

Introduction

On a bright Sunday at the beginning of March 2012, a month after I arrived in the city, Bologna's most famous son gave his final performance in Piazza Maggiore, on what would have been his sixty-ninth birthday. Three days previously, on tour in Switzerland, Lucio Dalla, Italy's most well-known folk singer, whose career spanned four decades, died following a heart attack. His body was brought back to his home town, where it laid in state in the square he made famous with a song about a vagrant who lives under the piazza's medieval arcades. An estimated 50,000 people from across the country flooded into the city to pay their respects, and for days the piazza was the site of an endless, snaking queue of fans, young and old, who waited for hours to file past the coffin. The street on which he lived, itself a few metres from the square, was awash in a sea of flowers and other offerings, and for months afterwards restaurants, bars, and other public places in the city decorated their windows with banners declaring 'Ciao Lucio' and set out books of condolence for patrons to sign.

The funeral itself took place in the Basilica of Saint Petronius, the enormous and imposing church that dominates the southern side of the square. The mayor had declared an official day of mourning, and the flag above the seat of the city's government flew at half-mast. A long list of dignitaries, including celebrities and politicians, attended the funeral at the Basilica, which was broadcast live on national television, whilst thousands continued to gather outside. A homily was delivered by a Dominican friar who had been Dalla's confessor, who wished his friend a posthumous happy birthday, and declared that he had had 'an incredible relationship with God'. Acclaimed as the most touching and beautiful part of the service, however, was a tribute delivered by a thirty-two-year-old man from Puglia, Marco Alemanno, who had collaborated with Dalla on some of his compositions. In a voice quavering with emotion and evidently struggling not to weep, he recalled the first time he and Dalla had met, and expressed his incredulity and gratitude at having had the 'honour and the privilege to grow by his side', before finally bursting into tears.

Why did this young man's speech create such a stirring impression and strike such a chord? Because Marco Alemanno was not simply, as he was

described in the service, Dalla's collaborator, he was also his long-term romantic partner, and everybody knew it.

The funeral occasioned a degree of soul-searching, both locally and nationally, about the status of homosexuality in Italy. A few Catholics I knew queried the appropriateness of providing such a lavish religious ceremony to honour a man who was not only gay but also famously left-wing. No one that I met countenanced such a position in Bologna however, where Dalla was mourned as a local hero; even my landlady, whose political views were far to the right of anybody else I ever met in a city famous as a bastion of socialism, lauded the decision to hold the funeral at the Basilica, declaring to me that Dalla was 'a good man whose private life is nobody's business'.

Such an assertion was possible because despite the fact that Dalla's sexuality was an open secret, a secret it remained: he never came out publicly. This, indeed, was the official justification for the funeral in the Basilica by the Church, a stance comparable to the US military's former policy of 'don't ask, don't tell'. Like the latter, this position was the target of much criticism. Many in the city's LGBTQ community were apathetic about the funeral, seeing it as yet another instance of hypocritical attitudes towards homosexuality in Italy, both on Dalla's part, for not coming out publicly, and on the part of the Church, for celebrating the life of a prominent and popular homosexual whilst simultaneously condemning homosexuality from the pulpits of churches across the country on a weekly basis.

A Dominican friar describes a gay man as having had 'an incredible relationship with God', whilst representing a Catholic Church whose opposition to the progress of LGBTQ rights in Italy is vocal and vituperative; that same gay man, despite his sexuality and his political views, is a famously devoted Catholic; his romantic partner speaks at his funeral but only as his 'collaborator'; and people such as my landlady, the majority of whose pronouncements on homosexuality were similar in tone and content to those of the Church, are spontaneously able to set aside their homophobia when it comes to a man whose music tugs at their heartstrings. These exemplify a curious and somewhat paradoxical way of relating to something, whether it be to a faith, an ideology, a person, or a moral code, that is one of partial fidelity rather than wholehearted subscription, one in which what is most remarkable is the distance or difference maintained between oneself and the object with which one is supposed to identify. Relationships of this form – relationships that sustain, rather than cancel out, the differences between their terms – are the central concern of this book.

Difference from What?

Relations, we are often wont to think, are about identification. As Rupert Stasch has recently argued (2009), the ideal of *Gemeinschaft*, first set out by

Ferdinand Tönnies in the nineteenth century, has long dominated social science studies of community as ‘a perfect unity of wills’ (1887: 37), and Marilyn Strathern has highlighted the etymological connections between relation and the idea of connection itself, noting that anthropologists usually speak of relations as the means ‘through which people connect themselves to one another’ (1995: 11). But as both these authors – and a growing number of others – argue, there is another side to relations: the ‘perfect unity’ Tönnies writes of always risks collapsing a relation of two or more terms into a singularity; without difference, as well as identity, a relation is no longer a relation. The ethnographic relations this book is concerned with are cases in which that difference is made highly visible; and one of the tasks of this book is to make highly visible the difference in a more theoretical relationship, namely that between ethnography and theory itself.

This book situates itself in a vein of literature on relating through difference by describing a set of empirical relations surrounding LGBTQ activism in Italy in which the difference between the terms being related is more important than the identities between them. My claim is not that this form of relationship is unique to the context I describe. Some of the relations I discuss will be recognizable to many as themselves related to other forms of political and ethical life, and partly for this reason I will draw from them more general theoretical arguments about the ways in which it is possible to relate – through difference – to political ideologies, or to moral codes, for example. What I will also suggest though is that the context of LGBTQ activism has something particular to teach us about the relationship between difference and identity, and that anthropologists, in particular, have something to learn from it. It forms a special and unusual example of a broader problem, namely that of how identities are constituted: particular and unusual because what constitutes identity in the context of Italian LGBTQ activism is in fact a radical rejection of identity politics in favour of a belief in the necessity and virtue of making or producing difference.

The problem of identity, or solidarity, is a problem for a particular reason. As Stasch eloquently describes, Tönnies’ arguments about *Gemeinschaft* had a critical edge: his ‘unity of wills’ was an ‘idyllic alternative possibility’ to the reality of urban strangeness and difference that he called *Gesellschaft* and that he understood to be characteristic of modern life (Stasch 2009: 7). Far from being something the existence and persistence of which could be assumed, bonds of identification were, at least implicitly, an ideal to be worked towards. Bringing people together has never been an easy task, though, as Stasch goes on to note, anthropologists have continued to find examples of the *Gemeinschaft* ideal in non-Western societies (2009: 8).

The context I describe is a modern, urban one, the city of Bologna in Italy, and thus one in which bringing people together should be as difficult, if not more so, as in that of Tönnies. Moreover, the particular community with which this book is concerned is one of political activists, and thus, popular

wisdom would have it, liable to suffer from the problem of what Freud – following anthropologist Ernest Crawley – called ‘the narcissism of minor differences’ (1957 [1917]: 119). Another Italianist, Anton Blok, begins a survey of anthropological and sociological literature on the ‘minor differences’ question with a Sicilian proverb: ‘in the same face, the right eye hates the left’, and as he goes on to note, the phenomenon of *campanilismo* (or the idea that one’s own village is infinitely better in every possible way than the one just down the road) is a quintessential version of this problem, even if it is as liable to be found in Cambridge colleges as in Italian villages (Blok 1998: 33).

So one would imagine that the people this book is concerned with do not easily form a community, let alone a ‘unity of wills’. Indeed, this is true to a large extent, and much of this book will describe the internal heterogeneity of an extremely diverse movement, and the ways in which this heterogeneity reveals itself through a variety of media, and often through intensely passionate debate and disagreement.

There is one respect, however, in which the question of identity and identification for LGBTQ activists in Bologna takes on a peculiar and perhaps somewhat unique colour, and that is the fact that if there is one thing with which most activists can identify, if there is one aspect of their activism that does indeed bring them together, it is their rejection of identity, and their valuation instead of difference. So the central ethnographic argument of this book will be that they are in the interesting position of being brought together by precisely what sets them apart, and set apart by what brings them together.

What I mean by that is that a dominant and even constitutively essential aspect of being an LGBTQ activist is performing and producing difference from the world around one. Activism, in a generic sense, is premised on a certain relationship of difference: that between what is and what ought to be (Dave 2012; see also Ferrara 2008; Robbins forthcoming). It is a deeply worldly activity, in the Weberian sense (2001 [1930]) but its relationship with the world is based around the fact that there is something wrong with it, something lacking or otherwise deficient, something to be changed (Dave 2012; Marx 1845): that it should be different from the way it is. It is about, as the cliché goes, ‘making a difference’.

But difference is important in a distinctive and unique sense for LGBTQ activism. As in much of the writing which inspires such activism (e.g. Butler 1990; De Lauretis 1991; Sedgwick 1990), many of the LGBTQ activists I worked with seek to embody a radical difference from the rules, norms and identities they see as undergirding Italian society, whether as ‘ethical sluts’, polyamorists, drag queens or kings, or just by living a life that runs against the grain of what they understand to be Catholic and conservative orthodoxy. Thus, as with activism in the more generic sense, what they do and what they believe is saturated with a concern for what they do not do and do not believe, for what they must differ from: transgression requires something to transgress (Bourg 2007).

For some activists this relationship is further complicated by their desire to erase this difference: those who seek equal treatment under the law from a state that currently excludes them from a range of institutional spheres aim to 'make a difference' by making certain differences disappear. But for many of those with whom this book is primarily concerned, their difference from others is something to be valued and celebrated. It is something to be produced and reproduced on a regular basis.

This leads to a conundrum of a sorts that is the central ethnographic focus of this book: producing difference from fixed identities like gay, lesbian or straight is a defining project of much queer activism in Bologna. But precisely as such, it is always on the verge of undoing itself, as it risks becoming its own kind of identity, as fixed, clear and easily recognizable as those to which it is opposed.

So if that is the primary ethnographic concern of this book, what of its theoretical focus? Raising this as a question may appear curious to some readers. For many it will seem obvious that the theoretical focus of a work of anthropology is simply an extension of its ethnography – an explication or description of whatever facts about the world it purports to represent. That is both true, and not true, of my argument here, as I hope will become clear. For my theoretical interest is in the nature of anthropological theory itself, and its relation to ethnography. To take this as a question cannot mean assuming an answer in advance. So I do not presume that the nature of that relationship will automatically be one of resemblance and proximity. Instead I aim to develop an argument through demonstrating the consequences of occupying certain positions in regard to this relationship.

That is also a partial answer to the obvious question of why a book about queer activism should also interest itself in the nature of anthropological theory. A more straightforward answer is that the issue of how one's theoretical concepts relate to one's empirical material is a question that preoccupies any anthropologist to some extent, and indeed has stimulated some of the most important pieces of methodological reflection in the discipline's history (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1973; Herzfeld 1987; Leach 1961; Strathern 1988). But concerns about the nature of the relationship between analysis and ethnography seem far removed from the empirical context of the LGBTQ activist movement in Bologna; the two issues appear disparate and unconnected.

Yet, as I hope to show, the more complex answer to the question of why a book about LGBTQ activism should concern itself with the nature of anthropological theory is that the two both are and are not connected, and indeed, precisely in being so they may aid us in coming to some conclusions about whether connection is always the most apposite form of relation between ethnography and theory.

The extent to which the two issues – one ethnographic and one theoretical – appear different from one another is obvious. At no point in this book will I

shy away from that fact. In fact, I will often emphasize it, for that difference will form a central plank of the overall thrust of the argument.

Yet I will also argue that they are more similar than they might first appear. This is evident if we examine some recent literature in anthropology that endeavours to take relationships of difference as its starting point.

Some readers will already have noted some similarities between the way in which I have described this kind of relationship, in which it is difference, rather than identity, that is important, and other anthropological reflections on difference, particularly perhaps those of Viveiros de Castro on equivocation (2004a; see also Stasch 2009). He describes affinity as the paradigmatic form of such a relationship, arguing that unlike consanguinity, which is based on a common referent ontologically prior to the terms being related, affinity is premised on an equivocation: instead of the parent uniting two brothers, we have the wife/sister uniting two brothers-in-law, 'a mediating term, which is seen in diametrically opposite ways by the two poles of the relation' (2004a: 16).

Viveiros de Castro's discussions of equivocation are part of a now extensive theoretical literature in anthropology often described as an ontological or recursive 'turn' in the discipline. Though a diverse and varied movement whose subjects range from lab technicians and scientists to jaguars and shamans (e.g. Mol 2002; Pedersen 2011), the spirit of the turn, whose progenitors include Viveiros de Castro, Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner and Bruno Latour, concerns precisely the question of difference.

The fundamental theoretical premise of recursivity in anthropology is the idea that ethnographic data should have a transformative effect on anthropological concepts. A corollary of this premise is that there is not thus a substantive difference between those ethnographic data and those concepts, hence also the turn's 'ontological' nature: it famously aims to collapse the distinction between concepts and things (Henare et al. 2006). When I use the word in this book I will primarily be referring to those claims.

They are a gloss of what are in fact a range of extremely complex arguments, which have generated a rich range of further ethnographic insights. My interest here, however, is with difference as an ethnographic object, and as a relationship between ethnographic objects and analytical categories. Hence, I raise the issue of recursivity here for several reasons.

Firstly, and most obviously, because the ideas about difference and equivocal relationships that the 'turn' encapsulates are the latest set of interventions in that grand tradition of anthropological reflection on the status of anthropological knowledge itself that I have already mentioned. Indeed, it draws heavily on earlier work on precisely those issues, such as that of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern.

Secondly, because the 'recursive turn' provides perhaps the clearest and most coherent example of an answer to the theoretical question of this book, namely how theory and ethnography relate to one another. It is, I will suggest in Part Three, the most paradigmatic and logically elegant instance of a

broader trend in anthropology towards seeing ‘good’ theory as closely and directly tied to ethnography. This is a perspective that I will go on to suggest is at least implicitly common to much contemporary anthropological writing, and which Matei Candea and I elsewhere call ‘ethnographic foundationalism’ (Heywood forthcoming). What I mean by this is that according to this perspective, it is ethnography that is alleged to justify whatever analysis is presented, whether via a commitment to empiricism, politicized intersubjectivity or conceptual novelty, and unlike in earlier reflections on anthropological method (e.g. Leach 1961; Nadel 1951).

Finally, and as I have already suggested, I raise it because the kinds of relationships of otherness upon which authors such as Viveiros de Castro focus resemble those that my own ethnography treats.

This returns us to the question of the resemblance, or difference, between the ethnographic and theoretical foci of this book. I have noted that the two obviously differ in some ways. But they are also related, to the extent that the idea of a relationship of partial fidelity, a relationship through difference, very much resembles that of equivocation: in such a relationship one is connected differently to an object depending upon the position or context involved. As Viveiros de Castro puts it with a phrase that could equally well apply to LGBTQ activists, in such a relationship one finds oneself ‘united by that which divides ... linked by that which separates’ (2004: 17). Thus, with this comparison in mind, the arguments this book will make regarding the connection between theory and ethnography will be connected (recursively) to the relationships of difference I describe amongst LGBTQ activists in Bologna.

But for similar reasons, that cannot be the end of the answer: for the analogy undoes itself, just, as I will argue later, as do those internal to it. Connecting ethnographic relations in which disconnection, not connection, is key, to theoretical questions cannot mean entirely assimilating the two, for to do so would be to obscure how they connect in the first place: over difference. It would not ‘make a difference’, in the manner of my LGBTQ activist interlocutors.

Thus, doing what anthropologists usually do – connecting a theoretical issue to an ethnographic one – will not suffice on its own when the ethnographic issue in question is that of connections through difference. Instead, like the empirical differences this book describes, the book itself differs from them by connecting them to precisely these theoretical questions about theory and ethnography. In other words, the argument I will go on to make about the value of disconnecting theory from ethnography is partly an instance of itself. So this equivocal relationship, of both connection and disconnection, between queer activism and anthropological theory, mirrors – but also of course differs from – the equally equivocal relationships the ethnographic sections of this book will describe. What this further involves is a similarly partial relationship with recursivity, as in this case being recursive means being paradoxically non-recursive as well. A part of the effect of the arguments of the book will thus be to widen, not just to narrow, the gap between analysis and ethnography.

Hence, 'making difference' is both what LGBTQ activists in Bologna seek to do in a range of different ways, and what the book itself will seek to do by connecting (through their differences) the activities of LGBTQ activists to issues surrounding the relationship between theory and ethnography in anthropology. In line with this argument, what I will suggest in the concluding chapters of this book is that a possible direction for a 'post-recursive' anthropology (Pedersen 2012) to take is to abandon our quest for recursivity itself.

Difference from Whom?

My fieldwork was conducted over the course of the calendar year of 2012, during which I encountered a wide range of activist groups in Bologna. As I will describe in detail in Chapter 1, the city has long been a centre for radical left-wing politics in Italy. It witnessed the rise and fall of Europe's largest and most successful communist party at first hand, having been governed by the Italian Communist Party from the end of World War II until the party's dissolution in 1991, following a crisis meeting in Bologna itself. It was the site of worker protests during the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969, saw even larger student protests that ended in the death of a demonstrator in 1977, and was left scarred by the 'Years of Lead' – a period of left- and right-wing terrorism – after a bomb exploded at its train station in 1980, the worst atrocity of its kind at the time and the deadliest act of terror to take place on European soil before the Madrid train bombings of 2004.

At the time of my fieldwork it was home to several major centres of left-wing activism, and dozens of smaller ones. Amongst the former (housed in spaces known as *centri sociali*, often illegally occupied buildings) prominent examples were Ex Mercato 24 (XM24), a collective that emerged in the wake of the No Global movement of the late 1990s and by 2012 occupied itself with a variety of initiatives ranging from a language school for immigrants to the promotion of recycling; Teatro Polyvalente Occupato (TPO), originally a cultural collective founded by university students but which went on to concern itself with immigration and globalization; Laboratorio Crash!, another anti-globalization collective; and Vag61, a cultural centre that focused on immigration and local politics, amongst other issues.

These descriptions are brief, for though I spent time at each of these places and interviewed some of their members, they were not the focus of my fieldwork, which was instead spent largely examining groups that occupied themselves specifically with issues surrounding sexuality, which I describe below. I should also say that although my descriptions have made them sound relatively homogenous, they are in fact distinct in a number of ways. Some differences are broad and familiar even to casual observers of the activist scene: TPO, for example, partly because some of its funding comes from local government and because it considers itself to be more of a cultural than a political

group, is viewed as a very different kind of entity from, say, Crash!, which is much more oriented towards anarchism and direct political action. Members of either organization make these distinctions themselves, often in a manner critical of the other. Other differences are less clear, and newcomers to the scene often spend time in a number of centres before finding one that they are most comfortable with.

Lines of conflict within LGBTQ activism are also focused on questions of institutionalization. Bologna is home to the largest and oldest local base of Italy's most prominent LGBTQ rights organization, Arcigay. In contrast to the majority of the *centri sociali*, Arcigay is housed in a large and elegant space given over to it by the city's government, known as Cassero. Cassero, as the Bologna chapter of Arcigay is often thus called, is home to a sophisticated and complex organization that includes an extensive library, a youth and schools outreach programme, a counselling and health service, and a large disco. Again, unlike the *centri sociali*, which almost universally emphasize self-government and decision by consensus, it is formally structured, with a President and Vice-President responsible for its operations. As I will describe in detail in the second part of this book, these features, coupled with its focus on lobbying for familial and reproductive rights, mean it is perceived by many LGBTQ activists as being too close to mainstream politics in Italy, both literally through its association with the city's government, and conceptually in the sense that the principal objects of its activism (the legalization of gay marriage¹ and adoption and fertility rights for gay couples) are about normalizing LGBTQ life in Italy. Associated with Cassero – particularly with its lobbying aims – but organizationally distinct are two smaller groups that focus exclusively on issues regarding the family: Famiglie Arcobaleno and Agedo both dedicate themselves to helping LGBTQ couples adopt or receive fertility treatment abroad, and on providing counselling for those in problematical domestic situations.

On the other side of the divide in LGBTQ political activism are a range of smaller groups that are structured along lines similar to *centri sociali* and much more radical in their politics than Cassero. During the course of my fieldwork, a number of these groups were united by a generalized opposition to Cassero's plans for the 2012 national Pride which took place in Bologna (see Part Two), and by an informal network, and it was with members of this network – of varying degrees of dedication to it – that a large part of my fieldwork time was spent. This network – known as the PutaLesboTransFemministaQueer Network, which I shorten to 'Put Network' – was loosely based around an occupied building in the south of the city, close to where I lived.

The network originated in two ways: firstly with the Pride celebrations of 2010, in which various LGBTQ activist groups banded together to hold a festival at a local LGBTQ-friendly bar, in order to raise money for activists to travel to Naples for the national gathering (though this itself was an 'alternative' Pride, in opposition to the official one in Rome that year); and secondly with the massive demonstrations of 15 October 2011, against European and

global financial institutions and the government of Silvio Berlusconi, for which these same groups collaborated.

Resisting institutionalization was of great importance for the Puta Network, and so pinning down its precise constituent parts is no easy task. The most visible elements of it were as follows: Antagonismogay/Laboratorio Smaschieramenti were two groups composed largely of the same individuals. The first was one of the earliest occupiers of Atlantide, a queer collective composed of gay, lesbian and transgender activists who seek to relate LGBTQ activism to the struggles of migrants, women, ethnic minorities and the unemployed, and to make the politics of LGBTQ activism into something more than a struggle for normalization. The second was formed by members of Antagonismogay in 2008 with the specific goal of investigating alternative forms of masculinity to be found amongst the LGBTQ and activist community of the city. FrangettEstreme emerged from XM24 in 2008 with the aim of pushing back against what they saw as an increasing commercialization of the LGBTQ movement, particularly with regard to Pride. Let's Queer were a largely cultural group of post-feminists who emphasize the ludic aspects of activism, and stage events, workshops and concerts in the city. Made in Woman were a similarly cultural group that produces and promotes goods and events made and organized by its members. Movimento Identità Transessuale (MIT) is the oldest and most well-established transgender organization in Italy, and is based in Bologna. Its position in the network was somewhat ambiguous, as it was simultaneously collaborating with Cassero on the organization of the official Bologna 2012 Pride. Finally, the group with whose members I spent the most time was known as SexyShock/Betty&Books; SexyShock emerged in 2001 as a group within TPO dedicated to exploring female desires, but split from it in 2004, believing it to be too rigid in both its structure and its political ideology. Betty&Books is the cultural/commercial arm of SexyShock, selling sex toys and related products, at one point through a shop in the Castiglione section of the city, but later through its website, or through temporary stalls.

Apart from MIT, these groups were made up of small numbers of dedicated individuals who met relatively regularly either in Atlantide or similar locations. Meetings would usually revolve around planning activities and events for the forthcoming period, but might also involve workshops on sexuality, book readings and film projections. The people involved also tended to frequent the same bars, clubs and cafes and so formed a close-knit community. This was true also because they tended to be similar in other respects, ranging in age from late twenties through to mid-forties but rarely beyond these limits, and were for the most part either unemployed, employed in part-time precarious labour, or students. Despite these similarities however, there were also differences between them – not least because the performance of difference was an essential aspect of their activism, and Part Two of the book will describe these tensions over identity and difference in detail.

A number of key names will recur throughout this book, and though I will describe these individuals as they appear, I introduce a few of the most important ones here briefly as well, because they broadly characterize some of the different types of activist I encountered in Bologna.

Marina and Massimo were key figures in the Puta Network, its *de facto* leaders in many respects, as I describe in Chapter 4. Marina was a recent graduate from Bologna University in her late twenties, working part time alongside her activism. Quiet, serious and earnest, her personality contrasted with that of Massimo, a flamboyant and charismatic man in his early forties who tended to dominate many of the meetings I attended, and was a driving force in the debates around the 2012 Pride described in Chapter 4. He was one of the few activists I met with a permanent job with the local city council. Both Marina and Massimo were unswerving in their convictions about the merits of the Puta Network over Cassero, and queer politics more broadly over what they saw as the conservative identity politics of the institutionalized movement.

On the more institutionalized side of the movement, Gaia was an imposing woman in her sixties, a matriarchal figure who commanded a great deal of respect even from those who disagreed with her. Not herself gay, she had come to LGBTQ activism through her son's difficulties in coming out, and was a prominent member of groups associated with and lobbying for LGBTQ families. Despite her strong opinions and forceful personality, she was a firm advocate of compromise and unity amongst the various factions within the LGBTQ movement, and in our discussions would often do her best to see the positive side of any position. She saw no harm in working with rather than simply against local government, and though her instincts could often be as antinomian as those of Marina and Massimo, she was convinced – like many in Cassero – that the movement's most important contemporary task was the achievement of equal rights.

Finally, Laura, an activist with Betty&Books/SexyShock, was a woman in her early thirties, a graduate in semiotics, employed part-time writing grant proposals for a local healthcare institution, and otherwise supported by her parents. In these respects and others she was in many ways typical of the female queer activists I encountered in my fieldwork. She was not as rigid in her beliefs as Marina and Massimo could sometimes seem, but she was deeply unsympathetic to Cassero and to institutions like it. Like many other queer activists in Bologna, she had begun her activism with Cassero, but become disillusioned with its focus on marriage to the exclusion of other political issues, and so had gravitated towards more radical LGBTQ activist groups such as those in the Puta Network. Yet she was far from being in complete agreement with Massimo and Marina, and argued with them on a number of occasions. As Chapter 4 will describe, she was suspicious of any attempt to reduce the pluralism of the radical LGBTQ movement to a singular perspective. This led her – as it did others – to drift in and out of initiatives, whilst retaining an absolute conviction in the value of activism *per se*. She was usually

to be found dressed casually but elegantly in jeans and a t-shirt, often with a dash of lipstick on, and could be relied upon to be present at a range of the regular gatherings or meetings that took place in the city. Kind, open and extremely confident, she became both a close friend and an invaluable interlocutor.

Needless to say, these brief descriptions are intended only to give an introductory sense for the kinds of activist characters I encountered in my fieldwork. Most, like Laura, fell somewhere in between Gaia and Marina in many respects: university graduates in their thirties, without – like many Italians of that generation – fixed employment, unhappy with the leadership and aims of Cassero but not fully convinced by alternative organizations like the Puta Network either.

A final point worth emphasizing is that this book is not intended to be, or even to resemble, a comprehensive ethnographic account of queer activism 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 book's conclusion.

In *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass* (1987), a foundational text for Europeanist anthropologists, Michael Herzfeld makes an argument about Greece and about anthropology as a discipline. Highlighting the ways in which Greeks, at the margins of Europe and the Orient, have been subjected to a discourse that on the one hand sanctions those aspects of its culture considered appropriately 'European' and on the other condemns 'exotic' yet traditional Greek practices, Herzfeld contends that anthropology has long been engaged in the same process of distillation, in which its European origins are subtly elevated to the pinnacle of civilization through an obsessive focus on the 'exotic' other. To rectify this, he calls for an increased attention to the anthropology of Europe, in an effort to force the discipline to come to terms with its own historical and cultural context.

The argument Herzfeld makes about Greece could be made in much the same form with regard to Italy: the cultural, racial and even criminological 'peculiarities' of the *mezzogiorno* had been preoccupying native scholars for the best part of a century prior to the publication of Edward Banfield's *Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958; Gibson 1998), and as Bonaccorso notes (2009: 8), anthropology has often reproduced this tendency to concern itself with 'predominantly small peasant communities in the south of the country, in impoverished and economically underdeveloped areas'. Since Banfield, ethnographers, both native and otherwise, have continued to focus largely on

areas south of the capital (e.g. Belmonte 1979; Blok 1975; Brogger 1971; Douglass 1975; Galt 1980; Gambetta 1993; Giovannini 1981; Schneider and Schneider 1976, 1996, 2003; Schneider 1998; Silverman 1968; Tarrow 1967) and to emphasize the ‘Mediterranean’ theme of honour and shame.²

Herzfeld’s argument in *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass* has rightly shaped the way in which subsequent ethnographers have approached the study of Europe, including this one. The principal arguments I will make in this book are deeply influenced by Herzfeld’s concern for the relationship between theory and ethnography, yet I aim to experiment with an alternative manner of approaching that relationship. *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass* is premised on a symmetry between ‘modern anthropological theory and the ethnographic study of modern Greece’; Herzfeld argues that ‘boundary creation ... should be seen as a problem in the ethnography of anthropological theory’ (1987: 15). Instead of being bounded off from one another, he suggests, ‘in the Mediterranean context ... [anthropological categories] reproduce the ambiguities of identity ... that the local populations directly experience for themselves. In this way anthropological theory and indigenous experience come together in an accessible framework of comparison’ (1987: 16).

As I noted at the beginning of this section, a very similar argument might be made with regard to Italy: for decades (at least prior to Herzfeld’s writing) Italianist ethnography was overwhelmingly focused upon the rural south, or upon the ‘honour and shame complex’. Yet a range of recent work has challenged this predominance through studies of immigration, urban life and political economy (e.g. Dines 2012; Goddard 1996; Herzfeld 2009; Kertzer 1980; Krause 2009; Mahmud 2014; Però 2007; Molé 2012a; Muehlebach 2012; Yanagisako 2002). Thanks at least in part to its own persuasiveness, in this respect Herzfeld’s argument no longer rings completely true. This is not, however, the only sense in which the kind of comparison Herzfeld had in mind might apply to my own argument. I will describe the political thought of the activists with whom I worked in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, but even the rudimentary outlines I have provided here should make it clear that they are far from being worlds apart from some aspects of anthropological theory. My interlocutors talked about Foucault, and they talked about Judith Butler; they talked about constructivism, and about performativity; and as I have mentioned already, their interest in difference unites them both intellectually and in many senses politically with the anthropological enterprise.

But it is precisely this interest in difference – and the broader focus of this book on relations of difference, rather than similarity – that makes a straightforward comparison with anthropology inappropriate. To be ‘symmetrical’ as an account of such relations of difference cannot mean erasing the difference between that account and those relations.

This is more than just a question of analytical strategy. Assuming a straightforward equation between the categories of anthropological analysis and those of Euro-American thought is no longer unproblematic. The developments in

anthropological theory which make some of the arguments of this book possible are derived from ethnographic material from places as diverse as Amazonia, Cuba and Mongolia; and even if we dispute the claims to recursivity that these authors make, we must at least acknowledge the difference between the theoretical models they employ and those that Herzfeld identifies as being based on ethnocentric assumptions.

Does this imply, then, that contemporary anthropological concepts have now advanced radically beyond those with which we were accustomed to think when the discipline was still blinkered by its 'Western' origins? The claim I wish to make here is less ambitious than that. What I want to argue is that though the contents of the arguments of Herzfeld and of recent thinkers on recursivity are very different, they in fact share both a question and the form of a certain kind of response: both are concerned with the way in which ethnography ought to relate to theory, and both look to ethnography for an answer to this question.

What I will argue here instead is that the question is by its nature an intrinsically anthropological one. In asking it, we presuppose a distinction – or at least an equivocal relationship – between the ethnographic data we observe in the field and the analysis of it we provide subsequently, one that cannot exist for those who do not do both. Note that there is absolutely no consequential claim that this makes us in any sense whatsoever 'superior' to those we study. The claim instead is no more than the bland truism that our task is not the same as theirs.

So rather than proposing an alternative to Herzfeld's formulation of 'comparison' because thinkers such as Viveiros de Castro have provided us with categories that are not 'Euro-American', I am suggesting that 'comparison' may not be an appropriate formulation because in so far as we are concerned with this relationship, our categories are not – and perhaps were never – identical with those of any particular ethnographic location, an argument I develop further in my conclusion. Viveiros de Castro and others have shown us that 'culture' is not the relative answer to universal questions but that questions themselves differ across contexts. To which I add merely that anthropology may have its own distinct set of questions too, of which perhaps the most crucial is that which both Viveiros de Castro and Herzfeld pose: how do our questions relate to those of our interlocutors? But that is itself our question, not theirs.

Given this, the experiment I will conduct with this book is to try to respond to this question not with 'comparison' or recursivity, but with equivocation and partial fidelity. What will it look like to try to 'take seriously' a Euro-American ethnographic context with theories influenced by the thought of Amerindian shamans? What kind of account can we produce when we seek not a confluence of concepts and materials, but a separation, not only from those materials but from the aim of confluence itself? How can we be recursive when 'making a difference' is both object and method of analysis?

As many readers will already be thinking, this kind of project has obvious ethical implications, particularly given that it is concerned with people struggling for various forms of recognition. The following section will seek to address some of these implications.

Why Make Difference?

In their landmark introduction to a symposium dedicated to anthropology and human rights (2005), Jean-Klein and Riles make a startling suggestion: instead, they argue, of asking what anthropology can do to be relevant to the human rights sector, they pose the question of ‘what anthropological encounters with human rights contribute to the development of our discipline’ (2005: 174). Flying in the face, they note, of a widespread preoccupation with ‘anti-disciplinarity’ as a cure for all the political and analytical ills of the academy, and of an equally widespread sense that to care about discipline – our discipline – ‘constitutes a form of perversion – a kind of lapse of professional ethics’ (2005: 174), they follow Pels (2002) in arguing that ‘self-disciplined ethnographic engagement is a form of professional commitment to humanitarian ethics ... [and] also necessarily a form of care for the discipline itself’ (2005: 175). In a statement phrased much more eloquently than the way in which I have tentatively echoed it above, they argue that ‘[e]thnography, and the commitments it demands, is in fact the only form of engagement that our profession is uniquely qualified to administer’ (2005: 175).

The reason their discussion of the relationship between anthropology and human rights is pertinent to my own argument is not only because of their stirring defence of a concern for anthropology’s own interests, but also because of the curious parallels between the kind of human rights literature to which they object and some aspects of the literature of anthropology’s ‘recursive turn’. I expand on this analogy in Chapter 6, but for now I focus on two trends they identify in anthropological engagements with human rights: the first they call ‘co-construction’, and the second, ‘denunciation’.

Co-construction, or ‘giving voice’, is the sympathetic approach taken by anthropologists interested in the ‘experiential dimensions’ (2005: 177) of what Joel Robbins has recently called ‘the suffering subject’ (2013). Focused, in the human rights sector, on narratives of violence and loss, ‘giving voice’, as Jean-Klein and Riles note, ‘curiously became a kind of postmodern solution to the critiques of positivism on the one hand, and to the vilification of theory on the other (as in the conceit that one could get away from representational authority and epistemological debates and simply “listen to people’s voices”)’ (2005: 177).

Denunciation, on the other hand, is what Jean-Klein and Riles identify as the critical approach taken by anthropologists when studying either situations of violence or oppression, and thus from a humanitarian perspective, or responses

to such situations on the part of states or NGOs which are viewed with suspicion because of their 'formalized' or 'institutional' nature (2005: 180).

Both approaches could be applied to my ethnographic context. Interviews I conducted with LGBTQ couples who had succeeded, against enormous odds and in spite of the legal and political obstacles the Italian state put in their way, in adopting children or receiving fertility treatment abroad were deeply affecting, and if their narratives do not form a part of this particular project it is because there is not the space here to do them proper justice. Similarly, Italy's woefully inadequate record of securing and protecting the rights of its LGBTQ citizens (e.g. Mahony 2013), not to mention the homophobic and racist statements that the nation's elected representatives make on a regular basis (e.g. ANSA 2013), are targets of critique and denunciation so obvious that it barely requires stating.

Both approaches are also curiously similar, in some senses, to aspects of anthropology's recent 'recursive turn', though their respective advocates may not find the comparison entirely to their liking. The idea of 'giving voice' as a resolution to epistemological problems sounds not unlike the implicit promise of transparency to be found in variations of the 'follow the actors themselves' formula that inspires Latourian variants of the turn (Latour 2005), particularly in its suspicion of 'theory'. Though the projects of Latour and of the authors Jean-Klein and Riles have in mind (e.g. Zur 1996; Wilson 2003) are worlds apart in a number of ways – particularly in their relationship to politics – they are made strange bedfellows by their rhetorical antipathy for anything that intrudes upon the immediacy of ethnographic presentation. They share the perspective I described earlier as 'ethnographic foundationalism'.

A perhaps somewhat clearer parallel can be drawn between the approach Jean-Klein and Riles call 'denunciation' and the more politically-inspired variants of the 'recursive turn' (e.g. Blaser 2009, 2013; de la Cadena 2010; di Giminiani 2013; Salmond 2012; see also Lloyd 2011: 838; and Holbraad et al. 2014). As I have already noted, much of the turn's metaphysics are inspired by a critique of those they see as 'Euro-American' (Descartes being the most frequent shorthand target, e.g. Robertson 2011), and some emphasize this critique more than others. Probably the clearest example of this sort of position is to be found in some of Viveiros de Castro's writings, in which he is more or less explicit about his lack of interest in 'taking seriously' Western philosophy, and the politics that inspires this (e.g. 2011a; 2011b; 2013: 497).

The purpose of drawing out these parallels is to highlight the fact that the problems Jean-Klein and Riles identify with both 'co-construction' and 'denunciation' are also to be found in the 'recursive turn'. Firstly, both are duplicative; as Jean-Klein and Riles note,

although anthropologists often claim observation and representation as their domains of expertise, for example, much human rights work consists also of fact-finding, reporting, analysis, and poetic evocation – even 'contextualisation' ... likewise, where anthropologists aspire to the role of expert critic of human rights

administration, communities of ‘critical legal scholars’ now invoke the same bodies of critical theory to produce highly nuanced, sophisticated analyses of the type anthropologists ideally hope to produce. (2005: 184)

This is absolutely true of my interlocutors (one group even conducted an ‘ironic’ survey of attitudes to masculinity). Of course, this is also true of ‘recursive turn’ anthropology, to the precise extent to which it succeeds in making the relationship between indigenous categories and anthropological ones recursive.

Furthermore, as Jean-Klein and Riles go on to argue, it should not be surprising that this kind of intentional duplication leads on to a consequent problem of iteration. Just like anthropological engagements with human rights – and indeed with activism (e.g. Low and Merry 2010; Merry 2008; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006; Turner 2006) – and despite their comparable professed emphases on innovation and contingency, recursive analyses are often remarkably homogenous, as Martin Holbraad himself has noted (2017), an issue I expand upon in Chapter 5.

I conclude this section with a final quotation from Jean-Klein and Riles that neatly summarizes both their position and the beginnings of my own: ‘our larger point, then, is that if at times it seems that 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’ (2005: 188). Because of this same conviction that a difference between anthropology and its object is worth producing (or ‘making’), for reasons Part Three will set out, my account will at least endeavour not to mirror the practices and categories of my interlocutors, either by ‘giving voice’ to their interpretations of Foucault or Butler, or by ventriloquizing their critiques of the Italian state, although it will undoubtedly fail at least occasionally in this endeavour. Crucially, though, what I add to Jean-Klein and Riles is that this conviction that difference must be produced is not merely an analytical one: it will be one of the central arguments of this book that the production of difference is an essential aspect of LGBTQ activism (see Chapters 4 and 6). So, bringing us back to the paradoxically recursive/non-recursive nature of this account, it is the production of difference, not difference itself, which is a found object here, and for that very reason, this account will aim to produce a difference between itself and its object.

Outline of Chapters

This book is divided into three parts, each containing two chapters. Part One describes some key aspects of the moral and political context of queer activism in Bologna, and introduces the issues of relatedness and difference with which the book will be concerned. Chapter 1 describes the recent political history of Bologna as a hotbed of left-wing activism, and highlights the

frequency with which people self-designate as left-wing, regardless of the actual content of their political beliefs. It thus shows how the idea of 'left-wing' in Bologna does not function to homogenize a particular political community, but to connect radically different ideas that might otherwise fail to relate to one another through a homonym over the proper meaning of which people can disagree. Chapter 2 explores a similar relationship in regard to moral codes, in which it is possible to subscribe to ethical injunctions in such a way that the eventuality of their betrayal under certain conditions is already allowed for.

Part Two focuses in on the notions of identity and difference with which queer activism is concerned. Chapter 3 describes a set of dialogues between queer activists and a pro-LGBT liberal Catholic group, using them to explore some notions of difference at work amongst queer activists in Bologna and the ways in which these dialogues faltered with a failure to agree on how the groups in questions actually differed. Chapter 4, the culmination of the book's ethnographic portion, sets out its key ethnographic focus by showing how important but also problematical the production of difference is to activists through a series of key debates that took place in advance of the 2012 Italian national Pride week in Bologna. It shows how a belief in the virtue and necessity of performing difference from any form of fixed identity led activists repeatedly to reject attempts to unify them around either support of or objection to the city's official Pride celebrations. Yet it also shows how on occasions like the day of the parade itself, it was precisely this belief in the value of difference that did bring them together as a community.

Part Three turns from the problem of difference in queer activism to the problem of the alleged identity between theory and ethnography in anthropology. Chapter 5 makes this switch in registers as clear as possible, surveying some responses to the question of what form the relation between theory and ethnography should take, and showing how much contemporary reflection on the topic aims to collapse the distinction between the two, whilst in fact relying upon it. This forms the centrepiece of a critique of what I call 'ethnographic foundationalism', on the basis that it purports to absolve anthropologists from the need to reflect on the epistemological foundations of their claims. Thus, the chapter's move away from queer activism in Bologna and towards theoretical abstraction is a deliberate instance of its own argument. Chapter 6 returns to ethnographic concerns by showing how the problem of ethnographic foundationalism is in fact very similar to the problem of difference in queer activism. As an argument though, that clearly verges on ethnographic foundationalism itself, as it derives what force it has from a direct comparison of an analytical and an ethnographic question. The book thus concludes by breaking down that very comparison in order to ask whether anthropology could possess what queer activism refuses: its own essential identity.

Notes

1. At the time of my fieldwork, neither same-sex civil unions nor marriage were legal in Italy, and prior to 2012 the legal recognition of same-sex relationships was not a part of the platform of any major Italian political party. Civil unions have been recognized in the country since June 2016.
2. For successive overviews of 'Mediterranean' literature, see Davis (1977), Gilmore (1982) and Pitt-Rivers' (1977) volume on 'the politics of sex' as well as Herzfeld (1980, 1985) and Peristiany (1965) for examples of 'honour and shame'; for subsequent critiques of the 'Mediterranean' as a regional category see Herzfeld (1984), Pina-Cabral (1989), SERG (1981); for a more recent survey and the argument that 'Mediterranean anthropology' is undergoing a renaissance, see Albera (2006), and Ben-Yehoyada (2014).