

Tanya Domi: Hi this is Tanya Domi, welcome to the The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the city University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers, and the world.

Tanya Domi: Justin Brown is the executive director of the Center for LGBTQ studies, also known as CLAGS at the Graduate Center of the city University of New York. Dr. Brown is also an assistant professor of health sciences at LaGuardia Community College where his teaching primarily centers on courses in public health and human services. His collaborative research focuses on addressing health inequities among persons of color, LGBTQ youth, and those populations at the intersection.

Tanya Domi: Prior to CLAGS Dr. Brown was the deputy director of the CUNY Institute for Health Equity and worked for several years running one of the only national social service agencies dedicated exclusively to working with LGBTQ youth of color. Brown completed his doctoral training with a health concentration in the critical social personality psychology program at the Graduate Center. Welcome to the podcast Justin.

Justin Brown: Thank you, I'm glad to be here.

Tanya Domi: Today we're gonna talk about the Center for LGBTQ Studies, also known as CLAGS which was founded in 1991 and it is the first university based research center in the United States dedicated to the study of historical, cultural, and political issues of vital concern to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender as well as queer individuals and their communities by sponsoring public programs and conferences, offering fellowships to individual scholars and functioning as an indispensable conduit of information CLAGS serves as a national center for promotion of scholarship that fosters social change.

Tanya Domi: CLAGS founder is the eminent American historian Martin Duberman, a professor Emeritus at the Herbert Lehman College. He is also a biographer, a playwright, and gay rights activist. There have been eight directors of CLAGS since its beginning including the present day executive director Justin Brown. What a legacy and a responsibility to lead CLAGS. You are now concluding your first year of a three year post, what can you tell us about the work of CLAGS at this moment, especially in light of the Trump presidency?

Justin Brown: Well I have to, in thinking about this year and reflecting upon it this year has been truly one of really learning and also planning and reflection. I think that a lot of what this year was focused on in part was really trying to assess kind of where we are given certainly the political climate that we are in today given the continual cuts that we see with funding and the limited offerings of programming and then the further kind of very anti-gay, homophobic LGBT non friendly-

Tanya Domi: Transphobic.

Justin Brown: Everything that we're really seeing existing in the current legislation that's being proposed and actions that are taken. With that I kind of wanted to also take this year to take some time to see functionally where we also were and getting insights from those that have come before me. I really wanted to take this opportunity to kind of learn from the past and the history in order to help move us forward in a direction.

Justin Brown: This year I think in light of everything where we've been it's been difficult and challenging at times certainly however I think on the other side of this we've come out with really coming through with a much more clear, more diverse approach to kind of how we have to learn to maneuver in air of today in terms of funding for sustainability purposes and also ensuring that we really take aim at that, we're focusing on providing programming that isn't what I would say is programming for programming sake but the programming has a true purpose of kind of advocacy and social change and uplifting of the community, I think that that is one of the huge aspects that we are hopefully looking forward to in the exciting years to come.

Tanya Domi: That's pretty interesting. When you talk about diversity what are you talking about because that could mean a lot of things about the LGBTQ community?

Justin Brown: I think for me in part I think going back to at heart with my work I think that part of the inclusion of diversity is that sometimes we're quite fractured. I think that there are moments in time where there's still serious issues of classism that may arise, there's issues that may arise on kind of understanding that voice of young youth today, I think that some of the very interesting conversations and dialogue that I've had even more as of late between younger generation youth and older generation individuals that kind of see the fluidity of their identity and I guess the forward nature in some of the things that they do and how they're approaching-

Tanya Domi: I was actually gonna talk to you about this later but maybe we should just get into this. I mean Walt Whitman the great American poet once said, "We are multitudes," and boy does that ever apply to the millennial generation. They are multiracial, they have multi identities self proclaimed non gender conforming.

Justin Brown:

Tanya Domi: Soon to be released, as you know, the public science project has this study coming out called What's Your Issue and they're looking at more than 130 different identities that this survey participants actually self identified as. I think that this is probably really alienating in many ways my own experience as a white lesbian, I've seen it in the community that in fact a lot of older white people in the LGBTQ community are really kind of freaked out about it because they don't see it as the movement that they grew up in and indeed it's not the same movement.

I agree. I think it is a different movement, it's a movement that is a movement of movements in many ways. Thinking about movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the Me Too movement and other additional movements that are going on I think that, and sometimes in the past, there may have been moments when there was this strong need of a clear distinctive LGBT specific movement and there are certainly, but it's not perfect, but I think that there are certainly levels of not I want to say full inclusion but there are moments of youth and the millennials today making their voices heard within those particular larger movements and staking their claim to say I am a part of this too and I'm not going to be silenced anymore.

Tanya Domi: Yes and I'm black or I'm brown and I'm an environmentalist or I'm undocumented or I'm a female or I'm many different things but you need to make room for me because this is who I am and this is how I live my life, this is where I live at the intersections.

Justin Brown: Definitely.

Tanya Domi: Do you see that reflected in the research of the academy because like you know once it happens in the popular society and the popular culture how does that or does it get reflected in the academy in your view?

Justin Brown: I think unfortunately that the academy is still a very non inclusion space. I think the academy to some extent is still very white hegemonic, you know patriarchal system that is non inclusion and I just think that the structure in how it is historically and continues to exist is one that may never get to the point of kind of that full acceptance in inclusion that we hope for.

Justin Brown: I think that a counter argument to the academic today is the existence of such things as open educational resources and open access journals and finding alternative mediums and spaces that although maybe not fully included as a quote unquote acceptable as academic work are academic work and that there are slow movements within the academy by individuals from the community themselves that are making and staking the claim that the work that I do, that may not be quote unquote traditional work, is just as valid and if not even more important because I think that that's the work that actually creates movement and change and actually has an impact.

Tanya Domi: Even in your discipline in which the Graduate Center is known for in critical psychology I mean it is one that empowers those who were formally subjects to actually participate side by side as participants in the research. That in and of itself is really quite innovative and really quite non academic shall we say?

Justin Brown: Definitely. I actually would say that part of ... within my training and within my work I think that's in part created some existence of space now in the academy that we have young, new, emerging scholars that see that this is the way that scholarship should and will be done and are very unapologetic about that in many ways.

Tanya Domi: You're part of that, Justin, you are a persona of that. Actually given this discussion I mean I just want to mention to our listenership that CLAGS gives significant visibility during the academic year to two major awards. One is the Kessler Lecture that went to Sara Ahmed this past December, her lecture was entitled Queer Use, she is a self described feminist writer, indeed her blog is entitled Feminist Killjoy, I had some mixed reactions to that, who is also an independent scholar and works at the intersection of feminist, queer, and race studies.

Tanya Domi: Next month, most excitingly, is you're going to award the José Muñoz Award which will be presented to Patrisse Cullors, a co founder of Black Lives Matter, openly lesbian, self described as an artist organizer and freedom fighter, also claims herself to be the wife of Harriet Tubman. These two queer lesbian feminist women of color could not be imagined when Martin Duberman launched CLAGS in 1991 and what do you see not only happening as we already discussed in the movement but wow you are reflecting this in the academy no less? This is really pretty remarkable in my view.

Justin Brown: Certainly. I mean I think part of it is certainly it is attempting also to continue to push and expand even amongst ourselves what should be included as individuals that are represented in these touted awards and also should be recognized for the type of work and the actions that they do. I think that a lot what they also do is not just things that have some historical importance but they also are doing critical movement activities today.

Justin Brown: I mean for example Sara and her work I think one of the most pivotal things, the fact that she kind of really attempted and has done to work within the academy to kind of make them reveal themselves of the system that is a system of oppression that continually exists and despite putting structures quote unquote in place to dismantle that they've essentially created committees or they've created diversity counsels or they've created offices of inclusion that are kind of there in-

Tanya Domi: Name.

Justin Brown: In name, but not really doing anything.

Justin Brown:

Tanya Domi: But not really actually operating in a diverse inclusive way.

Justin Brown: Yes.

Tanya Domi: It's interesting about Sara because she's been in academy and outside of the academy and probably it's due to her level of comfort and freedom that she is indeed an independent scholar. Is that not true?  
I do. I mean I think that certainly that is probably part of it but I also think that essentially also at a core that one of the most revealing things I think about her and then I think that also speaks to Patrisse and many other scholars of kind of this same-

Tanya Domi: Genre.

Justin Brown: -genre and I think that they in their unapologetic nature is that they also have this understanding of really no fear that, as I see it. I mean I think I see this no fear as being a place of saying why shouldn't I be able to be who I am represented of people as being as equal or there is some level of equity that exists and I shouldn't actually continue to live in a system that because by being silent I'm literally just perpetuating and continuing a cycle and if I don't speak out or take action.

Tanya Domi: Well these women, I mean I didn't meet Sara but just reading about her and reading her blog I mean she's so powerful, it just sort of jumps off the page at you her power. Patrisse Cullors who I have seen on television before and the first time I saw her I went wow, I mean this was at the beginning of the trajectory of Black Lives Matter and I realized that a couple of people that lead Black Lives Matter were both black women who were openly lesbian. At the time I in fact was chair of Get Equal, the board of directors of Get Equal which was a civil non violent disobedience action group for the community and working at the intersections which confused a lot of white men in the movement.

Tanya Domi: When I saw Patrisse on television I went, wow look at her and you just don't see those images of openly lesbian black women just everyday on MSNBC for example. I actually looked forward to the Munoz even myself, I plan to attend, but tell me why you picked her and what do you think she will bring to CLAGS and to at 365 Fifth Avenue on that day?

Justin Brown: I think you know the process in what you're going through as you know with any of these types of awards and the selection process is not an easy one and there's always a large number of very qualified and deserving candidates. With Patrisse I think that part of the history of when this was kind of coming to the realization in the mind of my predecessor Kevin Nadal and some of the other board members and the team here at the Graduate Center was that they wanted to really ensure that they were kind of highlighting someone that was really doing the work and creating some social change or representation in their art or in their work or something that was not necessarily within the tradition of the academy.

Justin Brown: With Patrisse and the selection of Patrisse the idea of kind of what she and the rest of the co founders, and she's a founder of her own kind of action organization and movement that is really one that has embraced and been inclusive of I think a younger millennial generation that at many times has felt maybe excluded from having a seat at the table so to speak. I think that also there's a level of connection that she's able to make and liven kind of this passion of wanting to pick up and continue to do this work.

Justin Brown: I also think that she pushes at the boundary in terms of the diverse set of social change and social justice issues that she's focusing on. I mean things such as you know prison reform to ending violence and I think it just goes on and on and on and so I agree when you mentioned when you saw her on TV and MSNBC was the first time I saw her and I really admit when I saw this I was preparing actually for a talk I was giving and there was one portion of an actual video that she had done MSNBC and it was an outtake and it was really the first time that I had seen in that kind of an arena the recognition of LGBT youth of color on such on a stage as that.

Tanya Domi: Indeed.

Justin Brown: And the way in which there was a level of inclusion in the conversation of them to be a part of the Black Lives Matter movement. I think that she is doing quite the work that's at the intersection and speaking and advocating for our communities to ensure that they're not forgotten, they're not overlooked, and that we are actually help accountable to put quote unquote our money where our mouth is and putting it towards really strong issues that need to be addressed that have not been addressed as opposed to putting our money behind maybe things that might have some social significance.

Tanya Domi: This actually segues to a point I'd like to hear your response to but I'll just say one more time, when I saw her the first time I did a double take. I went oh my god, this person you don't see this person on television and I was really, really blown away, I hung onto every word. Speaking of that, for example you know the National Advocacy Organization spent a lot of time on marriage equality, that was the last victory. We haven't done anything sense really, we're now treading shark infested waters.

Justin Brown:

Tanya Domi:

The gap between youth and what the National Advocacy Organizations are doing is I think growing, it's grown because if you're 12, 13, 14 years old, if you're homeless and on the street marriage equality doesn't mean anything to you. While there are some groups like GLSEN, but that's for kids in school, a lot of LGBTQ kids are not in school because they're on the street. There's a huge gap about the needs of this generation and one of my fears as we're treading water and we're going to have the play defense, major defense that youth are going to be really not at the forefront of what we're concerned about. Therefore I think about universities and I think about CLAGS and its role here and where youth are, if they are in school and they're fortunate enough to get to college like at LaGuardia Community College where you teach at least they're in a university setting so that's why I think what you're doing at CLAGS has even more importance at this time, I'd just like to hear your thoughts on that.

I agree. I tell people all the time that I always kind of claim my statement of my opinion or my perspective on things but having come from the background of working within and for small nonprofit organizations and working with LGBT youth of color and primarily homeless or marginally housed to me that is where I always keep my center so I think to some extent almost as ... I mean I think that we need to hold the larger national organizations certainly accountable for placing this as a key part of their agenda however I also think that we need to start to think in new ways about working and arming smaller community based organizations and smaller movements within cities and parts of the country that this is the work that they do passionately everyday and they can be the voice that can collectively work together to form coalitions and collaborations and uplift and make their own way in finding a plate at the larger table of the national organizations. I think that-

Tanya Domi:

That's fair enough. I mean there's a lot of people doing great work at the community level. I can see that from your biography you've done a lot of that work yourself. Let me just ask one other question, I mean Donald Trump is the 800 pound you know gorilla, elephant, herd of elephants, no insult to elephants, in the room. We're all sitting here going oh my god, what is gonna happen today? That isn't a strategy clearly but a lot is hanging in the balance. I mean his ban of trans people from open military service he ... you know the commander and chief has a lot of leeway on how they determine who serves, it's gonna be taken up in court obviously but to put a target on the backs of trans people is just really horrific.

Tanya Domi: We know that hate crimes have skyrocketed since he's been president and actually it was a peak on election day as a matter of fact and the period before and after the election. Now Mike Pompeo, one of the most homophobic and transphobic people is leading the state department and god only knows how that's gonna out picture itself with respect to LGBTQ human rights throughout the world. Do you think about this as you prepare for your second year? I mean is there ... this is something that everybody's talking about in their day to life and then CLAGS at the center of you know scholarship and programming and where people come together or to be together too how does that shape your thinking, how does it inform your thinking as you prepare for year two?

Justin Brown: I think it is certainly something that weighs on my mind and it's something that's there all the time and beyond the 800 pound elephant I'm looking at the rest of his administration is terrifying to me as well. To think that even if something, if that 800 pound elephant were to tumble and fall that I'm not certainly sure that there would be much change beyond that if with Pence and down the line. I certainly do think that this is something that has continued to force us to think and to kind of reconvene around developing a strategy that may include things that might be with us outside of the bit of the realm of what we've historically done.

Justin Brown: I know that that can be uncomfortable, right change is not always an easy thing for organizations to undertake. I think that's certainly part of the what we need to continue to do is also back to some of the other things that have historically been done around really also making this statement of kind of social change and advocacy central to what we do by not only our programming but also broadening our strategy on who we reach and how we reach those communities.

Justin Brown: I think in part really thinking about in the past is how things have been done such as seminars in the city that have been undertaken by CLAGS in the past, working with and strategically with community partners to provide programs that are in those spaces, broadening our training and education to be inclusion of things such as not only educating our students, building a pathway from community college to the four year to graduate school but also to educating the larger populous. So trying to figure out how can we work to really highlight and provide even the basic LGBTQIA 101 to teachers, to organizations that really lack that cultural responsiveness.

Justin Brown:

Justin Brown: I think that when ... I'm hopeful I guess, that I think that when you push them to that space of having to look hard in the face of what they're facing and question why and how they're skewed views or perceptions may have actually developed as to why it's okay to be exclusionary, why it's okay to accept the fact that there's a whole segment of our society that's not ... we don't hear about on the TV, you know the fact as you mentioned before violent crime against trans women of color and just the continually raising rates that that continues to occur at but yet we don't hear it, it's silences, it's not seen I think that it's our turn now to kind of force that issue and through ... I don't want to say formal lobbying but you know moving in the direction of finding our space to be able to continue to kind of maybe develop policy pieces, develop this additional arm that's going to kind of speak back to the legislation and to counteract the narrative that currently exists.

Tanya Domi: Well Justin thank you so much for being here with us today and we will have you back to give us a situation report.

Justin Brown: All right, I'm looking forward to it.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor Justin Brown. The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.