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The Intersection of Queer Theory and Empirical Methods: Visions for CLAGS, the Center for LGBTQ Studies

Kevin L. Nadal

In 1991 Martin Duberman and his colleagues founded the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the Graduate Center in the City University of New York (CUNY). Since its inception, CLAGS has been at the forefront of queer studies, promoting the study of historical, cultural, and political issues of vital concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals and communities. For twenty-five years, CLAGS has sponsored groundbreaking public programs and conferences; has offered fellowships and scholarships to academics, artists, and students; and has functioned as an indispensable conduit of information. As the first university-based LGBTQ research center in the United States, CLAGS (which was rebranded in 2014 as CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies) has served as a national center for the promotion of queer and trans* studies.

For decades, CLAGS has been a haven for many queer theorists—from the CLAGS founder Martin Duberman to Kessler Award Winners (e.g., Judith Butler, Jonathan Ned Katz, Susan Stryker) to past CLAGS board members (e.g., José Esteban Muñoz, Lisa Duggan, and Gayatri Gopinath). Queer theorists aim to challenge the conceptualizations of what is legitimate and acceptable. CLAGS has been a place where people question how “normal” is conceived in society (through gender binaries, sexualities, politics, behavior) while celebrating what is “queer” (applauding that which is different while validating experiences of the oppressed). Queer theorists recognize that systemic heterosexism, sexism, and transphobia are embedded throughout society and that it is imperative to change the ways that scholars approach research, so as to not condone heteronormative and cis-sexist male approaches as the only methods of inquiry.

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Without the queering of methods of the past, there would be a dearth of LGBTQ academic literature today. If scholars in LGBTQ studies (including those involved with CLAGS for the past twenty-five years) had merely focused on rigid scientific methods as ways of rejecting null hypotheses, it is probable that there would be little academic writing about LGBTQ people. Participant samples would never be large enough, resulting in low effect sizes and few analyses that would be considered scientifically robust. If previous researchers had limited themselves to measures normed on samples of white, heterosexual, and cisgender men, it is likely that LGBTQ people (and others) would continue to be stereotyped as abnormal, inferior to the dominant groups, or both.

Over the years, CLAGS's approach to queering methods has been multifaceted. First, through public programs CLAGS encourages dialogue with people affiliated with the academy, as well as those who are not. In doing so, CLAGS offers CUNY students a queer education in that they learn not just from professors and textbooks but also from community members from multiple educational backgrounds, perspectives, and life experiences. Concurrently, CLAGS also queers education for individuals without scholastic opportunities, who now have access to learn about theoretical concepts that they might not ever be exposed to otherwise. For instance, since 1998, the CLAGS Seminar in the City series has allowed community members to take weekly classes, taught by a professor, on some topic related to LGBTQ studies. Often, the topic is one that is not offered by traditional academic institutions, such as "Queering the Crip/ Crippling the Queer: Introduction to Queer and Disability Studies" in 2003.

CLAGS has also queered research methods to reframe the narrative of LGBTQ research. For centuries, non-LGBTQ-identified researchers studied individuals who were deemed to have nontraditional sexual orientations and gender identities in pathologizing and harmful ways. Scientists performed castrations, lobotomies, electroshock therapy, and other heinous acts to "cure" people of their "disorders." It was not until 1973 that "homosexuality" was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* on psychiatric disorders. And while no longer labeled "gender identity disorder," the current *DSM* still includes gender dysphoria among the list of disorders. CLAGS encourages research to be conducted by LGBTQ people (and non-LGBTQ people who are LGBTQ-affirming) and to focus on the various strengths

of LGBTQ individuals and communities. While it is valid and important for researchers to concentrate on LGBTQ disparities (such as HIV/AIDS, substance use) in hopes of addressing, treating, and/or minimizing such experiences, it is equally important to identify the protective factors that allow for LGBTQ people to survive and thrive. For instance, CLAGS initiated the LGBTQ Scholars of Color Network in 2014 and hosted its first national conference in 2015. Conference coordinators were intentional in promoting a resilience model (which celebrated the achievements of those who have navigated historic racist, heterosexist, and cis-sexist systems) instead of the deficit model in which LGBTQ people of color are usually framed. Similarly, CLAGS supports and promotes research about concepts that are typically viewed as pathological in non-LGBTQ communities yet may be quite normalized in LGBTQ communities (sex work for survival, polygamy, hookup culture, or BDSM).

Visions for CLAGS

Through the years, I believe that CLAGS has fulfilled its mission of being a catalyst for social change. We have allowed for people to learn about LGBTQ identities and experiences, we have encouraged (and facilitated) difficult dialogues about diverse sexualities and genders, and we have attempted to support and mentor future generations of LGBTQ scholars. Despite this, I believe there are many opportunities for CLAGS to use our research to advocate for social change on systemic and societal levels. I believe CLAGS can continue to utilize the aforementioned queer methods, while also being open to integrating traditional research methods into our practices in new ways that may blur the line between queer and traditional modes of research.

First, I purport that CLAGS needs to be more interdisciplinary. While queer studies has roots in the humanities, there has been a significant increase in LGBTQ scholars in fields like psychology, public health, and medicine. While I believe that it is crucial for young LGBTQ people to read James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, I believe it is just as important for them to understand the current state of health, economics, and well-being for LGBTQ people today. Further, in the same ways that I have made efforts to understand how phenomena like intersectionalities or identity development are studied in the humanities, I think it is crucial for everyone to be familiar with the empirical methods used in social sciences to

investigate similar concepts. Perhaps CLAGS programming or scholarships can encourage more research on topics in which LGBTQ people are understudied but overrepresented (criminal justice, homelessness, etc.).

Second, CLAGS should endorse more empirical research, particularly to influence legislation and court decisions. For instance, in *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, which legalized same-sex marriage in California (and influenced other states and SCOTUS to follow suit), attorneys relied on researchers like Gregory Herek or Ilan Meyer to discuss their research on multiple topics (sexual orientation identity development, psychological effects of discrimination) to support their case. Opposing counsel attempted to introduce biased religious researchers whose expertise was based on anecdotal experiences and problematic research methods (studying narratives of survivors of abuse and generalizing it to the entire LGBTQ community), all of which were deemed inadmissible in court by the judge. If research can influence local, state, or federal court cases, and eventually lead to changes in federal law, then perhaps CLAGS should integrate more rigorous research methods to instill systemic change.

Third, many LGBTQ researchers know that there is very little funding—particularly federal funding—for the study of LGBTQ people. Even less funding is offered for those who use qualitative methods or anything not considered empirical or quantitative. Perhaps CLAGS should promote more mixed-methods approaches (or collaborations that would foster such qualitative/quantitative scholarly cross talk), so that LGBTQ research would be more competitive for funding. While many LGBTQ researchers may prefer qualitative or observational designs (including the case studies and close readings that queer theory has been known for) because they seem more personable or less intrusive, funders seem to prefer quantitative designs with more robust samples because of the perception that larger samples equate to more generalizability. Perhaps mixed methodology can secure more funding, while staying true to queer theory in challenging traditional approaches. If more funding would signify more resources for LGBTQ communities, then being open to new designs would be worth considering.

Finally, as the first CLAGS executive director of color since its inception, I would encourage CLAGS (and queer studies) to queer their methods even more by integrating critical race theory and transgender studies into all aspects of their philosophies. In the same way that LGBTQ people should not be an afterthought in mainstream teaching, race, ethnicity, and

gender nonconformity should not be an afterthought in queer studies. In recent years, CLAGS has done a phenomenal job in creating programs examining race and LGBTQ identity (e.g., our recent Kessler Award lectures by Cheryl Clarke, Cathy Cohen, and Richard Fung) and in maintaining the most diverse board of directors in CLAGS's history. However, there is still much to do to dismantle the gender binary; to support transgender, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming people; and to encourage future generations of trans* leaders in academia.

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