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WSQ: Queer Methods Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Recently the *New York Times* announced that “[a]bout 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as transgender, double a widely used previous statistic” (Hoffman 2016b). The journalist, Jan Hoffman, was reporting on a study released by researchers at the Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy (Flores et al. 2016).¹ Just five years ago, the Williams Institute placed the number of transgender adults in the United States at 697,529, or 0.3 percent of the population (Gates 2011, 6). What happened in half a decade to account for such a jump—or to demand such a dramatic revision of the results of the previous study? Are practices of gender identification changing that rapidly? Was the category “transgender” redefined by the investigators? Or was some methodological failure at play? And why does it matter?

For one thing, the earlier study had to extrapolate from a smaller data set.² For another, authors of the study suggest that “a perceived increase in visibility and social acceptance of transgender people may increase the number of individuals willing to identify as transgender on a government-administered survey” (Flores et al. 2016, 6). Maybe so. There are surely many other factors involved.³ But as the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) has argued, “The persistent lack of data on transgender people’s lives from authoritative federal surveys is one of the greatest policy failures facing the trans movement today” (Tobin, Freedman-Gurspan, and Mottet 2015, 30). This is not to uncritically champion quantitative methods, nor to dismiss the very legitimate reasons that people have, historically and persistently, for seeking to evade various forms of government (and corporate) tracking. Disenfranchised populations may

be understandably suspicious of the veracity of such surveys or how they could be used. It is, however, to recognize that, for better or worse, access to illuminating data—as well as the invisibility and ignorance bolstered by its absence—is marshaled in contests over funding for social services and laws such as the disastrous Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act that took effect in North Carolina in 2016.⁴ “You don’t count in policy circles until someone counts you,” Gary J. Gates, an author of both studies, told the *Times* (Hoffman 2016b). And you don’t get counted unless someone authorized to count asks the right questions. Methods matter.

Public policy researchers are not the only ones grappling with questions of how to study LGBT populations, how to categorize us, and what to call those categories. The term “queer,” once bitter epithet but now proud sobriquet, appears at the current juncture to be flexibly broad enough for many of our purposes, but not granularly nuanced enough for others. Scholars across disciplines have long contested the applicability of established methods to study queer subjects, queer lives, and queer cultures. They called for new modes of studying sexual identities that would deconstruct biologically determined categories of sex and gender. By devising social constructionist theories, researchers redefined the meanings of deviance. These seismic shifts emerged in large part in postwar sociology. Nearly a half century ago, Mary McIntosh insisted on new paradigms for thinking about sexual identity in her then-radical article “The Homosexual Role” (1968). A few years later, John Gagnon and William Simon broke similar ground in *Sexual Conduct* (1973), as did Ken Plummer in *Sexual Stigma* (1975), all just prior to publication of the first volume of philosopher Michel Foucault’s influential opus *The History of Sexuality* (1978).

Innovative sociological work in queer studies may have been overshadowed by parallel developments in other disciplines—primarily the queer theory turn, chiefly (but far from exclusively) in literary studies—when, in fact, the disciplines have a lot to learn from one another (Gamson and Moon 2004; Irvine 2003; Seidman 1993; Stein and Plummer 1994). Fortunately, as Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani indicate in their introduction to this issue, a recent, remarkable boom in conferences and publications devoted to queer methods has invigorated both historical interest and interdisciplinary inquiry into *how* we study queerness (and sexual identity and culture broadly) across the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, it is our very willingness to *queer the disciplines and their methods*—to bring together the quantitative and the qualitative, the empirical and the textual,

the scholarly and the creative—that sustains and enriches queer studies and queer theory across the academy.

Queer Methods offers a set of articles that are attuned to both theoretical investments and social justice; that display both rich ethnographic experiences *and* critical embrace of the primacy of texts—that is, cultural practices and artifacts; and that exemplify the urgent vibrancy of interdisciplinary practices and multidisciplinary conversations. Matt and Amin discuss these ongoing conversations in more detail in their introduction, and we invite you to join this conversation as our invaluable readers.

On behalf of Matt and myself, in our roles as *WSQ*'s general coeditors, I extend our gratitude to all contributors to this issue, for carrying on this conversation with rigor and passion. First, warm thanks to the artist Andrea Geyer, whose project *Out of Sorts* graces this issue's pages. We also acknowledge a great many others who provide direct support that makes this journal possible, including the Editorial Board of *WSQ*, especially Heather Love, for her contribution to the Alerts and Provocations section; fiction/nonfiction/prose editor Asali Solomon and poetry editor Patricia Smith; the staff of the Feminist Press, especially Jennifer Baumgardner, Lauren Rosemary Hook, Alyea Canada, Suki Boynton, and Drew Stevens; *WSQ*'s editorial assistants Lindsey Eckenroth and Elena Cohen; and the administration of the College of Staten Island, CUNY. Special thanks to Matt Brim, who is an ideal collaborator and colleague.

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Notes

1. The Williams Institute study did not attempt to estimate the number of individuals under eighteen years of age who identify as transgender. See Hoffman 2016a.
2. *How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender?* relied on data sets from only two states, alongside comparative national and international surveys (Gates 2011). Data used in *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* derived from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System telephone survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control. The

survey is national, but only nineteen states included the questions “Do you consider yourself to be transgender?” and “[If yes] Do you consider yourself to be male-to-female, female-to-male, or gender non-conforming?” See Flores et al. 2016, esp. 6.

3. See Petra L. Doan’s “To Count or Not to Count” in this issue.
4. That bill, known as An Act to Provide for Single-Sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of Employment and Public Accommodations (or House Bill 2), prevents North Carolina municipalities from enacting measures to protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersex people from discrimination (and the bill strikes down antidiscrimination laws already in place). It also requires individuals to use public restrooms corresponding to the gender on their birth certificate, regardless of gender identity. At this writing, the Department of Justice has notified North Carolina that the law is in violation of the Civil Rights Act and other federal laws; challenges to its constitutionality are being mounted.

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