The Theoretical Foundations of Queer Organizing

Despite the formalization of "queer theory" as a named field in the early 1990s, the study's intellectual foundations can be traced to an array of earlier interventions in philosophy, feminism, and sexuality studies. Among these, Michel Foucault's "The History of Sexuality" remains central to understanding how sexuality has been historically constructed and regulated by state and social institutions. In this 1976 work, Foucault challenges the notion of sexuality as a natural or innate essence, arguing instead that it is produced through discourse and power relations. His concept of "biopower" – the mechanisms through which modern states "achieve the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" via institutions such as medicine, law, and psychiatry – establishes a crucial framework for later queer theoretical inquiries.[1] Therefore, by demonstrating that prevailing ideas about sexuality's supposed fixity are socially constructed and contingent upon state values, Foucault lays the groundwork for future studies on the fluid and ever-changing nature of sexual identity.

Expanding on Foucault's argument against the innate nature of sexuality, Gayle Rubin's *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality* introduces a radical framework for analyzing sexuality beyond the constraints of the gay/straight binary, foregrounding the ways in which sexual identity is constructed, regulated, and politically charged. Within her analysis, sexuality is positioned as inseparable from broader systems of power, with Rubin asserting that "sex is always political" and that notions of identity operate "not as a natural given" but as a "product of social relations."[2] Central to this argument is the claim that "modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value," wherein particular forms of sexuality – monogamous heterosexuality, state-sanctioned marriage – are elevated and legitimized, while others – queerness, non-reproductive sex, and non-normative sexual practices – are pathologized, criminalized, or otherwise rendered deviant.[3] The role of the state within this process is far from neutral, with "state policies on sexuality," whether repressive or tolerant , functioning not as passive reflections of cultural attitudes but as mechanisms that "reinforce existing power structures

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[1] Foucault, Michael. *The History of Sexuality*, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, 140.
[2] Rubin, Gayle S. "5. Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, New York: Duke University Press, 2012, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822394068-007, 143.
[3] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 151.

determining which sexual behaviors are granted legitimacy."[4] This structuring of sexuality through a top-down system of regulation not only codifies existing hierarchies but also ensures that those positioned at the margins must negotiate for freedom within a framework that inherently denies their legitimacy. Thus, in laying bare the inadequacy of state-imposed sexual norms, Rubin's critique provides a foundation for queer theory's later rejection of both fixed identity categories and state-led initiatives, reinforcing earlier claims surrounding the social construction of sexuality while extending this analysis to a broader critique of rights-based approaches that, by their very nature, demand conformity to state-sanctioned identity categories in order to be recognized.

Reinforcing these arguments on the state-backed construction of sexual and gendered identity, Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* presents a foundational critique of the assumption that gender is an innate, stable characteristic rather than a socially produced phenomenon. The analysis is grounded in the assertion that "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender," with gender functioning not as an inherent truth of the self but as a performative act, continuously produced and reinforced through social expression rather than existing as a fixed or predetermined state.[5] From this perspective, identity itself becomes a site of political contestation, with Butler directly challenging the ways in which categories of gender and sexuality are "fixed as the premises of political syllogism," instead advocating for the "destruction of identity" as a means of rendering "as political the very terms through which gender is articulated."[6] Within this framework, the reliance on stable identity categories in legal and political struggles is exposed as a potential reinforcement of the very structures that queer activism seeks to dismantle, raising fundamental questions about whether rights-based approaches ultimately work to uphold, rather than subvert, normative understandings of gender and sexuality. In this way, Butler extends Foucault's earlier critiques of identity's supposed stability, further unsettling the notion that sexuality and gender exist as coherent, state-legible categories rather than as contingent and ever-evolving social constructs.

These foundational texts illustrate that the core concerns of queer theory – resistance to the state and the interrogation of power's role in shaping sexuality – were being explored well

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[4] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 157.
[5] Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 189.
[6] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* 189.

before the discipline was formally named. Foucault's analysis of biopower reveals how institutions such as medicine and psychiatry construct and enforce normative understandings of sexuality, rendering certain identities legible and others deviant. Rubin's critique of the hierarchical organization of sexuality exposes the ways in which social and political forces dictate which sexual practices are granted legitimacy, reinforcing state-backed structures of control even in ostensibly progressive legal contexts. Butler's work further destabilizes the idea of fixed identity categories, arguing that gender itself is an effect of power rather than an intrinsic quality of the self. Taken together, these interventions reveal two critical insights that remain central to queer theory. First, the governance of marginalized sexualities is not merely a matter of legal oppression but is embedded in the structural power of the state itself, extending beyond formal statutes into the very ways sexuality and gender are categorized, policed, and understood. Any movement toward sexual freedom, then, is not simply a movement against repressive laws but a confrontation with the state as a whole, whose legitimacy is built upon the production and reinforcement of normative identities.

Second, the fact that these critiques emerged prior to the formalization of queer theory demonstrates that the principles of queer activism – resistance to state control, the rejection of fixed identity categories, and the development of anti-establishment, community-driven strategies – have existed and persisted independently of formal theoretical codification. Rather than being an invention of Western academia, these frameworks appear wherever structures of power attempt to impose rigid definitions of identity and wherever marginalized communities seek to exist outside of those constraints. The absence of explicitly "queer" terminology does not indicate an absence of queer thought; rather, it underscores the reality that the principles underpinning queer theory are not contingent upon a formalized academic discourse but emerge organically in response to the forces that seek to constrain gender and sexuality.

The Academic Origins of "Queer"

Following the decades-long development of these concepts, queer theory emerged as a distinct academic field in the 1990s, explicitly rejecting the assimilationist goals of mainstream LGBT politics and positioning itself in direct opposition to identity-based frameworks that seek legitimacy through state recognition. Within this vein, David Halperin's 1995 piece *Saint Foucault*: *Towards a Gay Hagiography* extends Foucault's earlier critiques by arguing that queer

theory is not merely an inquiry into sexuality but a broader project of disruption – one that actively challenges the "discourse," "category," and "site of regulation" imposed by the state, with queerness "by definition" constituting a challenge to "the normal, the legitimate," and "the dominant."[7] In advancing this argument, Halperin further unsettles the idea that queer politics should be grounded in stable identity categories, asserting that "queer politics does not depend on the existence of a gay identity" but instead refuses to treat identity as a fixed or essential foundation.[8] This rejection of identity as a precondition for political action marks a fundamental departure from traditional LGBT rights-based activism, which seeks inclusion within existing structures rather than questioning their legitimacy.

Building on the arguments foregrounded by Halperin and further formalizing discussions surrounding queerness as a named concept, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Queer and Now" – a chapter in her 1993 book *Tendencies* – arrived as the core tenets of queer theory were first beginning to coalesce into a distinct academic framework. As one of the earliest and most influential works in the field, Sedgwick's piece not only engages with the emerging discourse on queerness but also provides the theoretical groundwork upon which many subsequent scholars would build. At the heart of this intervention is a deceptively simple yet foundational question: "What's queer?" In response, Sedgwick offers a definition that resists rigid categorization, describing queerness as an expansive concept that, while often associated with "sexual identity," more accurately refers to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning" that structure "the constituent elements of anyone's gender" or "sexuality," emphasizing that these elements "aren't made" and "can't be made monolithically."[9]

In rejecting essentialist understandings of sexual orientation, Sedgwick challenges the notion that sexuality is an innate or stable characteristic, instead positioning queerness as something that hinges "much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" rather than on any impermeable or fixed sexual identity.[10] This articulation of queerness as performative, experimental, and

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[7] Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 62.
[8] Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 122.
[9] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpmxs, 8.
[10] Sedgwick, *Tendencies,* 8.

inherently fluid directly opposes traditional identity politics, which often depend on stable classifications to secure recognition and legal protection. With this in mind, it becomes clear that queerness, as Sedgwick theorizes it, does not pertain "simply" to "same-sex sexual object choice" but instead offers a broader epistemological and political framework – one that extends beyond "gender and sexuality" to engage with any system of "identity-constitution" or "identity-fracturing discourses."[11] In doing so, Sedgwick positions queerness as a mode of resistance not just to normative constructions of sexuality but to all systems that seek to define, categorize, and constrain identity through rigid classificatory structures. This expansive view of queerness not only informs later queer theoretical developments but also aligns with the central argument of this thesis: that queer political organizing, even when it does not explicitly adopt the language of queer theory, operates in opposition to fixed identity categories and state-sanctioned norms, emerging instead through dynamic, community-driven acts of self-definition and resistance.

Elaborating on the ideas introduced by Sedgwick, Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics" provides an in-depth analysis of both the emergence of queer theory and its conceptual evolution within the United States. Tracing its origins to the "early 1990s," Cohen describes how "academics working in programs" primarily "centered around social and cultural criticism" began to resist the traditional "hetero-gender" and identity-based pillars of sexual understanding, shifting away from stable identity markers toward a more dynamic framework for conceptualizing sexuality.[12] Rather than adhering to traditional categories, queer theorists instead presented "a different conceptualization of sexuality" that sought to "replace socially named and presumably stable categories of sexual expression with a new fluid movement."[13]

Extending this analysis further, Cohen critiques the ways in which queer theory, despite its rejection of rigid identity categories, risks reinforcing "assumed categories and binaries of sexual identity" by constructing an oppositional framework in which queerness exists only in

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[11] Sedgwick, *Tendencies,* 8.
[12] Cohen, Cathy. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822387220-004, 438.
[13] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438.

contrast to heterosexuality.[14] In creating "dichotomies between heterosexual and everything 'queer'," queer discourse can, paradoxically, replicate the very structures of exclusion it seeks to dismantle.[15] To avoid this, Cohen argues that queerness must not become an identity in and of itself – applying exclusively to sexual minorities – but should instead serve as a framework for rethinking sexuality more broadly, one that removes the artificial division between heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups.[16] In doing so, Cohen advances a vision of queerness that does not merely disrupt normative categories but actively resists the reconstitution of identity as a new, exclusionary site of regulation, reinforcing the argument that queerness operates not as a formal classification but as an organic mode of resistance to categorization itself.

Following its emergence as a distinct social theory, queer theory continued to evolve beyond its academic foundations, increasingly entering the political sphere and articulating a more defined agenda for sexual liberation. Michael Warner's 1991 piece *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* explores this shift, posing the central question: "what do queers want?"[17] In examining this, Warner argues that the entrenchment of heteronormative power structures within a "wide range" of commonly accepted "institutions and social ideology" necessitates a fundamental challenge to the "heteronormative understanding of society" at every level[18]. Thus, rather than seeking inclusion within existing legal and social frameworks, queerness must operate as a disruptive force, confronting the very structures that define normativity itself. This argument extends and politicizes the theoretical interventions of Sedgwick, Halperin, and Cohen, reframing their critiques of identity and normativity into a tangible political strategy that moves beyond deconstruction to active resistance. In doing so, Warner transforms Sedgwick's conceptualization of queerness into an agenda that centers not just the rejection of fixed identity categories but also the dismantling of the social and institutional structures that sustain them.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the formalization of queer theory in the 1990s marked a decisive break from traditional identity-based approaches to sexuality, reframing

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[14] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438.
[15] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438.

[16] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 439.
[17] Warner, Michael. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, vii.
[18] Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, x.

queerness not as a fixed identity but as an active critique of normativity itself. In other words, as the field developed, theorists moved beyond interrogating the social construction of sexuality to examine how normative structures functioned as mechanisms of regulation, control, and exclusion. Halperin positioned queer theory as fundamentally disruptive, challenging not just heteronormativity but the very frameworks that define legitimacy. Sedgwick expanded this by rejecting the notion of stable identity categories altogether, emphasizing queerness as a fluid, performative process rather than a static classification. Cohen complicated this further, arguing that queerness must not merely serve as an oppositional identity to heterosexuality but instead dismantle the binary logic that underpins all identity formation. Warner then pushed these ideas into the political sphere, formulating queerness as an agenda that actively resists the assimilationist goals of mainstream LGBT politics.

Speaking generally, these interventions redefined queerness as a radical praxis rather than a state-sanctioned identity, positioning queer theory not simply as a critique of exclusion but as an ongoing refusal of categorization itself. If earlier scholars had demonstrated that sexuality is a product of discourse and state regulation, queer theorists of the 1990s took this further, arguing that any pursuit of sexual liberation must necessarily challenge the structures that render identity legible in the first place. This shift cemented queer theory's divergence from rights-based movements, foregrounding the idea that queerness exists not as an inclusionary framework but as a mode of resistance – one that remains critical not only to understanding sexuality but to challenging the very logics that dictate social, political, and institutional belonging.

Queer vs LGBT: Co-optation, Compromise, and the Blurring of Radical Edges

Despite the foundational divide between LGBT and queer movements, the theoretical and political distinctions between the two began to blur as queer activism increasingly intersected with mainstream rights-based advocacy. This convergence is examined in depth, once again, by Cathy Cohen in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," where she extends her earlier critiques of identity-based frameworks to assess the trajectory of queer politics following its emergence as a challenge to normativity. Although initially conceived as a rejection of rigid classifications in favor of "fluidity and movement of people's sexual lives," the radical potential of queer activism, Cohen argues, has not produced "a truly radical or transformative politics;" instead of dismantling normative categories, queer activism has, through its increasing

entanglement with traditional LGBT political frameworks, "served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything 'queer'" rather than disrupting the structures that sustain these divisions."[19]

This process of convergence, beginning in the late 1990s stemmed in part from the marginalization of queer politics within mainstream lesbian and gay organizations, where assimilationist strategies often overshadowed critiques of normativity. Additionally, escalating legal and physical attacks on queer communities created a sense of urgency that pushed queer movements beyond theory and into direct political engagement, leading to their increasing alignment with the "real-life politics of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered activism."[20] As a result, the radical, anti-normative ethos of queerness became increasingly subject to the identity-based ideological frameworks of LGBT movements, integrating into a rights-based discourse that positioned state recognition as the ultimate goal. Through this lens, any supposed collaboration between queer networks and the nation-state appears less as an integration of liberatory approaches and more as a process of co-optation, in which the original principles of queerness – its refusal of categorization, its resistance to state legibility – were increasingly subordinated to the demands of institutional recognition.

The merging of queer and LGBT movements is further explored in Sharon Marcus's "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay," which begins by tracing the foundational tenets of queer theory and its emergence in the 1990s as a radical departure from identity-based activism. Highlighting the role of queer activists in shaping a politics rooted in fluidity, lawlessness, and resistance to institutional legibility, Marcus contextualizes the early development of queer theory within a broader rejection of normativity. However, moving beyond this historical analysis, her work, like Cohen's, interrogates the ways in which queerness has "become a compact alternative to lesbian-bisexual-transgender," functioning less as a challenge to normative categorization and more as an umbrella term that reabsorbs queer subjects into an identity-based model of activism.[21] This process, Marcus argues, is particularly troubling given that "while queer foregrounds the belief that sexual identity is flexible and unstable, gay and

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[19] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 438.
[20] Cohen, "Punks, Buldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 439.
[21] Marcus, Sharon. "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay," *Signs* 31, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, https://doi.org/10.1086/432743, 199.

lesbian assert the contrary," reinforcing a discourse centered on strict self-identification rather than the dismantling of categorical structures altogether.[22] In tracing this trajectory, her analysis adopts a pessimistic view of queer theory's evolution, illustrating how its initial emphasis on fluidity and disruption has, over time, been co-opted and reconstituted within the traditional frameworks of LGBT politics. Given this, the project of queer politics is revealed not as an inherently stable or self-sustaining endeavor but as one that remains vulnerable to assimilation, its theoretical and political potency continually threatened by the pressures of institutional recognition and mainstream political incorporation.

The loss of radical potential resulting from the convergence of queer theory with traditional LGBT frameworks is further illustrated in Aniel Rallin's 2008 piece "A Provocation: Queer is Not a Substitute for LGBT." Positioning queerness as inherently "oppositional, fragmentary, transgressive," and "multiply perverse" in relation to heteronormative systems, Rallin argues that the political aims of queer theory should be directed toward the "disruption of the assimilationist agendas of gay and lesbian cultural and political monopolies," a project made all the more urgent given the extent to which traditional LGBT movements remain invested in "legitimacy and respectability" as the primary means of securing rights and recognition.[23] Within this framework, queerness is not simply a rejection of fixed identity categories but an active refusal of the very logics that underpin institutional inclusion, positioning it as an antagonistic force rather than an assimilative one.

Echoing Cohen's critique of queer theory's co-optation, Rallin argues that "substituting queer for lesbian/gay stabilizes queer so that it loses its multidimensionality, open-endedness, and ephemerality," thereby stripping queerness of "its potential for ever-mutating radical imaginings, interventions, and transformations."[24] By integrating into mainstream LGBT frameworks, queerness risks becoming yet another static category, absorbed into the same structures it originally sought to dismantle. This process, rather than expanding the scope of queer politics, instead aligns it with the very respectability politics that queer activism was designed to resist, neutralizing its disruptive potential and transforming it into a tool for

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[22] Marcus, "Queer Theory for Everyone," 201.
[23] Rallin, Aniel. *A Provocation: Queer is Not a Substitute for LGBT,* Soka University of America, 2008, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/context/harlot/article/1003/type/native/viewcontent, 6.
[24] Rallin, *A Provocation*, 6.

reinforcing rather than subverting normative frameworks. Through this analysis, Rallin's work further underscores the tensions between queer theory's radical ambitions and the assimilationist strategies of mainstream LGBT movements, demonstrating how the incorporation of queerness into state-sanctioned political agendas functions not as an expansion of queer liberation but as a mechanism of containment, in which the logic of legibility ultimately overrides the imperative of resistance.

The increasing convergence of queer theory with traditional LGBT frameworks, as examined by Cohen, Marcus, and Rallin, highlights the tensions between queerness as a radical, anti-normative force and the assimilationist strategies that have shaped mainstream LGBT activism. While queer theory originally positioned itself in direct opposition to identity-based frameworks that sought legitimacy through state recognition, these scholars illustrate how, over time, the radical aims of queerness have been increasingly diluted through their incorporation into rights-based advocacy. Cohen critiques the ways in which queer politics, rather than destabilizing fixed identity categories, has often reinforced the very binaries it sought to dismantle, as queer activism became increasingly intertwined with mainstream LGBT political structures. Marcus extends this analysis by demonstrating how queerness, once defined by its refusal of categorization, has been repurposed as a broad identity label, functioning less as a disruptive framework and more as a shorthand for LGBT inclusion. Rallin, in turn, argues that this shift toward legibility has fundamentally altered the trajectory of queer politics, rendering it a tool of assimilation rather than transformation.

Together, these critiques illustrate a fundamental paradox at the heart of queer activism: while legal recognition and institutional engagement have allowed for tangible gains in rights and protections, these same processes risk neutralizing the anti-normative foundations of queerness, recasting it as a stable identity rather than a challenge to stability itself. This trajectory is particularly relevant to the broader scope of this thesis, which examines how queer activism operates outside of U.S.-centric frameworks and whether queerness, as a political project, necessarily requires formalized queer theoretical language to function. The erosion of queer radicalism through its absorption into mainstream LGBT movements raises critical questions about whether the principles of queer theory – its rejection of state legibility, its embrace of fluidity, and its opposition to normativity – can be sustained within institutional frameworks or

whether they are most effectively preserved in spaces that operate outside of traditional state engagement. By exploring how queer activism manifests globally, this thesis seeks to interrogate whether the trajectory described by Cohen, Marcus, and Rallin is a uniquely American phenomenon or whether similar patterns of co-optation emerge across different sociopolitical contexts, ultimately determining the extent to which queerness can exist as a liberatory project beyond the boundaries of Western rights-based discourse.

Linguistic and Cultural Critiques of Queerness

Despite attempts by queer political movements in advancing a more fluid and holistic approach to sexual liberation, critiques persist regarding the U.S.-centric theoretical origins of the term and its limited applicability outside of a U.S., or more broadly, Global North context. One such critique is presented by Mariecke van den Berg in "Queer Studies, Queer Faith, and the Construction of Religion in the Public Sphere in the Netherlands," examining "why queerness as a practice, a theory, and a theology is picked up on only reluctantly in religious LGBT communities and in religious emancipation language in the Netherlands."[25] In tracing the intersections between queer studies and Christian LGBT activism in the Netherlands, van den Berg argues that despite the country's reputation as a leader in LGBT rights, the incorporation of queer discourse into Dutch activism remains limited. The theological perspectives she examines regard queer as "much too undefined" to function as a productive category, asserting that discussions of sexuality "need to be switched back to gay" in order to retain coherence and intelligibility within the Dutch socio-political landscape.[26]

This reluctance to adopt queer as a theoretical or activist framework extends beyond theological discourse, reflecting a broader pattern in which "level interventions in LGBT emancipation" have "not automatically led to a 'queering' of Dutch society," with the term never gaining traction as "a subscribed strategy for social change," nor as a "mode of identification" in Dutch life.[27] Within this context, queerness, rather than functioning as an expansive or destabilizing force, remains largely absent as a formalized discourse, with sexual identity still

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[25]   Van den Berg, Mariecke. "Queer Studies, Queer Faith, and the Construction of Religion in the Public Sphere in the Netherlands," *S&F Online*, 2017, https://sfonline.barnard.edu/queer-studies-queer-faith-and-the-construction-of-religion-in-the-public-sphere-in-the-netherlands/

[26] Van den Berg, *"Queer Studies, Queer Faith."*

[27] Van den Berg, *"Queer Studies, Queer Faith."*

primarily framed through fixed, legible categories. From this analysis, van den Berg illustrates a central challenge to the global applicability of queer theory: in contexts where formalized queer language is neither widely recognized nor strategically useful, the theoretical assumptions underpinning U.S.-based queer discourse may not readily translate to local sexual minority communities. This raises critical questions about whether queerness, as articulated within U.S. academic and activist spaces, represents a universal framework for sexual and gender liberation or whether its utility is fundamentally contingent on the specific cultural and political contexts in which it is deployed.

Expanding on these critiques, but broadening the focus beyond linguistic limitations to examine the cultural and historical barriers to the adoption of queer agendas outside the West, Roberto Kulpa and Joanna Mizielinska's 2011 book *De-Centering Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives* interrogates the extent to which LGBT and queer movements originating in Western contexts can be meaningfully applied to "the specific context of Eastern Europe." Central to their argument is the claim that the "construction and conceptualization of sexuality," as well as the "Western discourses and theories that influence this process," remain dominated by an "Anglo-American model" that fails to account for the cultural and historical particularities of Central and Eastern Europe, ultimately rendering these frameworks too Western-centric to fully encompass the region's sexual politics.[28]

Beginning with an analysis of language, Kulpa and Mizielinska highlight the ways in which the term queer itself is "meaningless in a non-English context," making it immediately less relevant to the lived experiences of sexual minorities in Central and Eastern Europe.[29] However, their critique extends beyond terminology alone, arguing that a deeper "temporal disjunction" exists between the West and Central Europe in their approaches to sexual liberation due to the political and social separations enforced during the Cold War era.[30] While many post-communist states have since adopted aspects of "a Western style of political and social engagement," the historical trajectory that led to the formation of queer movements in Western nations remains largely absent in these contexts, with the "communist past of the CEE building

[28] Kulpa, Roberto. Mizielinska, Joanna. *Decentering Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011, 13.
[29] Kulpa and Mizielinska, *Decentering Western Sexualities*, 13.
[30] Kulpa and Mizielinska, *Decentering Western Sexualities*, 14.

completely different social structures and modalities" that complicate the transplantation of queer political frameworks into the region.[31] In this way, Kulpa and Mizielinska suggest that the historical and cultural foundations upon which queer theory was built – rooted in liberal democratic traditions and the specific socio-political landscape of late 20th-century Western activism – do not necessarily align with the post-socialist realities of Central and Eastern Europe, where different structures of governance, social organization, and identity formation have shaped LGBTQ+ activism along distinct trajectories.

Like van den Berg's analysis, Kulpa and Mizielinska's perspective remains shaped by an LGBT-centric approach to queerness, assuming that the emphasis on fixed identity and concrete terminology that characterizes Western LGBT movements must also be central to queer political organizing. By framing the barriers to queer activism in Central and Eastern Europe primarily in terms of linguistic and cultural legibility, their argument reflects an implicit expectation that queerness, in order to be politically viable, must conform to the identity-based strategies of LGBT movements in the West. In doing so, this critique raises broader questions about whether queerness, as a political project, can or should be expected to manifest in the same ways across disparate cultural and historical contexts, or whether its radical potential lies precisely in its ability to emerge organically in response to the specific conditions of a given society.

Shifting further from linguistic concerns and instead focusing on the cultural and geopolitical inapplicability of Western queer rights frameworks, Momin Rahman's "Queer Rights and the Triangulation of Western Exceptionalism" offers a critique of the ways in which LGBT and queer agendas have been deployed as instruments of Western superiority, particularly in relation to Muslim-majority countries. Centering his analysis on the ways in which Western nations frame "homophobia" and "cultural traditionalism" as defining features of Muslim societies, Rahman argues that queer rights have increasingly functioned as "markers of modernization," with their legitimacy tied to a "reliance on the credentials of modernization in the West."[32] Within this framework, queer activism, rather than operating as a universal liberatory project, becomes entangled in the political strategies of Western states, reinforcing a

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[31] Kulpa and Mizielinska, *Decentering Western Sexualities*, 14.
[32] Rahman, Momin. "Queer Rights and the Triangulation of Western Exceptionalism," *Journal of Human Rights*, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2014.919214, 278.

civilizational divide in which Muslim societies are positioned as inherently regressive while Western nations construct themselves as paragons of sexual freedom.

At the core of this analysis is the argument that the process of "positioning of queer rights and Muslim homophobia" against one another serves as a means of "promoting Western exceptionalism," turning sexual rights into a geopolitical tool rather than a genuinely emancipatory framework.[33] Given this dynamic, the very notion of the universality of sexual identities – the idea that queerness emerges organically across all cultural contexts – becomes untenable in Muslim-majority countries, where queer rights discourse has been actively weaponized against them.[34] As a result, many Muslim groups have responded by characterizing "identity concepts" as Western rather than universal, rejecting imposed categorizations of sexuality as part of a broader resistance to neocolonial interventions.[35] In this way, Rahman's critique aligns with the arguments forwarded by Kulpa and Mizielinska, demonstrating that queerness, rather than existing as a neutral or universally relevant category, is deeply entangled with both LGBT rights agendas and Western political projects that shape its reception and applicability outside of the Global North. Thus, queer identity itself is revealed not as a universally legible category but as a contingent and politically charged construct, one whose meaning and applicability remain deeply dependent on the historical and cultural contexts in which it is deployed.

Expanding upon critiques of Western-centric queer frameworks, Gloria Wekker's "The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora" interrogates the dominance of Euro-American sexual identity categories by examining Black Caribbean same-sex practices, specifically mati work. Through an in-depth study of Surinamese women who "have children and engage in sexual relationships with women and men," Wekker challenges the rigid, identity-based paradigms that Western queer theory often assumes to be universally applicable. Critiquing the imposition of Western sexual taxonomies, Wekker argues that the conceptual apparatus with which "Western feminist theories" and same-sex desire is often steeped in an "homosexual identity"-based paradigm that does not adequately reflect the lived realities of Black Caribbean women; rather than adhering to stable identity categories, mati women move

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[33] Rahman, "Queer Rights and the Triangulation," 275.
[34] Rahman, *Queer Rights and the Triangulation*, 275.
[35] Rahman, *Queer Rights and the Triangulation*, 280.

fluidly between relationships without necessarily categorizing their sexuality, emphasizing that while a mati may "engage in sexual relationships with both men or women," there is "claim" to a "homosexual self" in the Euro-American sense.[36] This analysis aligns with that of Kulpa and Mizielinska, highlighting the epistemological violence that occurs when Western-centric narratives are imposed upon non-Western sexualities. Positioning frameworks rooted in the Global North as fundamentally inadequate for capturing the complexities of sexual practices and identities in the Caribbean, Wekker examines a contradiction within queer theory: despite its claims to fluidity and resistance to rigid categorization, it remains deeply rooted in a Western epistemological framework that does not easily – or at all – translate into non-Western sexual cultures.

Through these examinations, a critical gap emerges in the critiques surrounding the applicability of queer theory outside the U.S., revealing two fundamental misconceptions that this research seeks to address. First, there is a persistent conflation between LGBT and queer frameworks. As demonstrated in the works of Rahman and Wekker, a central argument against the translatability of queer theory beyond the West is that Western states have co-opted queer and LGBT agendas alike to enforce a politics of acceptability and modernity, often positioning sexual rights as markers of Western progressiveness while weaponizing them against non-Western societies. Within this framework, queer politics cannot be applicable to sexual minorities outside the U.S. if the very structures that claim to champion queer rights are simultaneously using them as instruments of geopolitical control. However, this critique fundamentally collapses LGBT and queer political projects into a singular Western paradigm, failing to recognize that while LGBT movements have historically relied on state recognition as a mechanism for securing rights, queer theory actively resists such state-sanctioned frameworks. By equating the political trajectories of LGBT and queer movements, these critiques assume that queerness, like LGBT activism, is contingent upon institutional legitimacy, thereby ignoring the ways in which queer politics operate beyond – and often in opposition to – state structures.

From this conflation arises the second major gap: the assumption that queer theory's applicability is contingent upon the presence of formalized queer language. As explored in the works of van den Berg and Kulpa and Mizielinska,another primary critique of queer theory's

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[36] Wekker, *Politics of Passion*, 173.

universality is that its formal terminology is largely absent outside of the U.S. and, more broadly, the Global North. However, this argument, once again, stems from an implicit reliance on the identity-based frameworks of LGBT activism, in which political visibility is inextricably linked to the ability to name and categorize identity. As Cohen and Marcus demonstrate, LGBT movements have long operated within a framework in which concrete identities and formalized language serve as prerequisites for political recognition; in this paradigm, an identity must be named in order to be acknowledged as a valid political subject. This emphasis on language, however, is not mirrored in queer theory, which by design resists fixed categorization, emphasizing instead the fluidity of identity, the instability of sexual and gendered classifications, and the rejection of institutional legibility as a precondition for existence. If queerness functions as a critique of stable identity rather than an assertion of it, then its principles are not contingent on the widespread adoption of formalized queer terminology. Rather than assuming that queerness cannot exist where it is not explicitly named, it becomes necessary to investigate the ways in which queer political movements emerge organically, even in the absence of codified language.

From these gaps, this research seeks to challenge the assumption that queer theory is bound to a specifically Western trajectory by examining where and how queer political movements occur naturally, despite the absence of formalized discourse. By investigating the ways in which the core tenets of queer theory – fluidity, lawlessness, and community care – manifest in non-Western contexts, this project argues that, unlike LGBT activism, which remains largely tied to legal recognition and state-sanctioned legitimacy, queer politics functions independently of institutional frameworks, appearing wherever structures of power impose rigid definitions of sexuality and gender. In doing so, this research reframes queerness not as a theoretical import from the Global North but as a political praxis that materializes in response to systems of control, regardless of linguistic or cultural legibility.