in 1940 Alfred Kroeber published an essay in which he said (referring in particular to the acceptance of same-sex love among Native Americans) that “the time is ready for a synthetic work on this subject” (Kroeber 1940). Despite Kroeber’s bold suggestion, however, no anthropologist stepped forward to write such a synthetic work.

On the contrary, since the 1950s the younger generations of anthropologists seem to have retreated into a much more conservative stance regarding sex than their pioneering forebears held. This lacking pertains not only to the anthropological study of homosexuality, but to any form of sexual behavior outside the Anglo-American norm. This adherence to the norm is quite ironic, given the anthropological profession’s stated goal of questioning assumptions about what is “normal” in practically every aspect of peoples’ daily behavior.

Given the massive amount of writing that anthropologists have churned out within the last half century, what is most notable is the relatively small number of scholarly works that have been devoted to sex. While tons of writings have focused on marriage and kinship relations, and more recently on women’s gender roles, a sharp contrast is drawn to sexual behavior and sexuality. The reason for this is clear: studies of sex have until recently been considered “not serious.” Many anthropologists feel uncomfortable discussing the subject. For example, in the early 1980s when I was doing research on the American Indian Two-Spirit traditions (reported as “berdache” in Williams 1986) I interviewed many anthropologists who wrote ethnographies of specific tribes. When I asked them about that tradition, they often admitted to knowing about it.

When I asked them why this information was not included in their book, some seemed rather proud to say, “Such things don’t interest me.”

Such an attitude has been all too common among twentieth century anthropologists. The lack of study of sexual behavior gives lie to anthropologists’ claims of objectivity. The fact is that most anthropologists have been raised in mainstream Western cultural traditions which include many taboos about discussion of sexual behavior. Sex is only discussed in “gutter language,” and seldom in serious academic discourse. Anthropologist Kenneth Read, in analyzing the avoidance of cultural studies of homosexuality, concluded that this avoidance came from many anthropologists’ personal uncomfortableness with the topic. Read posited that, unlike with other “savage” behaviors, anthropologists could find no cultural “justification for homosexual behavior. It was far easier, for example, to excuse infanticide (a custom also abhorrent by Western standards) since it could be shown to have a rational basis in some demographic situations: it ‘produced’ something. But homosexual did not ‘produce’ anything” (Read 1984: 215-217); that is, except pleasure.

To note pleasure as a principle for human behavior seems beyond the abilities of some anthropologists to understand, at least as far as this is reflected in “serious” anthropological writings. This is erotophobia, pure and simple. Sometimes this erotophobic impulse has even taken the form of formal professional resolutions. For example, in 1975 the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association voted “not to endorse anthropological research on homosexuality across national borders.” Though that resolution was later repealed after protests from gay and lesbian anthropologists, such an incredible effort at censorship reflects many anthropologists’ uncomfortableness with sexuality. It is, Read concludes, evidence of scholars’

conscious or unconscious acceptance of “Western attitudes toward homosexual behavior as a sensitive subject which, though it is probably as prevalent as witchcraft, is morally distasteful” (Read 1984: 215-217).

The subject of homosexuality is only one part of a larger erotophobic pattern in the twentieth century anthropological profession. Many mainstream anthropologists do not encourage younger colleagues to pursue research on sexuality, or actively discourage such inquiry. They do not want their department to be known for studies of erotic behavior. To have such a reputation would be to label one’s department a laughing stock, tangential to the major themes of the discipline. Never mind the fact that sex is a major concern of human life, or that it underlies much of social relations within and between groups. As a consequence, anthropological scholarship on sex is so sparse that even popular sources like international “gay guides” often have more accurate information on sexual subcultures in many countries than can be gained by reading anthropological texts.

Unprepared by their education to deal with sexual matters, ethnographers in the field have often been easily misled, were more or less blind to behaviors going on around them, or simply never asked the right questions. Their moral queasiness led many to ignore the subject, or to make only a brief statement of imprecise language. The major serious studies of sexual behavior have occurred in other disciplines, and as a consequence of anthropologists’ absence sexology as a field has been weak in multicultural perspectives. It has only been within the last decade that anthropology as a profession has opened up to the idea of sex as a serious and legitimate area of study.

As more and more studies of sexual behavior and sexuality have been published by leading academic presses, academia has slowly responded with a grudging acceptance. However, this atmosphere of acceptance is still so new that a palpable uncomfortableness with the subject remains. Given this unease about even reporting sexual behaviors of people from the culture under study, writing about ethnographers' sexual behavior in the field is even more of a taboo. The taboo exists not only because of Western culture's general unease with sex, but also because this subject exposes what many anthropologists consider to be their dirty little secret.

Most anthropologists will admit in private that they know their colleagues often engage in sex while living in another culture. But they do not want it written about. The profession has enacted its own "don't ask, don't tell" policy, as pervasive as that policy announced by the United States armed forces in 1993.

The essays in this volume set out to help restore some sanity to our erotophobic Western culture, and specifically to the dominant Euro-American culture of anthropologists. Current anthropological convention says that an ethnographer should avoid sexual contact with people of their host society. This blanket prohibition ignores the cultural values of the host society, and results in many cases of hypocrisy or needless guilt and shame that inhibits good ethnography. The book is intended for anthropologists (both the guilt-ridden ones as well as the more sexually liberated ones), students, and sexologists who are interested in multicultural research.

The main problem of this book is that some of the chapters are so pitifully conservative and cautious that many readers will find them laughable how much stress they show for minor things. For example, people who have felt comfortable in group nudity (ex. nudists, or many Europeans who regularly go to nude beaches, as well as Japanese bathers) will probably find Ashkenazi to

be hopelessly provincial in his difficulty in becoming comfortable unclothed at the Japanese baths. This chapter seems to be much ado about nothing. Poor Jacob Climo is so uptight about bringing his girlfriend to visit him in Mexico, that he seems rather pitiful. For students who are comfortable with their sexual relationships, they might get the impression from this book that anthropologists are so uptight about sexuality that student readers might even change their major!

What is disappointing about this book is that many of the authors seem so browbeaten by anthropological convention that they are all stressed out and defensive about their rather mundane behavior. Only Wim Lunsing [coincidentally, raised in the non-puritanical Netherlands] really confronts the dominant social standards and glories in his sexual liberation. I expected to see more chapters like that, which would push buttons and make the book a truly controversial text that will cause a stir in the stodgy profession.

I would like to see Fran Markowitz tell us more in her otherwise excellent chapter, but she does not really give us much information about the divorced man she was involved with during her Israeli fieldwork. Likewise, Antonia Chao's excellent essay has no mention of her sexual behavior in Taiwan, other than to say she had a "T" girlfriend. It would make these two chapters come alive if they would tell us some more data about how these relationships worked while they were in the field. I have a feeling we could learn a lot from each of them if they would add some more to their chapters about what they learned from having a relationship during their fieldwork.

What are the do's and don't of having a successful relationship in a fieldwork context? This kind of data would make the book much more valuable.

I don't know if there is time now, but the book could be made more exciting if the editors could get another essay or two written by someone else like Lunsing who is not defensive about fieldwork sexual activity, and would be willing to write on it. Tom Fitzgerald does not mention his sexual behavior in Sweden and Finland at all, but since he emphasizes his subjects' alienation from him, he might not be the best choice. It would be a real coup if you could persuade Gilbert Herdt to write about his personal sexual experiences in New Guinea. He could turn out a chapter quickly (he is working on a sequel to his Sambia study), and he has the kind of major status in the discipline that would make more people take this subject seriously. If you want to ask him (he is in Amsterdam right now), you may say that I suggested him. Ralph Bolton, at California's Pomona, would be someone else who already has the reputation of being a sex radical, and could turn in a valuable chapter quickly.

There are no doubt lots of others I do not know, but getting them to admit to their real behavior in print might require the editors to use their strongest persuasive powers. If the editors would send their Introduction, plus the Rose Jones and Wim Lunsing chapters as samples, they just might be successful. Rose Jones' essay as Chapter 1. Though she reported NO sexual behavior on her part during her fieldwork, her ideas follow from and well complement the editors' ideas in the Introduction. The end of Jones' chapter is a powerful condemnation of anthropological puritanism. Having her chapter as the first will better interest readers to keep reading. Classes on fieldwork methods, and on sex and gender, are the two most obvious potentials for course adoption. No one should go out to do fieldwork without reading this book. This book has definite interest abroad, both because of the geographically varied fieldwork

locations and also the inclusion of some anthropologists from different nations. The book would be strengthened by inclusion of another chapter by a non-American (especially if that writer would talk about their sexual experiences during fieldwork, as I noted above).

Below are my comments on each essay.

Fran Markowitz and Michael Ashkenazi, "Introduction": This introduction is excellent, thoughtful, clearly written, and full of insights. The top sentence on page 5 should specify, in addition to structuralism, Marxism, and feminism, the influence of anti-colonial independence movements of the 1960s. A few times, the editors should briefly define anthropological concepts and terms for readers who are unfamiliar with the discipline's theoretical twists and turns. For example, in the middle of page 13, the editors refer to "thick description, multivocality and intersubjectivity" without any explanation of what these are.

Rose Jones essay is excellent and should be moved to become Chapter 1. The end of this chapter is powerfully written, and well complements the editors' Introduction. This essay shows the problems facing even anthropologists who have NO sex in the field. The discipline is so erotophobic that they can suffer threats to their career merely by reporting that they were sexually approached by informants in the field. The only thing that makes me uncomfortable about this essay is, here again, the author seems to be concluding that it is better for ethnographers not to be sexual in the field. She certainly has the right to conclude that being asexual was the best choice for her, since she wished to remain faithful to her husband. However, her statements about her own asexuality would be better balanced by a statement pointing out that, for another researcher who was not happily married, they might in fact have personally benefited from having a relationship in this kind of fieldwork setting where asexual persons are

"viewed suspiciously and are classified as social deviants" (p.19). Given this reality, Jones should at least mention the fact that, while she had some advantages in not being sexual, another researcher might have gained different advantages in that society by engaging in sexual relationships. All I am asking for here is a little balance, so that the book's thesis is not undermined.

Thomas Fitzgerald essay: This chapter is good, but there is too much jargon on pages 2 and 3. The author says nothing about his own sexual behavior while he was in Sweden and Finland. I could not help wondering if he was asexual, and this lack of relationship might have been one reason why he was not more closely accepted by the local gays. It would be good to encourage him to comment on this aspect (send him Lunsing's essay to spark some thought on this aspect).

Antonia Chao essay: This essay is excellent, one of the best in the book. She would never have wanted to do the research on, or been accepted at, this lesbian butch-femme bar, except for the fact that her girlfriend was a butch "T." Yet, given the crucial importance of her girlfriend, there was practically no mention of their relationship. See my remarks above, to get the editors to try to persuade the author to agree to write more on her relationship with her girlfriend, and how this relationship in the field worked.

Eva Huseby-Darvas essay: This essay is good, and interesting. She may be right that, in the context of the Hungarian village's sexual repression, it was probably best for her to remain asexual. However, again I found it disconcerting to see the anti-sexual position be articulated so cogently in this book, without much balance of pro-sexual views. This is not necessarily saying this essay should be changed, and it should be kept because of its insights. But if some more pro-sex essays added, then this Hungarian essay would not undercut the book's thesis.

Fran Markowitz essay: Finally, an essay that articulates the original ideas of the Introduction. This is excellent. However, as I said above, this essay would be stronger if the author would add more on the benefits of her relationship with the divorced man in Israel.

Wim Lunsing essay: After the cautious defensive conservatism of the previous chapters, the straightforward acceptance of sex by this author comes as a welcome relief. I thought there would be more chapters like this one, which centrally addresses the issues of the editors' Introduction. It is well written, thoughtful, and interesting. Maybe American anthropologists are so hopelessly puritanical, that the editors should look to other countries for authors. I hope at least one more chapter taking a similar liberationist stance can be found to add to this book.

Karla Poewe conclusion: She is an excellent writer, and this essay gives adequate summary-commentary on the essays. It nicely wraps up the volume.

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