Making difference: queer activism and anthropological theory

Abstract
This article examines two paradoxes. The first is ethnographic: queer activists in Bologna, Italy are concerned with defining themselves in opposition to fixed categories of identity and forms of politics based on them. In so doing however, they must engage with the risk that this endeavor of difference-making itself becomes as fixed and uniform as the identities to which it is opposed. The second paradox is theoretical: a range of anthropologists have recently argued that the relationship between theoretical and ethnographic material should be one of identity or correspondence. Yet such arguments, though highly conceptually stimulating, often reproduce in form what they refute in content: abstraction and metaphysical speculation, thus re-inscribing the difference between our concepts and our data. This article simultaneously connects these respectively ethnographic and theoretical questions, whilst also deliberately holding them apart. The beginnings of an answer to both, it suggests, lie in an explicit attention to the boundaries and differences, rather than simply the isomorphisms, between theory and ethnography.

Saying globalization is your theoretical interest is a little like an astronomer saying “my theory is Mars”. (Robbins 2014:70)

Lines had been drawn, and though there was to be no battle, there was a tank. It was made of pink velour, and on it hung a sign reading “surrender to love”. There were also uniforms. Some of the uniforms did what uniforms usually do, and clearly designated their wearers as alike in some respect. There were police uniforms, blue with white holsters for their pistols, some firemen milling around in red polo shirts, and the white and red together of the emergency medical services. Wearers of these uniforms tended to remain on the periphery, or outside of
them altogether, waiting in case their services were required, whilst occasionally posing for photographs with those in another sort of uniform.

This other sort of uniform was not, *stricto sensu*, a uniform, certainly not of the same sort as the first (at least, not usually). Rarely were any two instances the same, and on another day the idea of describing them as uniforms would seem strange. This, however, was 9th June 2012, the day on which the city of Bologna hosted Italy’s national Pride parade. The procession began early in the afternoon at Porta Saragozza, one of Bologna’s medieval gates, and snaked its way to Piazza Maggiore, the city’s main square. A large section of town had been pedestrianized to allow the parade to proceed unhindered by motor vehicles, and in many locations metal barriers divided the road and the pavements on which spectators stood or which, later, marchers used to circumvent the hold-ups that frequently occurred as a float was rearranged, or a musical display performed.

Some of these second sorts of uniforms were made of leather, others were t-shirts with slogans in pink-framed speech bubbles printed on them. Still more were feathered headdresses or boas, rainbow-coloured hats or face paint, and bridal dresses. A friend wore a dressing gown, whilst another painted a moustache on her face. Some did not exist – that is, they consisted of a notable absence of clothing where one might normally expect it. But they were all uniform insofar as they marked their wearers out as belonging to the community of people celebrating that day. Each was different to another in some particular way. Yet all were different in a similar way from those who did not wear this sort of uniform.

In the early stages of the procession the physical barriers the police had erected between the pavements and the road made it relatively easy to tell who was marching and who was not. Then,
later on, when the parade had become a carnival and a succession of celebrations, some of which would go on until the next day, a lot of those who had merely stopped to watch the parade as it passed had gone home. By that point almost everybody left standing was wearing a version of that second sort of uniform.

For most of the day the physical lines and barriers between spectators and participants, queer and not queer, blurred and collapsed as the parade became a manifestation of the value of equality which its organizers sought to promote. The metal barriers seemed to disappear as the march reached further into the center of the city, and by the time it arrived in Piazza Maggiore it was a mass of people unbroken by physical divisions. But even so, even with the physical barriers missing, in the crowds of Piazza Maggiore, one could see another value the parade was intended to embody: difference. The very lack of uniformity of the uniforms on show, the cultivated difference from the everyday, made their wearers stand out, and stand out together, in contrast to those around them (for comparable examples see Dave 2011; Port 2012).

Needless to say, it is impossible to draw a line, in any clear sense, around a community of queer activists in Bologna, even on the day of the year that they are most visible. But there are things that make them different from those who are not queer activists, and one of those things is the way in which they tend to think about difference as something that one has to make.

And now for something completely different

There seems to be a consensus, across a range of anthropological schools of thought, sometimes implicit but often – as in the primary example I treat in this article – explicit and well-theorised, about the fact that the best kind of anthropological analysis is that which is most difficult to
distinguish from ethnography. That what we might once have thought of as “anthropological theory” should not be considered different from ethnographic description, or perhaps from the theories of those whom we study. As Tim Ingold has recently noted, “it has become commonplace – at least over the last quarter of a century – for writers in our subject to treat the two [anthropology and ethnography] as virtually equivalent” (2008:69). Andreas Glaeser, writing in a recent volume intended to diagnose “a certain impasse in the theory ethnography relation today” (Boyer, Faubion, and Marcus 2015:3), notes likewise that “seasoned practitioners of both ethnography and historiography have rejected explicit theorization as part of their accounts” (2015:83).

Indeed, the range of questions to which it is claimed that answers should be found not through abstract reasoning, or what Faubion calls “model-theoretic apparatuses” (2011; 2015), but in ethnography has expanded to include methodological and epistemological ones, such as how anthropology should understand translation (Viveiros de Castro 2004), cultural change (Vilaça 2015) use examples (Krøijer 2015), generate politico-economic concepts (Jiménez and Willerslev 2007), and reinvigorate its notion of truth (Holbraad 2012), to name but a few. In fact, one of the few recent anthropological collections devoted specifically to epistemology is frequently concerned with claiming, as the argument of one of its contributors is described by the editors, that “anthropology has no need of any epistemology other than ethnography” (Toren and Pina-Cabral 2011:6). In this paper, I treat a question exemplary, indeed paradigmatic, of this methodological or epistemological type – namely, what relationship should exist between ethnography and theory in anthropology. I do so in order to show that there are instances in which questions of this form are better addressed by emphasizing the differences, not the resemblances, between theoretical concerns and ethnographic ones.
Ingold makes that remark about how easy it has become for us to equate ethnography with anthropology as part of an argument, subsequently repeated elsewhere (2014), for distinguishing between the two (2008; see also Cook 2016). Whilst that sounds rather similar on the surface to the suggestion I have just made – that sometimes it might be helpful to think of theory and ethnography as different – Ingold in fact identifies ethnography with “descriptive or documentary aims…which impose their own finalities on trajectories of learning, converting them into data-gathering exercises destined to yield “results,” usually in the form of research papers or monographs” (2014:390). Anthropology, on the other hand, is an “ontological commitment…to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study” (2014:390). Arguing against theorizing from the armchair, Ingold claims that its “paradox” “is that in order to know one can no longer be in the world of which one seeks knowledge. But anthropology’s solution, to ground knowing in being, in the world rather than the armchair, means that any study of human beings must also be a study with them” (2008:83 italics in original).

Ingold, in other words, far from suggesting that there might be a difference between description and analysis, is arguing the reverse: any anthropological endeavor, he suggests, if “it is to do justice to the implicate order of social life, can be neither descriptive nor theoretical in the specific senses constituted by their opposition. It must rather do away with the opposition itself” (2008:81).

Ingold repeats this argument in a critique of Da Col and Graeber’s proposal for an “ethnographic theory”, despite the fact that “ethnographic theory” is also intended to stimulate “ethnographically grounded, theoretically innovative engagements with the broadest possible geographic and thematic range” (2011:viii), as its name suggests. They come at the problem of
theory in contemporary anthropology from the opposite direction to Ingold – disapproving of what they think of as the imposition of concepts from European philosophy onto ethnography, rather than of the cold, descriptive enterprise of data collection – but their solution is roughly the same: that ‘theory’ must be ‘ethnographic’.

One suspects, in turn, that perhaps at least one example of the imputed imposition of European philosophical concepts onto ethnographic data that Da Col and Graeber have in mind is anthropology’s recent “ontological turn”. This, as with Ingold’s criticism of their own argument, is despite the fact that the notion of “recursivity” on which much ontological turn argumentation is based, and which I will discuss further shortly, is explicitly premised on there existing a continuity between ethnographic data and anthropological concepts and on a critique of philosophical abstraction. So, for example, Henare et al argue in the introduction to Thinking through things that “instead of just adapting or elaborating theoretical perspectives…to reconfigure the parameters of “our” knowledge to suit informants’ representations of reality, [the ontological turn] opens the way for genuinely novel concepts to be produced out of the ethnographic encounter” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:8).

We have then a series of recent and influential reflections on the problem of how our observations and descriptions and our arguments and analyses should relate to one another in which the response to that problem is not only identical, but is in fact identity, an identity between theory and ethnography. These arguments largely compete over who has best achieved this or whose method is most likely to do so, rather than about this principle itself. Of course, these reflections by no means exhaust current thinking on the relationship between theory and ethnography, but they represent a prominent and influential strain, and moreover one which is powerful enough to unite people who otherwise disagree with one another. Anthropological
projects aiming explicitly at generalisation, say, remain relatively rare (though see e.g. Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2014) and are usually not focussed on the methodological question of how such generalisation is possible (though see Candea Forthcoming). Miyazaki has similarly noted a propensity for anthropologists to identify “the ethnographic condition in which there is no distance between anthropologists' analytical practices and those of their research subjects as a methodological opportunity” (2006:132), quoting Maurer’s argument that “the convergence or indeed isomorphism of anthropological tools and the knowledge-generating techniques of those they study opens possibilities for a new kind of ethnographic sensibility” (Maurer 2003:163; cited in Miyazaki 2006).

This article is an attempt to think differently about the question of how ethnography and theory relate, by explicitly thinking of them as different. At the same time, it offers a glimpse of a particular, but related, question faced by the queer activists I worked with during my first period of fieldwork in Italy. So, the article’s argument will partly be an instance of itself, in that by its conclusion I hope it will be clear that those two issues, first the question of how theory and ethnography relate, and second a question from my own ethnography, are themselves related, but at the same time very different. Hence its status – unlike arguments for recursivity – as only “partly” an instance of itself. Because rather than presume that the answer to the question of how theory and ethnography relate lies in ethnographic material, which would beg it rather than answer it, I will aim – for a substantial part of the argument – to hold apart those two facets as far as possible, as a methodological experiment.

The article is structured into three fairly equal parts: first I discuss an ethnographic question that emerged from my fieldwork in Bologna with queer activists, one that revolves around an issue of central concern to this kind of activism, namely the notion of difference. This discussion is not
intended to be, or even to resemble, a comprehensive ethnographic account of queer activist perspectives on difference in Bologna. It is a partial description of a specific set of practices and problems involved in such activism, ones which throw into relief an equally specific set of anthropological problems. That is not an unusual strategy in anthropological writing, though some may prefer that it were. I make no attempt to defend such strategies, because it is precisely the question of how ethnographic material and anthropological problems relate that I aim to address. I have chosen to do so by demonstrating the consequences of self-consciously adopting the conceits of some forms of anthropological writing. My reasons for doing so will, I hope, be clear by the paper’s conclusion.

After this I discuss an analytical question regarding what is an important feature of a range of current ideas about anthropology’s proper task in relation to ethnography. A longer and more ambitious piece might seek to make the argument that follows in such a way as to encompass other, similar but differently named features, such as “ethnographic theory” or Ingold’s “philosophy with the people in it” so as to establish firstly that they share something in common, and secondly that they all suffer from the problem I go on to identify. However, for reasons of space I will confine myself largely to discussing the notion of recursivity. I will do so because I think that term is one that has received a significant amount of theoretical elaboration, and is thus both a clear example of the form of argument I am describing, and also, in some ways for that very reason, of the problems with that form. The nature of that analytical question revolves not around difference – as in the ethnographic case – but around identity, in the sense of resemblance – namely the resemblance we are told should exist between anthropological concepts and ethnographic ones. The final part of this paper will discuss the relationship between the first two
parts – in other words, between the ethnographic and the analytical – and their differences and resemblances, over the notions of difference and resemblance.

In essence, what I am going to suggest is that there is something fundamentally and perhaps unhelpfully self-contradictory about anthropologists having highly complex and abstract theoretical arguments over how un-theoretical they are. This is akin to what I have elsewhere seen described as the problem of Dumbo’s feather: Dumbo, the eponymous hero of a classic Disney film, is a baby elephant who can fly because of his very large ears. Dumbo, however, does not like having big ears, so he tells himself he can fly because he has a magic feather. Anthropological accounts often have big theoretical ears, but they would sometimes rather believe instead that they have a magical ethnographic feather.

This is not an argument against “ethnography” – whether of the form Ingold disapproves of, or any other – but against what Matei Candea and I suggest calling “ethnographic foundationalism”: the notion that ethnographic engagement is the beginning and end of anthropological epistemology. There are lots of arguments we could better have – including ones about how ethnography and theory relate – if we were explicit about the difference between our own metaphysics and assumptions, and those which emerge from our ethnographic material. In order to make that difference clear in my own case (though the phrase ‘make that difference’ may already recall to the reader my opening vignette), I proceed to discuss my ethnographic material and this analytical question in as distinct a manner as possible.
The difference they make

The city of Bologna in Italy is known by various sobriquets including *la grassa*, or the fat, for its food, *la dotta*, or the learned for its university, the oldest in Europe, and *la rossa*, or the red, for the color of much of its historic architecture and for its politics (on which see e.g. Kertzer 1974; Kertzer 1980; Però 2005). It was for its politics that I selected it as a fieldwork site. It was widely known as *la vetrina*, or the showcase of Italian Communism, as well as being a hotbed of extra-parliamentary political action, particularly in the seventies, and because of that long association with the Italian left it has become a bastion of the queer activist community in Italy. It hosts the largest and oldest base of Italy’s most well-established gay and lesbian rights organization, Arcigay, as well as innumerable smaller groups based in social centers and occupied buildings.

But perhaps not surprisingly, precisely because Bologna is where the movement is strongest, it is also where it is most internally differentiated, and a great many of those internal differences concern, precisely, the notion of difference itself. Indeed, the key point of the ethnographic tension I discuss here is to what extent and how it is possible for a group of people to be brought together around a concept as divisive, as it were, as difference. But that problem itself raises another one: precisely to the extent that it was difference, albeit of different kinds, that was an ubiquitous concern for the activists I worked with, it was also this concern for difference that gave them an identity, and thus to some extent made them the same, a point to which I will return.

In fact, though, more often than not the answer to whether or not anything like a queer activist community actually exists in Bologna appeared to be no. What might look like a community to an outsider, I was often told, was in fact riven by deep ideological and political divisions, a
number of which came very much to the fore during debates over Italy’s 2012 national Pride, which took place in Bologna. Lines of a sort had been drawn long before the barriers were put up at Pride itself.

A few months before the parade was scheduled to take place, on a warm evening in Spring, I joined around thirty to forty people in a bar in the city’s northern district, one that was a regular haunt of some of the groups with whom I worked. The atmosphere was somewhat more tense than usual, with several small groups of people talking quietly at individual tables, rather than the loud and disorganized kind of socializing that usually preceded a meeting.

Gradually, the space filled up with people and it became evident that a range of groups were to be represented at this meeting: occupying the stage as they waited to begin were the two speakers for the evening, Marina and Massimo, leading members of an occupied space (centro sociale) not far from where I lived, itself home to at least 3 different collectives. Some of the city’s most famous centri sociali were also represented at the meeting that night, alongside people from MIT (Movimento Identità Transessuale) Italy’s oldest transgender rights organization, as well as a plethora of smaller groups. Also present were members of two national organizations which aim to support young LGBTQ people in difficult domestic situations, along with their parents. Strikingly absent, however, were representatives of Arcigay, the largest and oldest LGBTQ organization in both Italy and Bologna, and the official organizer of the 2012 Pride. Much of Arcigay’s recent focus has been on lobbying for marriage rights and fertility rights.

The event that night was organized by Marina and Massimo, the de facto leaders of a network of small groups which had come together – loosely speaking, as we will see - around an opposition
to Arcigay’s official Pride, so it was not a great surprise that the latter had chosen not to send anyone to what would likely not be a meeting friendly to their particular position.

This first difference I describe within the community, between Arcigay and many of the smaller groups – temporarily coalesced into this network - that were often highly critical of it, was perhaps the most obvious of the differences I will discuss, and people’s position with respect to Arcigay was a relatively clear indicator of their relationships to other activists. This first difference also will not sound unfamiliar to many people acquainted with queer activist movements, or indeed familiar with the work of say Sarah Green, Naisargi Dave, or Cymene Howe who have all extremely eloquently described similar dynamics in movements in eighties London and contemporary India and Nicaragua (Dave 2012; Green 1997; Howe 2013; on “rights-based” vs queer politics cf. also Berlant and Warner 1998; Rahman and Jackson 1997).

Arcigay’s Bologna chapter is its oldest and most established local incarnation, and is based in large grounds on the outskirts of the old city. It made, I was told, quite considerable amounts of money from its weekly disco, and it was often insinuated to me by those critical of it that its leadership was more interested in increasing this cash flow than it was in political activism. As far as such activism goes, Arcigay focused on lobbying for rights: adoption rights, rights to fertility treatment, anti-discrimination legislation, and, most of all, marriage rights. They had chosen to emphasize these issues in their organization of the Pride celebrations, casting it as a “family pride” to which grandmothers and infant children should feel as welcome as anyone else.
As the title of the event I attended that evening suggested – “the revolution is not a wedding breakfast” – Marina and Massimo and most of the members of their network did not agree with this choice of objectives. Indeed, they saw the institutions of marriage and the family as prime targets of the movement’s critique, not as objects of aspiration.

So, by the time of the meeting I am describing Pride had already become a major battleground for a range of issues which had been on the boil for some little while. As an official from Arcigay explained to me, to her and her colleagues it seemed an obvious decision to hold Pride in Bologna, the heartland of the Italian gay and lesbian rights movement, and to focus it on issues that she felt everybody could agree upon. As far as those at the evening’s meeting were concerned though, holding Pride in a city that had (relatively) few serious problems in terms of discrimination made no sense. In fact, they suggested, it was probably just a consequence of Arcigay’s internal power struggles. 2012 happened also to be the 30th anniversary of the Bologna chapter of Arcigay’s foundation, and it was intimated that hosting Pride would improve their standing and prestige in comparison to rivals in Rome. Most of all though the choice of political focus was also anathema to the network.

Though Arcigay place a degree of rhetorical emphasis on the valuation of difference, the tension at the heart of their politics that its critics were keen to highlight was that the differences Arcigay claimed to value were also differences it seemed to want to erase. Their activism was permeated by a desire, as Marina put it to me, “to be like everyone else. We want to get married like you, we want to have families like you”. It was what Massimo would often call a “politics of reaction”. As far as he and Marina were concerned, Arcigay sought to subsume virtuous
differences from the norms of Italian society back into it. They wanted to make difference disappear into heteronormative identity.

Hence the purpose of the meeting that night. It would be about, as Massimo put it in his introduction, “real pride, a more original, authentic, and truer version of what pride should mean to people”, one that would display what he called “real difference”. That was a phrase that would be repeated throughout the night, as Massimo and Marina criticized what they called “the integrative movement” for its failures to appreciate this more genuine form of difference. “Radical, transgressive difference”, Massimo argued, was “the essence of Pride, queer difference that never stabilizes into fixed identities like gay, lesbian, or straight”.

However, the tension Massimo was wont to identify in Arcigay’s normalizing activism, between the promotion and valuation of difference, and the apparent desire to subsume that difference into identity, was far from absent from his own activism, as others within his network were equally wont to point out. A number of members of the network privately echoed his own “politics of reaction” critique of Arcigay back at Massimo himself. He was so obsessed with the problem he saw in Arcigay’s reproduction of normative identities that all of his own activism became defined simply in opposition to Arcigay itself, they said, a problem related to the more structural ones I will discuss below. For example, Arcigay staged a mass kiss-in in Bologna’s main square on Valentine’s Day 2012, in advance of the Pride celebrations. Largely because of its tenuous association with pride and the fight for marriage rights, Massimo had been vocally opposed to the kiss-in as a form of protest, resulting in murmurings of dissent from other
members of the network. What next, one person asked, are we going to start beating up gay people because Arcigay opposes homophobic violence?

The issue of dissent within the network in general raises a more fundamental question in regard to difference, indeed in many ways the key ethnographic question of this paper. The network that composed the meeting I have been describing was deliberately structured in opposition to Arcigay. Where Arcigay had a formal leadership hierarchy, the network was a loosely defined association of like-minded groups that on the whole emphasised self-government based on consensus building, with no explicit hierarchy, the word network chosen deliberately to emphasize its flatness. And yet, as I have suggested, Marina and more especially Massimo were in all but name its leaders. They wrote its manifestos, organized and chaired its meetings, and in Massimo’s case dominated the discussions that took place at them. Massimo was a highly charismatic speaker and a member of the movement’s old guard, in his forties though he looked much younger.

I have already described the atmosphere at the meeting that night as somewhat tense, and that was largely because a few days previously Massimo and Marina had presented a manifesto for the network that was intended to crystallize its position in opposition to pride. They had been somewhat taken aback though to discover that a number of members of the network felt that a document of that form ran completely against the spirit of the network itself. The network, according to this opposition and indeed to Massimo’s own articulated vision of it, was not supposed to have a single position. The whole point of forming the network was to insist on the virtue of performing difference from the fixed identities they saw Arcigay as representing – how
could they do that if they fixed their own identity in a manifesto, or behind the leadership of an individual?

That, in essence, is the ethnographic tension with which I am concerned here. Arcigay chose Bologna as a site for the 2012 Pride and focused it on marriage rights in order to find something that would unite a movement riven with division and disagreement. Yet in doing so they caused yet more division and disagreement on the part of people like Massimo and his network who felt that this unity came at the cost of the promotion of that real, or radically transgressive difference he spoke of at the meeting. But at the same time, of course, as members of the network pointed out, Massimo himself was trying to fix the community in his own image: the very idea of real difference points paradoxically to a kind of essential identity to which he hoped the meeting’s attendees would subscribe. And in a replica of his own disagreement with Arcigay he found himself likewise accused of a politics of reaction by privileging his own particular and preferred form of real difference – that between himself and Arcigay – over all others.

In a sense these disagreements are unsurprising: when “making difference” – in the literal sense of permanently enacting a difference that is understood to be ubiquitous – is what defines your identity, then it is unsurprisingly difficult to solidify that identity at any kind of communitarian level. But at the same time however, and as was made clear to me by the ways in which Massimo’s attempts to unite the network behind him foundered, the description I have just given is of course a paradox, because it already does solidify that identity: in suggesting that making difference from fixed identities is what defines the queer activist community in Bologna, I have slipped in to the very language of identity politics against which they define themselves.
Yet the members of the network present at the meeting I have described were at the same time united by something that made Massimo’s attempts to fix this unity in fact perfectly plausible. They and the queer activists I worked with all, broadly speaking, believed in the virtue and necessity of making difference. By this I mean that they believed in making their difference from the fixed identities they opposed as clear as possible, something that was much on show during the week of Pride itself, which was, as my opening vignette suggested, a festival of what Massimo would describe as real differences: drag queens and kings, leather, S&M gear, nudity, and the giant pink velour tank with a sign on it reading “surrender to love”. These are enactments of how queer activists think about difference – they literally make difference between oneself and others. Insofar as they differentiate activists from non-activists they also instantiate the tension I am describing: difference is both what makes them different from one another – because it is understood to be an ubiquitous construction – but also different from others (and therefore potentially the same) – because others do not think about difference this way. These made differences were thus both uniform in one sense, and paradigmatically not so in another: a ‘repetition of differential sameness’, in Jarett Zigon’s terms (Zigon 2013:719).

In other words, and put very simplistically, fixing the identity of a community through its shared belief in the necessity and virtue of performing difference from fixed identities is not an easy task. Yet it is exactly this shared belief that does indeed bring them together.

And that is precisely the ethnographic tension I am seeking to draw out: Massimo, many members of Arcigay, and all those at the meeting who disagreed with one or both, do share a
common understanding of difference as something that it is both necessary and virtuous to make
and it is precisely this common understanding that does allow them to emerge occasionally as a
community, as was the case, in the end, in the Pride celebrations, for example. But, of course,
insofar as there exists a solution to the problem of how to build a community around the idea of
difference as something that has to be made, it creates a new problem: how to reconcile the
existence of such a community with the central tenet that actually holds it together, namely that
difference is produced and should be produced all the time. A belief in “making difference” as
what makes them different from one another is also what makes them the same.

This tension resembles – but also differs from – the tension in anthropology that emerges around
the notion of “strategic essentialism”, first proposed by Gayatri Spivak as a way of accounting
for the persistent power of identity in spite of its deconstruction (Spivak 1988). The term has
since come in for a range of engagements and criticism, and it is not my intention to engage with
it in great depth here. What I wish to point out though, is the presupposition of which it is by
definition guilty: that the “essentialism” it describes is only “strategic”. When used in description
it foregrounds, in other words, the concept of a fixed identity, but it does so only by tacitly
assuming that such fixed identities are really only chimerae, an assumption that usually reappears
in analysis (cf. (Sylvain 2014).

I raise this issue not because I wish to suggest that a form of “strategic essentialism” is at work in
the tension I have described amongst queer activists; quite the reverse, in fact. Whilst the idea of
strategic essentialism foregrounds a notion of identity and simultaneously reasserts an underlying
politics of difference, my account of queer activism in Bologna suggests that a politics of
difference is put in the foreground in order – at least occasionally – to fix a kind of identity. It is, as it were, a kind of “strategic anti-essentialism”.

This is partly, of course, an artefact of my account, rather than its object. As Strathern notes in the case of her use of feminism in *The Gender of the Gift*,

My account exploits perspectival devices, including the us/them dichotomy, as essential fictions to its argument. I even include “the feminist voice” as one perspective. But I hope I have not thereby homogenized it. For Owens (1985:62) notes that the "feminist voice is usually regarded as one among many, its insistence on difference as testimony to the pluralism of the times," thereby making it victim to assimilation as an undifferentiated category in itself. Its internal differences are suppressed in the adoption of “the feminist view”. (Strathern 1988:38)

And later:

Feminist scholarship, polyphonic out of political necessity, accommodates anthropology as “another voice”. Within this epistemology, anthropological analysis of male-female relations in non-Western societies in the end cannot explain Western experience, which is also personal experience, although it may contribute to the further experiences about which feminists must think. At the same time, different viewpoints are sustained in coeval parallel; indeed, the multiplicity of experience is retained as a sign of authenticity. Each is a feminist voice, but the voices create no single viewpoint, no single perspective,
and no part-whole relation between themselves. The only perspective lies in the common challenge of patriarchy. (Strathern 1988:39)

What gives feminism, for Strathern, its distinctive identity – as opposed, importantly, to anthropology – in spite (indeed because) of its insistence on plurality is its unity vis-à-vis the condition of women in the world. Hence the unproblematic nature of its plurality, for there remains a “continuity of purpose” in its antagonistic relationship to patriarchy. Fixed identity, in my ethnographic case, is the equivalent of feminism’s patriarchy, the perspective queer activism cannot adopt and the difference it cannot produce. But without it – as in the case of feminism and patriarchy – this kind of activism makes no sense as activism. Of course activism of this form looks like an “undifferentiated category”, in Strathern’s terms, when put into relationship with what it opposes – “undifferentiated categories” themselves; but it is precisely in relation to what it opposes that it has meaning as activism. In part for that reason I am holding it stable within that comparative relationship, rather than elaborating further upon the nuances of internal differences over difference that exist within it.

I will return to these questions, and the reasons for which I have chosen to depict this tension in this way, in the final part of this paper. For now, that, in a nutshell, is the ethnographic issue with which this paper is concerned. At this point, what I could do is to show how this ethnographic question speaks to broader conceptual issues in anthropology by linking it with analytical concerns that are in some very obvious sense connected to it, or at the very least I could strive to make that connection to my analytical concern as obvious as possible.
I am not going to do that however, as I indicated in my introduction, and so although the switch in registers – the difference I am about to make, if you will - may feel somewhat jarring, I hope by the conclusion of the argument it will be clear that that switch and that difference was deliberately made, might not have been made, and that an important part of the overall argument of this paper will be that such differences can and ought to be made at least on occasion.

The difference we make

The analytical problem I am concerned with in this second part of this paper is an extremely old one, and one that has been addressed by a number of what are now classic reflections on the subject, such as those of Radcliffe-Brown (1951), Evans-Pritchard (1950), Leach (1966), Geertz (1966), Herzfeld (1987), and Rabinow (1988) to name only a few prominent examples, although, as Boyer, Faubion, and Marcus note in a recent volume, there has been a “relative silence” on the issue for the last twenty-five years (2015:5). I make no claim to survey or account for the enormous range of responses to which this problem has given rise. The claim I will make is the traditional anthropological one: that my ethnography may speak in interesting ways to the most recent set of responses to this analytical problem, and in doing so go a little way towards complicating precisely the issue of how exactly ethnography does speak to analytical problems.

Which, in fact, is exactly the analytical problem with which I will be concerned: how do ethnographic data and analytical concepts interact with one another? That problem, though an old one, has recently arisen anew in the form of what has been called a recursive turn in anthropological theory, and its associated ontological variations, but is also present to varying degrees in a range of contemporary methodological and theoretical reflections. As well as
Ingold’s call for a “philosophy with the people in it” and Da Col and Graeber’s notion of “ethnographic theory”, it is present for example in the methodological injunctions that have emerged from perspectivism, whether in the form of Viveiros de Castro’s notion of equivocation or in the idea of symmetrization that Philippe Descola has expounded on. One might also see it in the suspicion of theory, or anything else that intrudes on the immediacy of ethnographic presentation that is to be found in variants of Actor Network Theory, which aim to “follow the actors themselves” (Latour 2005:12).

So, whilst I am going to confine myself largely to discussing this problem through the notion of recursivity that is because it is in and through this notion that the ideas I am describing have had an extremely sophisticated theoretical exposition (e.g. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2009), not because they are confined to those who prefer to use that particular language.

The suggestion I am going to make – one which will, eventually, lead us back to the ethnographic question I have just discussed – is that contemporary ideas about the relationship between anthropology and ethnography centre not around difference but around identity, and in particular around one identity, namely that between concepts and things, between ontology and epistemology, or more broadly between conceptual analysis and ethnographic data. The key conceptual underpinning of these ideas is to collapse the distinction between concepts and objects, an argument that has of course been made from the edited volume Thinking through things (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007) onward throughout the recursive turn’s development. It is also I think worth pointing out that although a number of different aspects of
this body of work have come in for recent criticism (Bessire and Bond 2014; Graeber 2015; Heywood 2012; Laidlaw and Heywood 2013; see also Pedersen 2012), its recursive component – its fundamental view of what work anthropological concepts do – has remained relatively unscathed.

The obvious way in which to describe what is meant by recursivity is through an example, and the obvious example to choose is Holbraad’s monograph, *Truth in Motion* (2012). I will try to be as brief as possible, without doing too much of a disservice to an extremely elegant and sophisticated argument.

The ethnographic problem Holbraad is faced with is the classic problem of alterity – how to account for something that our analytical categories appear unable to explain, in this case, the indubitability of Ifa divinatory truth in Cuba – the fact that its oracular verdicts are, according to its practitioners, not open to doubt.

“Classic anthropology”, according to Holbraad, can only account for divinatory indubitability as an absurdity or an irrational belief (Holbraad 2009:82–84; 2012:51–53, 71). We have a few understandings of indubitable truth at our disposal from Anglo-American philosophy – analytical truths about bachelors being unmarried men, or Kripkean a posteriori truths about water being H2O, as Holbraad lays out (Holbraad 2012:71) – but none of these make sense of how a statement issuing from an oracle such as “you are bewitched” could possibly be considered indubitable, appearing as it does to be a simple case of representational truth – either you are bewitched, and the statement is true, or you are not, and the statement is false.

So, the syllogism of the recursive solution Holbraad provides runs roughly as follows:
Since any representational truth must by definition be open to the possibility of doubt, it follows that divinatory truth is a non-representational truth, because it is indubitable. Since that ethnographic concept – a truth that has no representative relation to states of affairs in the world, and whose opposite is not falsehood – does not exist in our analytical repertoire, Holbraad must invent one, which he does in the form of “inventive definition” (Holbraad 2009:87; 2012:219), which is, therefore, both a description of divinatory verdicts and an instance of itself, or “metarecursive”, in Holbraad’s terms (2012:237).

Inventive definitions are non-predicative truth statements. Like Roy Wagner’s notion of “invention” (1981), they derive their truth not from their possession of an external relationship to things in the world to which they can be applied but from the intensively transformative effects they have on the objects to which they relate. Thus, as in one of Holbraad’s examples, to say that “Wagner is a genius” is not to connect two pre-existing entities via an external relationship of meaning, but to transform both entities into something new (Holbraad 2012:44). In the same way, divinatory verdicts are precisely not open to doubt because they do not represent a state of affairs in the world but modify the objects to which they apply: “You are bewitched” “transforms me from a person who stands in no particular relation to witchcraft into a person who is being bewitched” (Holbraad 2009:88). Similarly, “inventive definition” itself puts together concepts like “speech act”, “inauguration”, “novelty” and “meaning” in order to produce a new concept, that of “inventive definition” (Holbraad 2012:220).

Anthropological concepts more generally are supposed to function in the same way: they emerge in relation to specific ethnographic data because of the “alter” nature of such data, their otherness (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). Because we cannot explain the alterity of Cuban divination with
existing concepts of truth, we invent a new one which transforms old ones through its relation to the ethnography of Cuban divination. Thus “inventive definition” is not merely a case of Wagner’s concept of “invention” being “applied” to Cuban divination, but of a set of concepts – including, undoubtedly, “invention” – being put into relation with Cuban divinatory truth to produce a new concept, “inventive definition”, or which is thus a mix of both concept and datum together (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009; Holbraad 2017).

Thus, in the language of this “postplural” vision (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009), anthropological concepts are not predicates attached or applied to data, they are intrinsically and intensively (in the Deleuzian terminology of the turn) linked to them. It is only by mistakenly “cutting off the ethnographic tail” of an anthropological concept that one could arrive anything that would resemble abstraction, or a difference between an anthropological concept and an ethnographic one (Holbraad 2017:154).

The arguments upon which the recursive turn is based all proceed from this fundamental premise: that analytical concepts, rather than being abstract, are of the same order as ethnographic data. They collapse the distinction between analysis and ethnography to arrive at this new notion of the “anthropological concept”.

That premise, however, is self-refuting, in so far as the “anthropological concept” asserts the mutual imbrication of concepts and objects, indeed denying the conceptual “purity” of concepts in anthropological theory *per se*; except, that is, for the “anthropological concept” itself, which emerges from a series of highly conceptual, abstract, and analytical ruminations that have nothing to do with ethnography; much like this section of my paper, and much like the
arguments of Ingold, Da Col and Graeber; much like most methodological and epistemological reflections on the status of method and epistemology in anthropology.

In other words, there can be no non-conceptual source for this notion of the anthropological concept itself. Even claiming, in meta-recursive fashion, that as a concept it might resemble certain ethnographic objects as a justification is circular in the same way, because it either assumes in advance that concepts and objects can resemble one another in the very particular sense in which these authors intend it, or what is meant is simply that it resembles certain objects in the way that any concept resembles that which it is intended to conceptualize, i.e. in abstraction. Thus, arguments based on a recursive premise frequently produce in form (highly analytical discussions of abstract concepts like the “anthropological concept”) what they refute in content (the distinction between concepts and objects, analysis and data). The more rigorous and well-conceptualized these arguments are (as in the case of the recursive turn) the further they move from ethnography; the more systematized and comprehensive the claims, the more abstract the reasoning.

To bring us back to the issue of identity with which I began this part of this paper, I am suggesting there is a tension intrinsic to recursive argumentation around the notion of identity: recursive anthropology and related trends argue that the distinctive thing about the anthropological concept is the identity it produces between things we took to be abstract concepts – like truth – and the things we took to be data – like Cuban divinatory practices. But precisely insofar as that idea is distinctive, it cannot itself be derived from any ethnographic data. In other words, the recursive claim that concepts and data are alike is exactly why its conceptual
analysis will always in fact be irreducibly different from its ethnography – because there is no ethnographic source for that claim itself.

Or put another way, if the claim here is that what makes recursive anthropological analysis recursive is precisely its attempts to collapse the boundary between concepts and data then of course this results in the paradoxical assertion that what makes recursive conceptual analysis different from other things – like ethnographic data – is the exact extent to which it makes that difference disappear.

To return to Strathern on feminism and anthropology, making difference disappear is exactly the reverse of what her account of that relationship accomplishes:

Feminists argue with one another, in their many voices, because they also know themselves as an interest group. There is certainty about that context. The anthropologist is in a rather different position. There appears no such anthropological interest group. For anthropology, play with internal contexts – with the conventions of scholarship (genre) – looks like free play with the social context of anthropology as such (life). (Strathern et al. 1987:268 italics in original)

“Play with internal contexts” – such as blurring the boundaries between concepts and objects – looks like free play”. But internal contexts are internal to something: blurring those boundaries reproduces them, because it is only anthropologists who do so, in order to answer peculiarly anthropological questions, such as “how do my concepts and my ethnographic objects relate?”
As Jean-Klein and Riles point out in making a similar argument with regard to anthropology and human rights, it is precisely Strathern’s point that these differences are actually what makes anthropology and feminism of use to one another, and so ought to be sustained. Or better yet, as Jean-Klein and Riles put it: “if at times it seems like there is no difference between anthropological practice and human rights practice, then perhaps difference, like relevance, must be produced, as an effect, not simply found in the world” (Jean-Klein and Riles 2005:188).

“Producing” the difference between feminism and anthropology is exactly what Strathern’s account accomplishes. Producing, or making difference is also exactly what I have argued is a constitutive aspect of queer activism in Bologna.

**The difference this makes**

With that last sentence, I hope, what I have made to appear a deliberately unwarranted excursion into the realms of abstract anthropological analysis now begins to appear possibly, if still problematically (as I will discuss), connected to the ethnographic issue I raised in the first part of this paper.

The analogy one might make would go as follows: first, I highlighted a tension intrinsic to queer activism in Bologna: this tension lay in the fact that it is constitutively concerned with making difference from fixed categories of identity. But in being thus united by such a concern, making difference can often appear to be its own kind of fixed identity, as clear and recognizable as those it opposes. Making difference in this way can thus also produce identity.
Second, what I have just sought to argue is that the tension in contemporary discussions of the relation between ethnography and theory in anthropology lies in the fact that they identify the distinctive nature of anthropological analysis with its ability to collapse the distinction between analytical concepts and ethnographic data. But insofar as this is argued to be anthropology’s distinctive nature it is thus also what will always make it different from other things, including the ethnography it seeks to identify with. So here making identity also makes difference.

So, the two issues, one ethnographic and one analytical, are inversions of one another, connected but also disconnected, alike but also different.

In the sense in which they are alike, the relationship between theory and ethnography in my own account is much like it should be according to Da Col and Graeber, Ingold and indeed the recursive turn. In that sense, my account has sought to use what one might think of as an ethnographic theory about difference and identity to shed light on a more analytical problem. However, the analytical problem in question has been whether or not “ethnographic theories” can deal with all kinds of analytical problems. And the light it has shed demonstrates, in fact, that no matter how much we may claim that our theory is only derived from our ethnography, a difference will always remain. And if this account is at least partly concerned with making that difference as explicit as possible, a part of the difficulty involving in doing that derives from the fact that the object from which it aims to differ is precisely the activist project of making difference explicit.
My argument, in other words, like the two problems it has addressed, is itself unstable - it has made both identity and difference. Hence, unlike the circularity of “ethnographic theory”, of which the *ouroboros* is a deliberate figuration (da Col and Graeber 2011:vi), or of recursive argument (see e.g. Holbraad 2009:218; though also Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:218), or Ingold’s ‘arcs’ of theory and ethnography which “embrace each other in an encompassing, brightly illuminated ellipse” (2014:393), the argument I have made here does not invite agreement on self-supporting grounds. It is not a closed circle (or ellipse). It both performs and refutes itself, just as its component parts do: queer activism performs the difference it seeks to make to the world, but in doing so risks becoming akin to that which it opposes. Recursive anthropology performs the identity it seeks to create between analysis and data, but in doing so distinguishes its analysis from that data. And the analogy I have made works – or does not – in the same way: it connects the two problems through their difference, over, precisely, connection and difference.

That difference is why my account is not a simple case of using ethnographic material to resolve a theoretical problem. If it were, it too would reproduce in form what it refutes in content – it would use ethnography to argue against using ethnography to resolve theoretical questions. And, moreover it would miss the point of the ethnography in question, which was after all about making difference, not about making things the same.

That is why I have deliberately emphasized the obvious differences, rather than similarities, between the ethnographic and the analytical problems I have dealt with (and what could be more different than queer activism and the ontological turn?). By describing them as separate
analytical and ethnographic concerns, by dividing this paper accordingly, and by beginning not
with a general question to which I then tried to fit a case, but with a case to which I then
deliberately and artificially connected a question. I have made, in other words, as much
difference as possible between that question and my ethnography. I have tried to show, both in
content and in form, that some of the conceptual questions we ask are not answerable through
ethnography – and I think one of those questions is precisely the question of how our questions
and ethnography relate.

Earlier in the paper I used the neologism of “strategic anti-essentialism” to describe the emphasis
queer activism in Bologna places on difference from fixed identity and the fact that it leaves the
identity this emphasis itself produces implicit, whilst being careful to note that this perspective
was in part a fiction of my account. Why I did so is I hope now clear: the identititarian product of
the anti-identitarian politics of queer activism in Bologna is not a matter of choice but a
necessary aspect of such activism itself. Queer activism – like feminism, as Strathern describes –
may be internally perspectivalist, in the sense that it allows and indeed promotes a multiplicity of
viewpoints within it, but its relationship to its object, identity, is prior to the terms related
(Strathern 2011). As in the case of feminism and patriarchy, there is no choice of perspective
when it comes to identity: to be a queer activist in Bologna is to have a specific kind of
(oppositional) relationship to the category of identity. That is precisely why it is unhelpful – in
terms of activism – to point out that from another perspective this may appear self-refuting: that
“other perspective” is unavailable from an activist perspective.
Clearly it is not unhelpful in the same way to point out that anthropology need not always insist on there being an identity between its ethnographic and theoretical categories. I am of course by no means the first to suggest that difference, detachment, and separation may have as much value to some of the people we work with as the kind of non-dualist collapsing of boundaries that inspires Ingold, Graeber, and the recursive turn. But even though a number of authors have pointed to the ethnographic importance of dualisms and boundaries in a range of contexts (Candea 2010; Reed 2004; Stasch 2009; Yarrow et al. 2015), non-dualist thinking continues, paradoxically, to dominate explicit theoretical reflection on the question of how theory and ethnography should relate. That such reflection remains nevertheless highly theoretical is, some might say, evidence enough of its implicit confusion, but I have tried in this paper to think through it and with it, with the help of my ethnographic material. In doing so I hope to have shown the extent to which connection and difference are important to both.

But if we only focus on connection, we risk becoming the mirror image of Massimo: so concerned with purity, although in our case a purity of resemblance rather than of difference, that we miss the difference we inevitably make. Instead, I suggest, we think about how to identify which questions are better addressed by emphasizing those differences, rather than resemblances, between the kinds of anthropological arguments we make and the ethnographic material with which we make them. One of those questions, I have suggested here, is precisely the question of just how similar and how different theory and ethnography are.

What alternative consequences does this proposition entail? For a start, it would allow us to avoid what I have no doubt will justly be seen as the central problem of this paper: it would no
longer be necessary to address – even in the somewhat roundabout manner that I have done here – complex methodological questions through an engagement with ethnography of some form, and ethnography would no longer come combined with abstract ruminations about what it can tell us about anthropology as a discipline.

As should be obvious from the content of the latter part of this paper, I consider such methodological issues to be deeply important, and I think simply ignoring or dismissing them is not a sustainable position. But my point here is that we can only gain in our ability to answer them by recognizing the fairly self-evident truth that they are not of the same kind as ethnographic ones. A large portion of the later part of this paper has been an attempt to show that this difference exists. That difference should be clear to any reader whose reaction is to wonder why I have not discussed the connections between queer activism and political economy, say, and/or made further comparative remarks on similar cases in anthropological literature, and/or discussed the place of the Catholic Church in contemporary Italian politics, and/or simply been more “ethnographic”. We know, on some level, how to tell when something is “ethnographic” enough: onesuspects we might have more trouble specifying when something is “ethnographic-theoretical”, or “recursive” enough.

These latter sorts of questions are also, obviously, important, and the first part of the paper raised an example of them (and see Heywood 2015a; Heywood 2015b; Heywood 2015c) despite the diversions of its final part. Would such questions be better addressed in the absence of diversions into methodological issues? Undoubtedly, and that is exactly the point I have just been making.
But it is a point – a difference – that needs to be made, not taken for granted, particularly when an important current in the discipline is going in precisely the opposite direction.

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1 Although despite its name, Da Col and Graeber are explicit about the remainder that is left over from the encounter between ethnography and theory, citing Eco’s description of translation as ‘almost’ saying the same thing (Da Col and Graeber 2011:vii).
This is despite the existence of large scale comparative anthropological projects. In fact, a part of the methodological impetus for this paper came from my current work on an ERC-funded study of European free speech.

Miyazaki’s own work, of course, and much of that of Annelise Riles (Riles 2001), takes a significantly more complex view of the relationship between anthropological knowledge and its objects, somewhat akin to that for which I argue here.

In a manner akin to what some have called the fallacy of the stolen concept (Rand 1990): ‘property is theft’ is an example of self-refutation via a stolen concept because the whole notion of theft relies for its meaning on the notion of property. As an axiom it depends for its truth on a premise the validity of which it denies. If there is some irony in an axiom about theft being accused of stealing a concept, then there is also in the case of the recursive turn, because the stolen concept in this case is the whole notion of the conceptual itself.

This might also allow for what Richard Handler has called “destructive analysis” – the critical examination of the categories of both the analyst and subject of analysis (Handler 1985), particularly when the two resemble one another in the first place. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing me towards this idea. Handler’s argument, together with that of Jean-Klein and Riles (2005), also makes clear the fact that even in situations in which ethnographic objects – such as nationalist conceptions of bounded cultures, or human-rights discourses – appear initially isomorphic with anthropological concepts, it is the task of the ethnographer to make difference between the two. Another perspective would be one which Adam Reed has suggested to me: that of employing a transitive concept, such as inspiration, in thinking about the relationship between ethnographic materials and analytical claims. This seems to me a most promising alternative to recursivity, as it substantially qualifies claims about the kinds of effects on anthropological arguments that ethnography can have (though I am also curious as to whether the ‘meta-inspiration’ for the idea comes from his work on literary societies).

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