

Finding its origins in the early 1990s, queer theory has long served as a radical critique of identity politics that, prior to its inception, had largely been mobilized in service of state-sanctioned inclusion. Its proponents – scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler – challenged the very premises of stable identity and normative belonging, arguing instead that sexual and gendered subjectivities are fluid, constructed, and perpetually in process. Yet while these ideas first developed as a powerful theoretical framework within American academia, the principles at their core – rejection of heteronormativity, skepticism toward state-centered organizing, and an emphasis on community care – have found expression in a wide array of activist movements around the globe. With this in mind, this thesis interrogates the global manifestations of queer organizing outside the United States, contending that the absence of formalized "queer" language in many non-Western contexts does not denote a lack of radical politics, but rather an organic and queer-centric configuration of resistance.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a recognition that the theoretical and practical innovations of queer thought are not bound to linguistic or geographic confines. Drawing on Michel Foucault's dissection of power and biopolitics, Sedgwick's deconstruction of binary sexual categories, and Butler's formulation of gender performativity, queer theory destabilized the notion of a fixed, inherent self. These foundational insights, by disassembling the legitimacy of normalized identity categories, set the stage for a politics that prizes fluidity over fixity and community-driven transformation over institutional assimilation. Yet despite this emancipatory potential, critiques of queer theory have persistently labeled it as an American construct – one that privileges the visible and the named over the tacit and the practiced. This study, therefore, seeks to move beyond such narrow analyses by exploring how the same anti-normative impulses underpinning U.S. queer theory are enacted in contexts where the explicit terminology of "queer" is notably absent.

This gap in scholarly attention is significant. In regions such as South Africa, and even within segments of U.S. activism that resist assimilation, the drive to subvert heteronormative and state-imposed categories often materializes in practices outside the conventional language of queer politics. However, as queer theory suggests, instead of framing their struggle in terms of legal recognition or codified rights, these movements emphasize mutual aid, grassroots organization, and the creation of autonomous community spaces. In doing so, they forge

pathways toward forms of resistance that are both deeply rooted in local socio-cultural contexts and remarkably resonant with the radical, queer theoretical insights that emerged in the American academy decades ago.

The central questions guiding this research are therefore twofold: How do queer theoretical principles manifest in activist movements that operate outside the explicit vocabulary of “queer”? And to what extent does the absence of this formalized language contribute to the widespread perception that queer organizing is a predominantly Western phenomenon? By interrogating these issues, this project contends that the pivot away from label-centric views on activism – and thus the subsequent lack of formalized queer language evident in a number of global movements – is not a deviation from, but rather a reiteration of, the core tenets of queer politics. The practices of community care, decentralized organization, and anti-normative resistance are not merely products of academic thought; they represent proactive and naturally occurring strategies for constructing new forms of social, political, and cultural belonging that stand in stark opposition to the legibility demanded by traditional state-oriented frameworks.

To illuminate these dynamics, the study employs a comparative case study approach that examines queer organizing in the United States and South Africa. The U.S. case serves as a baseline – a space where the explicit nomenclature of queer politics has evolved alongside legal and institutional advocacy, often grappling with the tensions between assimilation and radical dissent. In contrast, South Africa presents a landscape where, despite progressive legal protections and constitutional commitments to equality, queer organizing largely transpires outside labeled mechanisms, rooted in community responses to crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic and existing in the absence of formal “queer” language.

With this in mind, this thesis challenges the prevailing assumption that queer politics is inherently tied to Western paradigms. Instead, it posits that the core impulses of queer theory – its insistence on fluidity, its critique of state power, and its commitment to community-based solutions – find universal expression, even in places where the label “queer” is rarely used. By comparing case studies that range from legalistic state engagements to spontaneous, community-driven resistance, this work aims to make visible the transformative potential of queer organizing as a global phenomenon.

What follows is a detailed exploration of these themes, beginning with a review of the pre-1990s intellectual foundations of queer thought and the subsequent formalization of queer theory. Subsequent sections delve into empirical analyses of queer activism in the United States and South Africa, highlighting both the convergences and divergences in how these movements articulate their resistance to normative structures. Ultimately, this study aspires to contribute to a broader rethinking of queer politics – one that not only resists assimilation into established state frameworks but also acknowledges alternative modes of social organization rooted in the principles of radical, community-led empowerment central to formalized queer theory, even in the absence of formal language. Through this inquiry, it becomes evident that the struggle for sexual liberation and social justice is not confined to a single lexicon or political model. Rather, it is a multifaceted, globally resonant project that reimagines the possibilities of resistance, community, and care in the face of relentless structural oppression.