

## Introduction: Queer Methods

Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani

Queer studies is experiencing a methodological renaissance. In both the humanities and the social sciences, scholars have begun to identify research protocols and practices that have been largely overshadowed by dramatic advances in queer theory. The 2010 volume *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, edited by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash, indexed this shift toward methods by reframing the endlessly rehearsed question “*what is queer theory?*” as the nascent “*how is queer theory done?*” Three years later, the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania hosted a two-day Queer Method conference. Organizers asked “what it means to understand queer work as having a method, or to imagine method itself as queer” (*Queer Method* 2016). A 2016 University of Massachusetts Amherst conference similarly refocused queer studies—as well as black and postcolonial studies—through the lens of methods, and next year, the University of California Press will release a new collection on queer methods in sociology. With this special issue, *WSQ* affirms and enriches these conversations by presenting pioneering feminist work on queer methods in sociology, performance studies, African American studies, lesbian cultural studies, critical psychology, African studies, statistics, transgender and queer studies, media and digital studies, history, and English, as well as poetry and fiction.

### An Alternate History

What if a high-profile academic conference in 1990 had ushered in an enterprise called “queer methods” rather than “queer theory”?<sup>1</sup> Our ques-

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tion—speculative and provocative in its rewriting of a watershed moment in queer intellectual history—is also surprisingly plausible. The methods that scholars used to establish gay and lesbian studies in the decades prior to queer theory were often quite queer themselves, particularly when guided by social constructionist approaches to the study of homosexuality. This was certainly true in sociology, as Steven Seidman (1994), Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer (1994), and others have noted.<sup>2</sup> Why then has queer theory not staked a more pervasive, methods-oriented claim? Insofar as queer theory has relied on a humanities-centered displacement of the disciplinary innovations that were unfolding in the social sciences as “LGBT/queer studies” (see Lovaas, Elia, and Yep 2006), a focus on methods would not only have exposed that displacement but also forced a confrontation with disciplinarity that might have threatened queer theory’s constitutional claims to inter/antidisciplinarity. The current turn “back” to methods may be perceived as an attempt to leverage disciplinarity against those longstanding claims by queer theory. Working explicitly through the question of queer methods, the following contributions thoughtfully negotiate such disciplinary impasses.

From another angle, the political context that inspired early queer theory might also have translated into an inaugural focus on queer methods. Like much of gay and lesbian studies scholarship, academic queer theory was largely inspired by activist social movements of the day. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman suggests that ACT UP exemplified the pragmatic ability of queer activists of the 1980s and 1990s to join “deconstructive reading practices and grassroots activism together, laying the groundwork for . . . queer theory” (2010, xv).<sup>3</sup> Freeman thus links queer theoretical work in the academy to the questions of *how* that queer activism so ingeniously answered. To take her example, ACT UP was grounded in goal-oriented tactics and techniques including direct actions (e.g., teach-ins, kiss-ins, and die-ins), building coalitions across race and gender (e.g., affinity groups), highly stylized graphic designs, medical interventions (e.g., needle exchange, inclusive clinical trials, lay expertise<sup>4</sup>), video/media innovation, acts of disclosing, self-nominating, public shaming, outing, and marching. It is reasonable to imagine queer activism as a collection of street-level case studies for designing queer interventions in the academy and explicitly engaging the politics of research methods. Yet queer theory, not queer methods, materialized as the point of entry for queer activism in higher education.

While the authors that follow elaborate on the apparent incommensurability of the phrase “queer methods,” we offer one final hypothesis to explain the overriding queer suspicion of method. The dominant queer theory narrative of productively cultivating antisciplinary irreverence offers a kind of intellectual, but also historiographic, value that a story about methodological continuity does not. Framed as a watershed—as a break primarily from Western white gay and lesbian studies and the disciplinary methods these proscribed fields deployed so productively—queer theory could then do new intellectual work: work unrestrained by identities, disciplinarity, and traditional methods. As is the case with most things queer, however, a paradox arises here. Strangely, the most pervasive characteristic of queer theory may be its methodological use of self-narration/self-invention in the service of scholarship. For what is queer theory’s constant autobiographic renarrativization—based at once on the need to make itself anew and the seemingly infinite capacity to do so<sup>5</sup>—if not a *method* of inquiry?

In the social sciences, one of the hurdles for developing queer methods has been what Kevin A. Clarke and David M. Primo call “physics envy” (2012). To establish their legitimacy, sociologists, economists, and political scientists mimic the “real” or “natural” sciences by using words like “theory,” “experiments,” and “laws.” Science has a method, these researchers say, and to be scientific, one must adopt it. The scientific method proceeds from a theory from which researchers deduce one or more hypotheses that they can test against systematically collected data. This conventional method of research is called the hypothetico-deductive model. “If your discipline does not operate by this method, then in the minds of many it’s not scientific,” Clarke and Primo explain. Ultimately, hypothetico-deductivism is a flawed rendering of how research actually occurs. It ignores “everything messy and chaotic about scientific inquiry,” and it devalues theoretical models that do not find empirical support.

Queer methods use the limitations of the hypothetico-deductive model to advance two major innovations about how we study the social construction of sexuality and the sexual construction of the social. First, queer social research methods question the origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than reify them in an allegedly generalizable variable-oriented paradigm, because these categories do not always align with lived experiences. Second, queer social research methods reject the fetishizing of the observable. If empiricism grants authority to categories

that are operationalized into observable units, then to queer empiricism means to embrace multiplicity, misalignments, and silences. Consider that gender and sexual orientation are not empirically stable; what we observe depends on how we measure it. If we define homosexuality by same-sex behavior, then we will omit gay virgins but include women who kiss other women to satisfy the straight male gaze. If instead we define homosexuality by an identity category like gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB), then we will exclude those people who experience same-sex arousal or who engage in same-sex behavior but do not self-identify as GLB. In the biological and health sciences, a single instance of same-sex behavior can automatically place an individual in the homosexual category, with “little regard for the sexual context, what constitutes sex, the desirability or enjoyment of sex, or the frequency of sex” (Savin-Williams 2006) or a person’s label of choice at any given time, which itself can change (Diamond 2008). This type of work in the social sciences showcases the risks associated with limiting our knowledge of gender and sexuality only to that which is empirically observable and closely linked to existing categories.

In the humanities, recent advances in queer, trans\*, non-Western, and nonwhite archival methods respond to these risks by featuring resistant, mobile, and intimate practices by which knowledge is constructed and collected, such as Juana María Rodríguez’s re/deconstruction of ephemeral archives of queer and femme gestures in *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014).<sup>6</sup> Scott L. Morgensen points to queer methods of interrelational ethnography at the nexus of anthropology and American studies. He cites Marcia Ochoa’s “queer diasporic ethnography” in Venezuela (2014), Jafari Allen’s study that reads black Cuban “self-making” in erotic terms crafted by black feminism (2011), and Audra Simpson’s ethnography of the Mohawks of Kahnawake and their struggle for political sovereignty (2014). For Morgensen, queer ethnography can uncover mechanisms of power by displacing “the uninterrogated critic with accounts of relationality that situate and destabilize the self that is written and the self that writes. Rather than fix objects in place, our methods would lead us to ask what we think we know and how we think we know it” (2015, 310–11).

Queer theory is often cast in the dual role of method *and* method’s foil. This can conceal the rich intellectual history that has inspired the contemporary concern with research practices in the humanities. Sedgwick’s (1990) method of “nonce taxonomy” offers an early flashpoint for this

slippage as it eschews the reproducibility associated with methodological rigor. With their sensitivity to lived practice, black queer studies and queer of color critique renewed black lesbian feminist attention to embodied knowledges. In this vein, Phillip Brian Harper's "The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge" (2005) provides a fulcrum for the reengagement with methods in the humanities at the millennial turn.<sup>7</sup> Harper argues for the validity—in fact, the life-saving necessity—of a queer method of "speculative rumination," one that counts as evidence the "guesswork and conjecture" that accrues to the experience of eroticized blackness in the United States (108). In addition, reenergized discussions of reading as a queer method have emerged from literature scholars. In *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America*, Peter Coviello advocates for "patient, ground-level explication" and "long exposure" to texts. These, he says, are "better served by a practice invested in detail, particularity, and unsystematizable variousness—all the specificities that literature proffers in such abundance, *and in whose explication close textual reading specializes*" (2013, 18; italics in the original). Citing the "descriptive turn" away from the literary, Heather Love, who generously writes the Alerts and Provocations section of this issue, promotes "thin description," a practice of "exhaustive, fine-grained attention to phenomena" that "offers a model for close reading after the decline of the linguistic turn" (2013, 404).

With repercussions beyond the academy, queer methods can offer a framework for "making space for what is" as they illuminate the messy and chaotic interstices across theory, lived experience, and practice (Love et al. 2012, 144).<sup>8</sup> In a 2016 interview with Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler sees "queer" as operating largely beyond theory and in service of the "fundamental issue of how to . . . make life liveable" (490). And so a political logic of gender confirmation on the ground, largely crafted in transgender communities, confronts a queer theoretic emphasis on the "unfixed." Butler asks, "If 'queer' means that we are generally people whose gender and sexuality is 'unfixed' then what room is there in a queer movement for those who understand themselves as requiring—and wanting—a clear gender category within a binary frame?"

A turn to methods can help queers to navigate such complex returns—to categories, to the past, to lived experience. In a recent blog post, Paisley Currah proposes a "provisional and generative" transgender feminist methodology that uses a model of gender asymmetry—perhaps most

readily associated with second wave feminist analysis—rather than a model of gender neutrality or plurality typically associated with more recent transgender analysis: “Any conceptual framework, from the sex/gender binary to the transgender-cisgender dichotomy, risks ossification, risks turning what had been a provisional and generative idea [e.g., sexual difference] into a methodological imperative that over time obscures more than it reveals. But I do think that, in particular moments and circumstances, we need a transgender feminist approach that is not gender-neutral—that dares to identify *asymmetry* when it sees it” (Currah 2016). This is the mandate of queer methods as we see it: to clarify, but not overdetermine, the conditions that make life livable. The queer methods that follow are thus both coherent and provisional, precise and adaptable, expansive and self-reflexive, timely and anticipatory.

In this *Queer Methods* special issue, scholars from across disciplines have crafted a collage that consists of three major themes. We call these Eroticized Racial Registers, Quantification/Interpretation, and Tethering.

### **Eroticized Racial Registers**

Gathered under the theme of “Eroticized Racial Registers,” the first three articles remind us that queer methods rely on, create, and complicate racialized human relationships. Here, we hear from Jessica Fields, E. Patrick Johnson, and Jane Ward about the *how* of queer methods as we conduct our research through embodied and eroticized racial registers.

In “The Racialized Erotics of Participatory Research: A Queer Feminist Understanding,” Jessica Fields argues that the method of participatory action research (PAR) unveils the “erotics of racialized, gendered, and sexualized power—erotics that can span differences to bring collaborators together even as they also threaten to disrupt the promise of shared effort and insight.” Working at the intersections of PAR, queer theory, and women of color feminism, Fields alerts us to the risky yet promising erotics of queer feminist research. Fields’s work with women incarcerated in U.S. jails shows that “the erotic is a relation made in the research encounter, and it leaves its trace across the data.”

Coproducing queer knowledge requires methodological innovation. In “Put a Little Honey in My Sweet Tea: Oral History as Quare Performance,” E. Patrick Johnson develops a method that is “decidedly quare *and* feminist” to mediate between his position as a cisgender black gay man

and the mostly cisgender black queer women whom he interviews. He finds in a honeybee's "waggle dance" a rich metaphor that "evoke[s] the sensuousness" of the encounter and embodies a materiality that, for him, is a form of communication and self-narration. About his queer method, Johnson writes, "[M]y desire in 'Honeypot' is that the oral histories collected account for not only the way the narrators embody and relay historical material about race, region, class, sexuality, and gender, but also for how storytelling as a mode of communication is simultaneously a quotidian form of self-fashioning and theorizing."

If Fields and Johnson investigate firsthand, embodied instances of eroticized and intersubjective race relating, Jane Ward works at a digital distance in her essay "Dyke Methods: A Meditation on Queer Studies and the Gay Men Who Hate It." After the publication of her book *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men* in 2015 (reviewed in this issue by Dustin Kidd), Ward received unsolicited, anonymous online reactions from men who were unabashedly sexist and lesbianphobic. These comments created an "unexpected archive" of white gay men's worries that queer studies is "a rogue discipline helmed by dykes, and ruined by [the 'nonsensical methods' of] intersectionality." The focus on method here is crucial. Ward writes, "[T]hey hated my method: my choice of white men as the subject of the study, my decision to be a dyke who writes about men, my feminist and critical race theoretical orientation, and my archive itself (cultural case studies instead of interviews with men)." A homonormative reiteration of gay/white/male identity becomes a reactive refusal—itsself a form of racial registering—that, in contrast to charges of ivory tower isolation, sets the broad stakes of dyke methods.

### Quantification/Interpretation

An entanglement between counting and reading occurs in our second group of essays written by Petra L. Doan, Noah Tsika, Patrick R. Grzanka, and Benjamin Haber. Quantification might seem incompatible with interpretive methods, but as these four essays reveal, counting and reading are not always easy to disentangle and distinguish. Asking "To Count or Not to Count" in her title, Doan poses two questions: *whether* to count transgender people (an issue of methodology, i.e., a conceptual argument about how research should proceed) and *how* to count transgender people (an issue of methods, i.e., techniques for gathering data). Doan asserts

that counting should be contingent: “If the purpose of counting is to correct the long-standing neglect of the transgender community by trying to gauge the number of people subject to fear, discrimination, and potential gender-related violence,” then “[u]nder such circumstances counting can be a queerly radical act.” By her queer count, the transgender population can be estimated at 9,149,306 people, compared with 2,036,535 using traditional approaches.

Noah Tsika considers the “distinctly queer-illiterate process” of machine reading in “CompuQueer: Protocological Constraints, Algorithmic Streamlining, and the Search for Queer Methods Online.” Computational tools and algorithms used by popular websites and search engines do not just crunch numbers, Tsika argues, but also perform a hermeneutic filtering of statistical anomalies. This blurs the line between quantification and interpretation, but it can also conceal queerness if the coding system selects against recognizably gay and lesbian search phrases. For Tsika, queer methods are “strategies for uncovering and elucidating queer media on the Internet.” He proposes that queers might enjoy the constraints they expose online by making their exclusion within digital technologies a source of valued deviance from legibility as homonormalized, high-tech, data-set gays.

Like Doan, Patrick Grzanka “imagine[s] quantification otherwise” in his essay “Queer Survey Research and the Ontological Dimensions of Heterosexism.” He argues that a person- rather than variable-centered approach contributes to a distinctly queer method: “This kind of statistical work—that emphasizes multidimensionality, embraces rather than shies away from complexity and social constructionism, and which focuses on actual people’s responses rather than aggregated and disambiguated variables—has the potential to realize queer methods.” Grzanka describes how a study using the Sexual Orientation Beliefs Scale found evidence of the weakness of “born-this-way” biological determinist beliefs about sexual orientation to distinguish between individuals with high versus low levels of modern homonegativity.

Also navigating the datalogical turn, Benjamin Haber argues that the promiscuity of digital technologies—even those technologies associated with data capitalism—can disrupt the knotty ties queer methods have to normative difference and positivist epistemologies. “The Queer Ontology of Digital Method” implies a series of potentially productive breakdowns: queer theory’s attachments to the qualitative over the quantitative; social



science's attachments to empiricism; between the sensory and the statistical; and between the corporeal and the digital. Haber advocates "experimentally using [digital] methods to more widely distribute queer politics, sociality, and sensibility," a project that can rework injustices distributed through the embodied categories of race, class, sexuality, gender, and ability.

### **Tethering**

Research methods tether techniques for collecting data to a specific sample. However, queer studies and other "pedagogies of minority difference" (Ferguson 2012) embrace *as* methodology their refusal to clearly define or isolate their objects of investigation. What methods of/as tethering are possible for the researcher with queer investments in mobility, the undefinable, the affective, and the ephemeral? Our final collection of articles by Kadji Amin, Thérèse Migraine-George and Ashley Currier, Amy Tweedy, and Hannah McCann rethink what it means and how it feels to fasten queer theory with data.

In "Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory's Affective Histories," Kadji Amin engages the inaugural decade of queer theory in an effort to interrupt its tendency to hurtle into the future by disavowing the affective charge of its own history. "[W]hat Queer Studies has institutionalized, above an object of study or method," he asserts, "is a set of historical emotions generated within U.S. queer culture and politics around the early 1990s." These "historical affects," as he calls them, "propel the inchoate method that animates what objects may be claimed as *queer*." Amin links queer theory with data through a method of "attachment genealogy" which requires researchers to "rehistoricize" how it feels to do queer studies.

Thérèse Migraine-George and Ashley Currier confront the shifting ground of queer African studies in "Querying Queer African Archives: Methods and Movements." Analytical approaches to the archive, they say, demand ethical self-reflexivity and vigilance against ethnocentric taxonomies and identity politics characterized by Western disciplinary methods. Their transnational approach to queering the archive attends to it as a repository as well as a "process" and a "movement." Working with emerging but also disappearing archives of African same-sex and queer identities reveals "a more objective acknowledgment of the daily work performed by African activists, for whom remembering the past translates into a daily

mobilization against the annihilation of the present and future of queer experiences, relationships, and feelings.”

In “Openings, Obstacles, and Disruptions: Desire as a Portable Queer Method,” Amy Tweedy has no trouble identifying a discrete object of study: “For my doctoral research, I was always on the lookout for lesbians who worked at gas stations.” Attention to the spatial expressions of lesbian existence compels Tweedy to frame the desire between an interviewer and an informant as a type of method in the moment. The pedagogical implications are worth repeating: “[S]implified qualitative instructions that usually include a case study describing when a researcher has sex with an informant do little to prepare students for the embodied experience of the field where our hearts flutter, our stomachs constrict, and our armpits sweat.” Tweedy leads us to wonder how instruction in queer research methods might increase our degrees of precision about ephemeral moments: “a smile, a wink, a laugh.”

Finally, Hannah McCann focuses on strategies for locating the subject. In “Epistemology of the Subject: Queer Theory’s Challenge to Feminist Sociology,” she shows how queer theory can shape the practice of research by enhancing a “self-reflexive awareness” against “reinscribing the subject” with fixed notions of gender and sexual identity. For McCann, a method that is queer requires a “queer orientation.” This argument produces a distinction between queer methods and the queering of methods. No particular method is queer in its own right; instead, researchers can bring a theoretical perspective to their portfolio of methods that has the potential to queer those established protocols and procedures.

One of the feminist strengths of *WSQ* is its commitment to publishing diverse genres of writing, and we are pleased to present a rich selection of poems and fiction curated by our extraordinary prose and poetry editors, Asali Solomon and Patricia Smith. Special thanks to Eileen Myles who not only contributed an exquisite poem, “Epic for You,” to the issue but also graciously gave us permission to incorporate an excerpt on the cover.

In *Classics Revisited*, we feature CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies, which has just celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. CLAGS is the first academic center of its kind in the United States and, as such, has a long history of shaping and being shaped by queer methods. We are deeply grateful to past and present CLAGS executive directors and board members Jill

Dolan, Kevin L. Nadal, and Rosamond S. King for their perspectives, and we are honored to include a reflection by CLAGS founder and eminent scholar Martin Duberman.

We are indebted to Valerie Traub who good-spiritedly agreed to our suggestion that we construct an interdisciplinary conversation around her newest book, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (2015), in the Book Review section. Traub's reviewers—Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands, Lisa Jean Moore, and Anjali Arondekar—join Dustin Kidd and Tey Meadow in creating a vital assessment of recent work on queer methods.

A few other words of thanks are a must: to Heather Love—who has done so much to energize and enrich current thinking about queer methods—for writing the Alerts and Provocations section for this issue. Our boundless thanks to our amazing editorial assistant, Lindsey Eckenroth, as well as our editor, Lauren Rosemary Hook, editorial assistant Alyea Canada, and the entire Feminist Press team led by publisher Jennifer Baumgardner. And finally, our heartfelt thanks to Cynthia Chris for her keen eye and smart advice as general coeditor of *WSQ*.

**Matt Brim** is associate professor of queer studies and director of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the College of Staten Island, CUNY. He is author of *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*, as well as an interactive online study guide for teaching the HIV/AIDS documentary film *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*. Brim is a former member of the board of directors for CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies. Currently, he is general coeditor of *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* and is a contributing editor for the *James Baldwin Review*.

**Amin Ghaziani** is associate professor of sociology and Canada Research Chair in Sexuality and Urban Studies at the University of British Columbia. He is coeditor of *A Decade of HAART* and author of three books: *The Dividends of Dissent*, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, and *Sex Cultures*. His work has appeared in the *American Sociological Review*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Contexts*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Social Problems*, and *Theory and Society*.

## Notes

1. We refer to the groundbreaking 1990 Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities conference organized by Teresa de Lauretis at the University of California, Santa Cruz.
2. This advance, according to Roderick Ferguson, simultaneously affirmed and concretized identity categories and, in Ferguson's view, ultimately mimicked

- the narrow politics emerging around single-issue gay male identity. See Ferguson 2012, 216–17.
3. Freeman describes prosex advocates, queer nationalists, people of color, and feminists as the “pragmatic, coalitional movements” of the 1980s and 1990s in comparison to the anticapitalist social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s (2010, xiv). Importantly, Lisa Duggan (1995) and Heather Love (2007) note that (pre)queer activism was as aligned with feminism and “girl-history” as with gay male contexts. Jim Hubbard’s documentary film *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012) reflects the gender, racial, and class diversity of ACT UP members and the multidirectional concerns of the organization.
  4. See Steven Epstein’s *Impure Science* (1998) for an analysis of the queer activist method of deconstructing medical knowledge and scientific expertise around HIV/AIDS.
  5. For a trenchant analysis of the way political aspiration has translated into disciplinary work in the academy, see Wiegman 2012.
  6. In the past year alone, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* published a special issue, “Archives and Archiving” (2015); *Radical History Review* published a special issue, “Queering Archives: Intimate Tracings” (2015); and SUNY Press published *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives* (2015), edited by Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell.
  7. Harper gave “The Evidence of Felt Intuition” as the keynote address at the Black Queer Studies in the Millennium conference at the University of North Carolina in April of 2000. Sharon Patricia Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012) reframes alternate queer methodological concerns by casting racism as a quotidian practice constitutive of “personal” erotic choices.
  8. Love takes her cue from Gayle Rubin.

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