

Anthropology News



Queer Language Matters

Siobhán McGuirk

William Leap

The 22nd Conference on Lavender Languages and Linguistics to be Held Feb 13–15

For many lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer (LGBTQ) activists, visibility stands as a central [measure of equal rights campaigns](#). Seeing queer characters on primetime TV is undeniably exciting. Yet it is also concerning, because the most popular shows (*Modern Family*, *Glee*, *Transparent*) tend to show LGBTQ people as affluent, employed, well fed, and well housed. The reality is that [most do not enjoy such benefits](#). Even with increased visibility, there remains a real danger that large segments of LGBTQ experience, especially those of people living on the margins, are ignored.



Lavender languages participants in 2013. Photo courtesy American University Staff
Photographer Jeff Watts

Language matters in LGBTQ experience, and a great deal. In Sweden, conceptions of gender may be transformed by the formal [introduction of a new, gender-neutral pronoun into the country's dictionary](#). In Washington, DC, the language of "Prostitution Free Zones" has opened the gates for District police, relying on prejudicial stereotypes, to [target trans women](#) for arrest. In Uganda, activists have used [song lyrics, newspapers and magazines](#) to assert "kuchu" presence—using local languages and terminology to refute the popular notion that queerness is a "Western import". In San Francisco, the city's [last dyke bar](#) and [only queer Latino bar](#) recently shut down, prompting the question: Are ubiquitous "LGBTQ friendly" venues desirable, if diverse queer spaces are subsequently erased?

For the past 22 years, [The Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference at American University](#) has provided a site where those interested in language, gender and sexuality studies can explore those experiences. Conference discussions address spoken, written, signed, filmed, imaged and other languages, always foregrounding the languages of queer people and keeping queer people themselves in the center of the conversation.

The first Lavender Languages Conference was held in conjunction with the National March for Lesbian and Gay Equality in 1993. The conference has transformed over two decades of substantial change, in society at large and within the academy. A half-day meeting in 1993 has grown into a full three-day event. This year's program includes timely panels on sexuality, Islam and Francophone cultures, (anti-)homophobic discourses, trans experiences, international queer political dissidence, and—a new topic for conference discussion—language and queer ecology.

Individual papers explore the backstage talk of drag queens, the language of redemption among gay Jews, ways of being a fashionable butch, and queer sign language in the UK. An Artists Salon features the current creative projects of queer filmmakers, musicians and visual artists.

The conference is now international, with presenters coming from Australia, Hong Kong, Germany, France, North Africa, Mexico, Canada, and across the US. Moreover, those reading papers include undergraduates, graduate students university faculty and community activists – testament to conference efforts to maintain an open, egalitarian, "no attitude" environment, and to avoid reproducing academic hierarchy and queer elitism.

Papers presented at Lavender Languages conferences over the past two decades have gone on to shape the directions of queer linguistics and language and sexuality studies. The conference takes pride in creating a site where dissident points of view about queer language and related topics can be openly explored. Similar opportunities may not exist in other conference settings in anthropology and linguistics, judging by the limited number of LGBTQ-themed panels included in their programs. Registration fees and other (financial, social) conditions can also restrict participation. In this sense, activities at the Lavender Languages Conference complement the resources of mainstream academic discourse. Yet in some ways, that location also ensures its marginality.

Queer linguistics itself continues to grapple with this issue of mainstream vs. marginal placement. Linguistics is a mode of “scientific” inquiry, deeply rooted in technical procedures and positivist assumptions about the stability of data. Queer theory, on the other hand, draws on a range of academic and political practices, emphasizing, in the words of Nora Giffney, [“defiance, celebration and refusal.”](#) These points of view do not integrate easily, as some anthropology students developing language-centered projects within a framework of queer inquiry will attest. Similarly, those on the job market may not always find that prospective employers treat proficiency in queer theory as a job-search priority – in linguistics or any of the subfields.

From its inception, the Lavender Languages Conference has also addressed these aspects of LGBTQ language research. Informal networks of scholars have emerged from the conference, (greatly enabled by email, Facebook and Skype) to produce research and publication projects informed by international perspectives, including the [Journal of Language and Sexuality](#). The conference strives to provide formal and informal opportunities for mentoring, across and within generational cohorts and in dialogue with community activists working with language related issues in daily struggle.

So: Does language matter in LGBTQ experience? Certainly, there is more at stake here than the forms of public proclamation that the media and the mainstream so greatly adore. This is the point that the Lavender Languages Conference has always argued, when supporting studies of language and experience in all domains of the sexual margin.

The 22nd annual Lavender Language Conference will be held February 13–15, 2015. For information, visit the [Lavender Languages Conference website](#).

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Anthropology News



Multiplying Moscow

Soyuz Postsocialist Studies Network

Till Mostowlansky

Provisioning and Connectivity on the Roof of the World

On a cold winter morning in 2010 I travelled with the driver Mital and a group of other passengers from the town of Murghab in Tajikistan to Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan. While the journey usually takes a day, snowfall, a damaged car or border closure can turn the trip on the Pamir Highway into an indefinite endeavor. None of my fellow passengers was therefore surprised when the engine of Mital's UAZ jeep began to stutter in the mountainous no-man's-land at the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. As it turned out the heavy wet snow had consumed the car's adulterated fuel faster than expected and left us stuck far away from the next village. In search of gasoline Mital and I trudged through the snow to one of the road supply stations that date back to the Soviet construction of the highway. As we approached the moldering group of buildings that are still manned by families of herders and road constructors, Mital began to describe the bustling traffic along the road back in the 1980s. And when we sucked the last liters of fuel from a disintegrating snowplough with a tube he told me how much sweeter the never-ending supply of Soviet gasoline had tasted.



On the search for fuel with Mital (March 2010). Photo courtesy Till Mostowlansky

To be sure Soviet rule in the Autonomous Region of Gorno-Badakhshan, now bordering Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and China, had not been a bed of roses either. Indeed civil war in the 1920s, Stalin, WWII and economic hardship would give the inhabitants of the sparsely inhabited most eastern tip of Tajikistan enough reasons to reject nostalgia. If it were not for the last two decades of Soviet hegemony from the 1960s onwards, which brought year-round connectivity to other parts of the Union, as well as a phenomenon colloquially named "Moscow provisioning" (*moskovskoe obespechenie*).

The integration of regions considered "periphery" through the establishing of physical links to "the center" had been an important theme since the early days of Soviet planning. The construction of the Pamir Highway leading from Osh via Murghab to Khorog at the Afghan border, a high altitude region often labeled the "Roof of the World" (*krysha mira*), began in this spirit and resulted in regular automobile traffic from 1935 onwards. On a local level the construction of the road caused an incisive reorientation away from long established ties to China and Afghanistan towards Soviet territory only. In addition, job opportunities along the Pamir Highway led to migration

and therefore to a transformation of the region's social and physical landscapes.



In the process of securing the frontier region and establishing a loyal border society "Moscow provisioning" constituted a particular tool of governance. But "Moscow provisioning" did not just signify a supply chain of goods and benefits emanating from "the center" to settlements along the Pamir Highway. For people in the region it also meant a cultural connection to Moscow in the sense of being modern, educated, Russophone, mobile and multi-ethnic. This cultural connection was reinforced by the presence of engineers, scientists and large deployments of border guards in Gorno-Badakhshan as well as by local people travelling to other parts of the Soviet Union for education and work.

With reference to Shurab, a mining town in the Tajik part of the Ferghana Valley, the anthropologist [Madeleine Revees](#) shows in her book [Border Work](#) that *moskovskoe obespechenie* was as much provisioning as it was incorporation and enclosure. In this regard, one can imagine the process whereby a town is chosen as significant, uplifted

A road supply station at the Tajik-Kyrgyz border (March 2010). Photo courtesy Till Mostowlansky

to a special status and made distinct from its neighbors. Indeed it can best be imagined in a context where “Moscow multiplying outward”, as Reeves calls it, applies to the transfer from megacity to provincial town. However, the Soviet definition of “Moscow provisioning” actually went beyond the evident and extended to deserted

high altitude places and regions that are conventionally put into the rubric of extreme marginality.



Travellers resting in a teahouse on the Pamir Highway between Osh and Murghab (August 2011). Photo courtesy Till Mostowlansky

In Gorno-Badakhshan, the afterlife of “Moscow provisioning” is omnipresent. While it lingers on in people’s nostalgia and erupts in everyday remarks “Moscow provisioning” and past connectivity also have actual effects on current political aspirations and the formation of alliances. A vivid example for this is the presence of the Aga Khan Development Network, a set of international institutions with Shia-Ismaili background, which grew into powerful players in the region during the Tajik civil war (1992-1997).

With a large bag of dollars and under the auspices of capitalism these institutions are in many ways walking in the footsteps of the Soviet state. Serving large parts of the population of Gorno-Badakhshan, the majority of whom are Shia-Ismaili, the Aga Khan Development Network and affiliated organizations invest in infrastructure, health care and education. In addition, they provide access to a transnational religious network which caters to Ismailis and created links to Europe and the US. Those less fortunate, such as the driver Mital, are still on the lookout for a new “provider” and will probably have to suck fuel from abandoned Soviet vehicles for a while. The alternative would be labor migration to Russia – a thing to avoid as Mital also stated since “Moscow shines brighter from afar”.



The moldering airport of Murghab (July 2010), copyright Till Mostowlansky

[Till Mostowlansky](#) is a post-doctoral researcher at the [University of Bern, Switzerland](#). Till authored the 2007 monograph [Islam und Kirgisen on Tour: Die Rezeption “nomadischer Religion” und ihre Wirkung](#) [Islam and Kyrgyz on Tour: The Perception of “Nomadic Religion” and Its Effect] as well as of several articles on local history, modernity, mobility and development in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Pakistan.

Kristen Ghodsee is contributing editor of the Soyuz column in Anthropology News.

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AAA Career Expo(sed)

Anthropology Works

Kenda R Stewart

Anthropologists Who Work for the Department of Veterans Affairs



Kenda Stewart in front of the Washington Monument, 2014 AAA meetings.

Fourteen years ago, I attended my first AAA meetings. My most vivid memory from those meetings, besides eating sushi for the first time, was of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Paul Farmer debating the merits of public and applied anthropology before a packed house. Anthropologists continue to engage these questions even as the employment world has changed, with fewer tenure-track jobs for anthropology doctorates, due to a combination of the economic recession, university restructuring, and influx of potential hires. Thus, anthropology students and recent graduates are searching outside the academy for personally meaningful work that can also help pay those student loans. I've attended the AAAs semi-regularly since then, and largely, the questions remain the same. To work within or practice outside the academy? Who are our publics? What does an anthropologist outside the academy do, anyway?

While participating in the 2014 AAA Career Expo held at the recent meetings (jointly sponsored by the [National Association for the Practice of Anthropology](#) and AAA), I was struck by the familiarity of the questions I and my colleagues fielded: What does an anthropologist do for VA? Is that really considered anthropology? How do I find a job opening? Do I need a résumé? How do you do research? How can I be qualified if I've never worked on Veterans' issues?

Attendees' lack of familiarity with professional anthropology careers is troubling. Although an applied anthropology career remains relatively opaque when compared to the traditional path of a tenure-track anthropologist, in reality, there are many similarities. In an effort to provide a grounded example of anthropologists' contributions and careers outside academia, I offer a general overview of my professional world, that of VA anthropologists and how we operate within a large, bureaucratic organization.

To provide a grounded example of anthropologists' contributions and careers outside academia, I offer a general overview of my professional world, that of VA anthropologists and how we operate within a large, bureaucratic organization.

To date, there are approximately 60 anthropologists working for the Department of Veterans Affairs, a majority of whom work in the Veterans Health Administration. To illustrate a snapshot of an anthropological community at work in the public sector, I conducted a survey (using [surveymonkey.com](#)) of VA anthropologists who participate on a private listserv. Respondents were asked 10 questions regarding their educational training, their tenure in the VA, and how they define their work.

Twenty-five out of 70 subscribers responded to the 10-question survey, and of these 25, 72% graduated with an anthropology degree and 87.5% identified as anthropologists, while the remainder identified as sociologists, gerontologists, cultural geographers, or qualitative project managers. Eighty percent of respondents have completed a PhD, and a little over half have a faculty appointment with a university. Most respondents (86.36%) have worked for the VA for less than 10 years, reflecting the VA Health Services and Research Department's (HSR&D) relatively recent interest in employing anthropologists and qualitative researchers.

Respondents hold a variety of positions in the VA. *Investigators* are typically responsible for obtaining research funding for projects that they lead, which interestingly parallels the academic tenure track with emphasis placed on grants awarded and publications. When asked how they measure their

productivity, respondents mostly cited publications, grant submissions, and participation in research projects as markers of their work. However, respondents also listed “service,” “interventions implemented into VA practice,” and “impact on community and clinical practice,” as evidence of productivity. *Qualitative Analysts* often work on mixed methods projects, where they may lead or assist in collecting and analyzing qualitative data. Depending on the structure of the research center, Qualitative Analysts may or may not be involved in grant-writing. *Research assistants, Administrators, and Coordinators* provide logistical and analytical support to the research teams. This includes budget tracking, managing personnel, and expertise in IRB, VA, and HSR&D policies and procedures.

VA anthropologists are involved in a wide array of projects. Some are heavily research-driven, focusing on comparative effectiveness of a treatment. Others focus on implementation, interventions, and quality improvement. Current projects among respondents included: smoking cessation interventions; improved access to care for rural Veterans with HIV; care for Veterans with spinal cord injuries; creative and therapeutic outlets for Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder; access to care for homeless Veterans; identifying and providing care to Veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma; tailoring services for LGBTQ Veterans; and building capacity of health care providers to serve a diverse population of Veterans effectively and efficiently. Indeed, 17 separate papers discussing many of these topics were presented by VA-employed anthropologists at the 2014 AAA meetings.

Based on my own work in VA, my experiences at the AAA meetings, and the responses of my colleagues, anthropologists inside and outside academia share a commitment to publishing as a way to have their work recognized. This speaks to anthropologists' desire to share the results of their research in order to positively impact social policy, whether it is improving Veterans' health care or anthropologically theorizing human behavior and relationships. However, for many anthropologists who work outside the academy, support for external publishing may be dependent on their employers' priorities, and they may find they have little time or incentive to publish in peer-reviewed journals typically read by anthropologists. The AAA Career Expo is a great way to introduce students and recent graduates to the variety of careers available for anthropologists.

However, this should not be the students' or young professionals' first exposure to nonacademic anthropology careers. As current [NASA](#) president Andrew Tartar demonstrated in [last month's column](#), there is student demand for rigorous, systematic training in qualitative interviewing, observation, grant writing, and statistics. Professors and practitioners should facilitate dialogue with each other and with their students. Greater integration of different career options throughout students' training could shape the discipline into one that knows exactly what and how our expertise contributes to organizations outside the university context.

Greater integration of different career options throughout students' training could shape the discipline into one that knows exactly what and how our expertise contributes to organizations outside the university context.

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