It's about the Sex: Queerness as a Radical Political Notion[1]

You can't tell who's queer anymore, not since the RuPauling of the nation. — Willowe, bouncer at The Stud, San Francisco

What does it mean to be queer? These days, the term is perhaps most often embraced as a noun for self-identification. But it can also serve as an adjective to describe a cluster of countercultural actions, events, and ways of life, or as a verb signifying an intent to undermine certain conventional expectations. It was, in the past, wielded primarily as a derogatory slur—an encapsulation of the idea that there is something wrong with people with nonnormative sexualities. You can still today find those who take it to be offensive, but at this point "queer" enjoys wide acceptance in mainstream discourse, particularly in the Global North. It can describe everything from drag queens, to darkrooms, to ostensibly straight cis men exploring their "feminine side" by experimenting with skirts or eyeliner. It has spawned an entirely new academic discipline, queer theory. It has been awarded a place as an apparently independent category in the widely used acronym "LGBTQIA+", despite also often being taken as an umbrella term that captures the acronym's other six letters.

In this context, it can be tempting to search for a concrete definition of the term, or for a clear account of how the term should be used. But these goals are complicated, both because the social category that this term picks out has vague boundaries, and because, as we will see, the term "queer" serves a liberatory function that stands in opposition to traditional identity categories such as gay, lesbian and bisexual.

We propose here to leave aside the question of how to define queer identity – or what someone should be like in order to count as queer – and focus instead on the question of what should be centered, for political purposes, in an understanding of queerness. We'll argue that what should be centered is the subversive sexual dimension of queerness, because this dimension is what fundamentally challenges the

[1] In the true spirit of queer community, this article would have never been completed without the help of the many lovely queers who read a first draft. Thanks to [omitted for blind review] for suggesting that we frame the discussion in terms of how to socially and politically organize the queer community. Thanks to [omitted for blind review] for suggesting that queerness be framed in terms of belonging to a community rather than in more individualistic terms. Thanks to [omitted for blind review] for pressing the point that different social positions within the queer community relate members of the community to extant power in different ways. Thanks to [omitted for blind review] for reminding us that identity categories forged in the Global North can be exported to the Global South as part of a colonizing project. Thanks to [omitted for blind review] for pressing us to make explicit what motivates this article. Thanks to [omitted for blind review] for numerous bibliographical suggestions.

heteropatriarchy, and thus explains queer oppression. The heteropatriarchy is a complex ideology that sanctions (white) male supremacy as grounded on a specific understanding of sex and of sexual behavior.[2] A crucial element of queerness, we'll argue, is undermining the foundations of this ideology by subverting its sexual norms.

Centering sexuality in an understanding of queerness makes straightforward sense of the nature of the threats that queers continue to face. Aspiring authoritarians are notorious for inventing problems to mask domestic political emergencies, such as growing wealth inequality, widespread racism, and the degradation of the rule of law. Queer people are singled out as their chosen targets specifically for their sexual practices that are perceived to be deviant.[3] They are accused of threatening traditional values and the mythological innocence of societies because they (in particular gay men and trans women) are seen as sexually degenerate and perverse – as akin to pedophiles.[4]

This emphasis on sexuality, however, has also been criticized: first, for being insufficiently intersectional, and, second, for preventing queers from being fully accepted into extant social structures. We will argue that the first criticism, while serious, arises only if one fails to properly appreciate the political dimension of sex. The second wave feminist aphorism that "the personal is political" is relevant here; in this context, the slogan could be restated as *the sexual is political*. The second criticism is less serious, we argue, because assimilation is not a proper goal of queer movements. Assimilation strips queerness of its political significance and severs the movement from its history of resistance against oppression and violence.

In the next section, after giving a brief historical overview of the use of the term "queer", we identify two functions that the term plays: an *expanding function* and an *aggregating*

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[2] When context does not disambiguate, we use the term "sex" to refer to biological sex, or the sex assigned at birth. We use "sexuality" or "sexual activity" or "sexual behavior" to refer to erotic activities that individuals desire or engage in.

[3] This appears to be happening presently in The United States. In a similar fashion, autocratic forces in Russia in 2011-12, and in Ukraine in 2014, portrayed their opposition as part of a homosexual conspiracy whose intent was the destruction of Russian society via the creation of a demographic and moral crisis. See Snyder 2018, pp. 45-46 and 110-112.

[4] See, e.g. the recent US Executive Order, "Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness," issued January 27, 2025: " [A]doption of a gender identity inconsistent with an individual's sex conflicts with a soldier's commitment to an honorable, truthful, and disciplined lifestyle … A man's assertion that he is a woman, and his requirement that others honor this falsehood, is not consistent with the humility and selflessness required of a service member. For the sake of our Nation and the patriotic Americans who volunteer to serve it, military service must be reserved for those mentally and physically fit for duty." https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/prioritizing-military-excellence-and-readiness/

function. We propose, then, to separate the use of the term in relation to identity—that is, the question of queer identity—from the issue of how the queer movement should be organized. In section 2, we spell out our understanding of queerness as centering people who belong to a community whose existence subverts the heteropatriarchy by unpacking three interrelated tenets of heteropatriarchal ideology: (1) *white cis male supremacy*; (2) *binary gender essentialism*; and (3) *heteronormativity*. In section 3, we consider and respond to the objection that centering sexuality delivers an insufficiently intersectional and radical brand of queer politics. We conclude, in section 4, with a discussion of allyship and the perils of assimilation.

1. Two functions of the term "queer": Expanding & Aggregating

The word "queer" has undergone significant transformation throughout history. From the 16th to 19th centuries, "queer" meant "strange" or "odd." By the early to mid-20th century, however, the term morphed into a slur directed at people with nonnormative sexualities (primarily cis gay men). The AIDS crisis of the 1980s begat the first attempts at reappropriating the term as a radical symbol of defiance—seen, for example, in the activist group Queer Nation's unapologetic chant, "We're Here! We're Queer! Get Used to It!"—intended to resist both the homophobia of mainstream society and the more conservative or assimilationist factions within the LGBTQIA+ community. By the 1990s, "queer" came to represent a way to avoid labeling people strictly as lesbian, gay, bixsexual, or straight—a use that gained prominence in academia in particular through the rise of the discipline of queer theory, which sought to challenge fixed categories of gender and sexual identity. The term continues to evolve today, often now indicating a more fluid and inclusive understanding of nonnormative sexual and gender identities.

As a term for self-identification, "queer" often plays an *expanding function*, capturing that the term gained prominence at least in part to problematize the very idea of stable sexual identities and behaviors. In this context, being queer signifies an openness to sexual possibilities that highlights and challenges the socially constructed and performative nature of both sex and gender. Here, queerness represents a commitment to exploring the creative possibilities of existing outside the narrow confines of what is prescribed or permitted by the status quo. No longer merely a sexual identity, queerness can become a liberatory space for radical openness and imagination, a way to resist conformity and subvert oppressive social norms.

The expanding function of queerness also serves to guard against problems of exclusion and erasure. Femme women commonly experience exclusion or erasure in

queer spaces, for example, as do bisexual people.[5] But while femmes' gender expression might allow them to pass as straight, the content of their sexual desires is not heterosexual. And while a bisexual person might pass as straight when their partner happens to be of the opposite sex, they too lack solely heterosexual desires. The expanding function of queerness makes it possible to recognize straightforwardly how the sexuality of both femmes and bisexuals challenge heteronormative assumptions, and thus to show why both groups of people belong fully to the LGBTQIA+ community.

A second function of the term "queer" is an *aggregating function* that captures how "queer" can operate as an umbrella term that consolidates what is shared in common between people whose sexual identities, expressions, and behaviors are otherwise very different. What does a bisexual cis man (a person assigned male at birth who identifies with the gender assigned to him at birth) and a straight trans woman (a person who does not identify with the gender assigned to her at birth) have in common? What does a gay man (cis or trans) have in common with a lesbian woman (cis or trans)? What does a closeted person have in common with someone who is out and proud? Each of these people can identify as queer. The aggregating function of "queer" not only allows it to consolidate all other six letters in the LGBTQIA acronym, but also acts as a sort of insurance policy meant to capture identities, expressions, or orientations—e.g., pansexuality, two-spirit people—that might inadvertently be left out as contemporary understandings of nonnormative sexualities continue to evolve.

As an aggregator, the term serves to bring people together in contexts where solidarity is crucial to resisting an oppressive system. Queerness can bring us together not just across lines of gender and sex, but also across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, this function of queerness situates us historically. It can serve to connect those of us in the present to the ancestors in our history.

Because the queer movement is, at bottom, a liberatory movement, it is important to maintain a policy of 'open borders' when it comes to queer identification. It is wrong-headed to try to specify precisely what someone should be or look like in order to count as queer, in part because social categories such as this often have fuzzy boundaries, and in part because this kind of gatekeeping is at odds with the anti-essentialism that the term was designed to foreground. As Judith Butler remarks, their

> understanding of queer is a term that desires that you don't have to present an identity card before entering a meeting. Heterosexuals can join the queer

[5] Cooley, MacLachlan, and Sreedhar, 2012.

> movement. Bisexuals can join the queer movement. Queer is not being lesbian. Queer is not being gay. It is an argument against lesbian specificity: that if I am a lesbian I have to desire in a certain way. Or if I am a gay I have to desire in a certain way. Queer is an argument against certain normativity, what a proper lesbian or gay identity is.[6]

Although this liberatory function of the term "queer" is clearly important, it has also encouraged a tendency to use the term somewhat indiscriminately. This indiscriminacy occurs both in the mainstream media – where pundits suggest that being queer "could mean as little as having kissed another girl your sophomore year at college," or as having "valiantly plowed through the prose of Judith Butler in a course on queerness in the Elizabethan theater"[7] – and in academic settings that tend to emphasize the purely theoretical or conceptual work the term "queer" performs. David Halperin, for example, characterizes the term as encompassing

> by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence. "Queer" then demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative – a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices: it could include some married couples *without* children.[8]

Queerness, on this expansive view, can refer to any counternormative expression that is vaguely connected to sex or gender. Channeling this view, Stella Nyanzi asks

> If queer is … an open invitation to all of us opposed to essentialist patriarchal heterosexist binary configurations of sexual orientations and gender identities, why did I repel queers? If queer is allowed to be queer, why are boundaries of inclusion and exclusion forcibly drawn—and usually based on essentialist readings by others of the perceived body under scrutiny?[9]

Reporting that her body is often uncritically read as that of an "African cisgender woman," Nyanzi insists that she—a self-identified "Black African heterosexual cisgender woman and mother"—is queer insofar as she rejects the stereotypically conservative

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[6] Butler in Michalik 2001. See also Butler 1990.

[7] Paul 2022.

[8] Halperin 1995, p. 64 (italics in original).

[9] Nyanzi 2014, p. 61.

associations of these identity labels, such as monogamy and feminine subservience, as well as assumptions that she is "heterosexist, homophobic, transphobic, and bi-phobic". Those who challenge her self-characterization as queer, she reports, often claim that "heterosexuals have no part in this queer world, for they are the oppressors."[10]

Nyanzi is right to resist any blanket implication that would malign the moral character of every cis straight person, or would claim that cis straight people cannot be invested in queer liberation. She is also correct in pointing out that cis straight people can be wronged or harmed for exhibiting nonnormative sexual behaviors and gender expressions (a point to which we will return below).

There is, however, a question separate from the question of whether queer self-identification should be left entirely to individuals. We can also ask what and who should be centered in the queer movement. What should queer spaces look like? What should queer movements prioritize? And what should they guard against?

When we ask these questions, it becomes impossible to justify centering cis straight women who kissed other girls in college, or married straight couples without children, in queer politics. These people might identify as queer, but their struggles are derivative from the struggles of queers who consistently engage in non-heterosexual practices or gender expressions, and who are violently oppressed for doing so. In general, the types of wrong that cis straight people suffer in a heteropatriarchy are akin to the wrongs or harms potentially suffered by white people in a white supremacist society, or the wrongs or harms potentially suffered by men under a patriarchy. These wrongs or harms (although not necessarily of different severity) are of a different kind — and often derivative from — the oppression suffered by queers for being queer in a heteropatriarchal society.[11]

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[10] Nyanzi 2014, p. 62.

[11] In this respect, we disagree with Robin Dembroff (2023 and forthcoming) who argues that patriarchal norms do not privilege men in general, but only men "at the top" – that is, men who belong to the socio-economic elite – thus harming everyone else, including other less privileged men, in roughly the same ways.

An analogy can be drawn here to the "invisible knapsack of privilege" Peggy MacIntosh uses to describe the unacknowledged benefits enjoyed by white people in a racist society (1989). Just as acknowledging white supremacy means acknowledging that all white people benefit from their whiteness, regardless of whether they personally endorse racist ideology, recognizing heteronormativity means acknowledging that all straight people benefit from their straightness, and all cis people benefit from their cis-ness, regardless of their personal attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ people.

Oppression is a specific kind of wrong or harm, defined by its connection to systemic social structures that privilege one group over another, rather than by the severity of the harm itself.[12] Queer people experience a specific type of sexual oppression: they are perceived not only as failing to live up to heteropatriarchal standards, but as *subverting* them. Queers are perceived as subverting the natural order–or destroying a mythological time of innocence–in a way that disrupts the core of heteronormative societies. This explains why heteropatriarchal societies tend to want to *eliminate* queer people, not integrate them.

What is more properly seen at the center of the queer movement, then, is the fact that queers belong to a community that subverts the heteropatriarchy through sexuality. Being queer is often not a wholly theoretical affair nor a mere aesthetic stance. Superficial violations of gender norms – a "Rupauling of the nation," as our opening epigraph evokes — can in fact be disruptive,but the ultimate source of such disruptions is a perceived violation of norms of sexual behavior. Dressing in a certain way is connected to sexuality insofar as it is taken to indicate a particular role in sexual interactions. The subversion of the gender binary by nonbinary individuals is an act that involves sexual *disorientation* – the inability to place a person's sexual preferences. But playing with gender can become a mere cosmetic affair when it stands for no real challenge to the power structures of the heteropatriarchy. (As a friend of ours tends to ask rather wryly, "Sure, he wears nail polish, but does he do the dishes?")

We aim here to provide an analysis of queerness that does not put constraints on queer self-identification, but that centers the sexual subversion of the heteropatriarchy as an important aspect of being queer and as a pillar of queer organizing. In this sense, our project is primarily concerned with politics and is thus *not* ameliorative, since we are not trying to re-define the concept QUEER.[13] We are also not interested in policing how the term "queer" should be used or what it should refer to. We are interested, rather, in who should be centered in the queer movement.

Focusing on subversive sexuality makes sense of why the expanding and aggregating functions of the term "queer" need not ultimately be in tension. How, you might ask, can "queer" be an umbrella term that's used to refer to gay, lesbian, or bisexual people, while simultaneously functioning to question the stability of the very categories of

[12] Frye 1983.

[13] Haslanger 2000 and 2020. Haslanger defines ameliorative analysis as redefining concepts to better serve practical or social justice goals rather than simply describing existing usage. As a type of conceptual engineering, ameliorative analysis is contrasted with conceptual analysis, which focuses on clarifying and analyzing the ordinary or traditional meaning of concepts, and descriptive analysis, which examines how concepts are actually used in practice.

gayness, lesbianism, and bisexuality?[14] A proper appreciation of the types of transgressions that queerness embodies shows why this tension is ultimately superficial. An important feature of queerness is deviating from a heteropatriarchal ideology that regards the sexual binary as biologically determined, a binary that links biological sex to both sexual preference and to gender expression. Insofar as queerness can consist in engaging in same-sex relationships that violate the expectation that, for example, men should only have sex with women, the term "queer" can indeed function as another way of saying "gay", "lesbian", or "bisexual". But queerness is not exhausted by this identification, because the term not only picks out certain sexual behaviors, but also implies a rejection of the essentializing of sexual behavior for political purposes. This, we'll see, gives the term an ineliminably radical import, one that strikes at the very heart of the systems of power that define the status quo.

2. Queerness as sexual subversion of the heteropatriarchy

We have proposed to center the sexual subversion of the heteropatriarchy in queer politics. But what is the heteropatriarchy? As we see it, the heteropatriarchy is a deep-rooted ideology that upholds (white) male supremacy through a rigid framework of sex and sexuality. Queer identities and behaviors challenge this system by disrupting its prescribed sexual norms.

Heteropatriarchal ideology consists of commitments to at least three interrelated tenets: (1) white cis male supremacy; (2) binary gender essentialism; and (3) heteronormativity.

White Cis Male Supremacy

A patriarchal system is a framework of power and authority rooted in the assumption of cis male superiority and dominance. Patriarchal ideology, explains bell hooks, "insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females."[15] Patriarchy operates as a social and political structure that institutionalizes gender hierarchies that dictate roles, behaviors, and access to resources based on a reductive understanding of biological sex. This system

[14] This tension very likely explains some of the resistance found in some gay and lesbian communities to adopting the term—particularly those, such as wealthy white cis gay men, privileged to be relatively accepted by mainstream society and served perfectly well by the identity categories that are interrogated by the expanding function of queerness.

[15] hooks 2010.

perpetuates itself through cultural norms, laws, and traditions that reinforce cis male privilege while normalizing the marginalization of everyone else. Patriarchy shapes aspects of society ranging from family dynamics to workplace hierarchies, political governance, and media representation, often justifying inequality through appeals to biology or tradition.

The hierarchies imposed and defended by patriarchal ideology are inextricably racialized. Legitimate masculine power is often reserved for those with a particular racial identity (being a *white* male). Patriarchal norms of dominance rest on a connection between biological sex and judgements about who may legitimately rule and dominate that bear a striking similarity to the folk ideology that sustains the notion of race in Europe and North America.[16] Racial differences between individuals are thought to be based in biology, to be heritable, and to explain psychological, characterological, spiritual, and moral differences that sustain social hierarchies. "Racialism" according to Kwame Anthony Appiah, is the belief that there are inheritable traits among humans that enable us to classify them into a few distinct races, with members of each race sharing specific traits and tendencies unique to their group and absent in others. According to the racialist view, these shared traits and tendencies form a kind of racial essence.

In a manner similar to how racialism understands race, in a patriarchal system being male and being white are regarded as biological facts that have consequences of great importance. This ideology maintains that just as gold has an essence given by its atomic number, and this essence determines the properties we observe in gold (its malleability, weight, and color, for example), being white and male is grounded in a genetic essence that determines the properties we (supposedly) observe in white males (their superior strength, intelligence, and propensity to lead, for example). In this ideology, the connection between being white and male, and being a leader and dominator, is not accidental. It is an inevitable consequence of one's genetic endowment. It is meant to explain, for example, persistent differences in characteristics ranging from IQ, to criminality, moral character, and cultural dominance.[17]

A patriarchal system, like a racial system, has what Charles Mills calls both "horizontal" and "vertical" dimensions.[18] While the horizontal dimension of patriarchy distinguishes people morphologically and genealogically (as males and females), its vertical dimension is explicitly hierarchical, linking horizontal distinctions to political power,

[16] Appiah 1992, 2006; Mills 2015.

[17] Ceci & Williams 2009; Cofnas 2020; Fine 2010; Sesardic 2000 and 2005.

[18] Mills 2015, p. 43.

economic wealth, and cultural influence. Patriarchal norms in the Global North thus almost unfailingly involve reference to racial hierarchies: the cis males that are legitimately authorized to dominate society are invariably white males. Any sense in which queers are to be understood as disruptors of patriarchal norms, then, means they are also to be understood as engaging in an anti-racist struggle.

Binary Gender Essentialism

In heteropatriarchal ideology, sex is a purely biological notion. This ideology appeals to a particular interpretation of biological science to divide humans into two binary sex categories—male and female**.** Biological sex is taken to have a genetic essence: there are believed to be features, such as a certain chromosomal configuration, that determine who is male or female in a similar way to how atomic number determines what is gold.[19] Just as no matter how much a substance looks like gold it is not in fact gold unless it has a particular atomic number, so too no matter how much a person looks like a man or a woman they do not belong to these sex categories, unless they possess the relevant genetic essences. The two biological sexes are defined primarily in terms of their different, complementary roles in reproduction, which are assigned according to phenotypic differences in primary and secondary sex characteristics (including important differences in genital configuration). Just as presumed racialized essences are believed to give rise to observable differences in both physical appearance and psychological traits, the presumed genetic essences of males and females are believed to give rise to observable physical and psychological differences. Males are considered to be superior to females on a variety of physical and cognitive dimensions. As with race, this superiority is supposed to both explain and justify the imbalances of power we see across cultures in favor of men.

The gender assigned to a person at birth by heteropatriarchal ideology is strictly determined by observed primary sex characteristics (typically genital configuration observed in infancy). Gender, in other words, is strictly determined by sex. Gender assignment comes with a variety of expectations and constraints on what one is permitted, as well as required, to do. Gender norms require strict conformity to codes of conduct, dressing, and mannerism and that socially mark and announce one's biological sex. The term for all this is *gender essentialism*.

Heteronormativity

[19] The situation is rather more complex. Fausto-Sterling 1993.

The third tenet in heteropatriarchal ideology is a commitment to heteronormativity. A *hetero*patriarchal system is one that enriches a patriarchal ideology by further delimiting the scope of who is believed to be an appropriate candidate to wield power. Fully legitimate masculine power is reserved not only for those with a particular gender identity (being a male) and racial identity (being a white male), but also a particular sex assignment (being a *cis* male), and a particular sexual orientation (being a *heterosexual* male).

Heteronormativity is the conviction that heterosexuality and traditional gender roles are the default or "normal" ways of being human. It marginalizes and stigmatizes other sexual orientations and gender identities by reinforcing the idea that being straight and cis is the norm. Normality here is not taken to indicate merely descriptive statistical facts, but also prescriptive facts about what is morally and socially acceptable. In this sense, "heterosexual" is not a politically neutral identity term: to affirm one's heterosexuality is also to affirm a certain privilege and legitimization in virtue of one's sexual activities and desires.

Michel Foucault argues influentially that the practice of viewing erotic preferences and acts as indices of discrete and stable sexual identities emerged only in the 19th century.[20] But this historical shift means that heterosexuality, in a heteropatriarchy, is now not merely a sexual preference; it also lies at the center of one's identity as a man or woman. Furthermore, heterosexuality involves more than simply being sexually attracted to feminine or masculine gender expressions. Heterosexual sexual desire includes the expectation that one will experience desire for a specific genital configuration (one presumed to facilitate a particular role in reproduction). This means that, for example, a heterosexual man cannot be attracted to a trans woman on pain of threatening his very identity as a man.

Heteronormativity also includes certain expectations about social and political arrangements. The power dynamics within the traditional nuclear heterosexual family, for example, are taken to be a microcosm for the power dynamics that exist in society at large.

Queerness and the sexual subversion of heteropatriarchal ideology

[20] Foucault 1978/1990.

Heteropatriarchal ideology thus dictates the legitimacy of a social hierarchy based on race, biological sex, and sexual orientation, where cis white straight men's interests, and the preservation of their power, are of paramount importance. Queerness subverts this heteropatriarchal system by rebelling against the sexual ideology that sustains it. Queer communities question foundational heteropatriarchal tenets such as the existence of two binary sex categories with well-defined essences, the importance given to genital configuration in determining whether someone is male or female, the idea that physical differences should determine one's gender or one's sexual preferences, and the very idea that there should be two genders or any genders at all. Queers thereby undermine the power structure of the heteropatriarchy by questioning the very basis for its claims of superiority and inferiority.

We use the word "subvert" here for two reasons. One is that queers violate norms that are foundational to the system of power of heteropatriarchal societies. Because these norms are interconnected, violating even just one can constitute a deep disruption to the ideology that sustains the entire system. Second, queer lives show in practice, not merely in theory, that there are no essences to sex, gender, or sexual orientation. When a trans woman like Caitlyn Jenner publicly insists that "the hardest thing about being a woman is figuring out what to wear," she is, on the one hand, performing an extremely regressive (and not particularly queer) version of hyperbolic femininity. But, on the other hand, by living as an out trans woman she is also showcasing the performative nature of being a woman. Even when the content of her performance of gender might be legitimately criticizable for other reasons, Jenner's existence demonstrates that chromosomal or genital configurations do not, in fact, determine the kind of femininity or masculinity one must express.

If this is true, then a queerness that is centrally rooted in sexual identity and behavior, has radical political repercussions. Being queer is not like being a chocolate lover, or a movie aficionado, or a bird watcher–labels that pick out activities or preferences that can feel central to one's identity, but that are fairly neutral from a political point of view. Being a chocolate lover doesn't entail any particular commitment to how public life should be organized. Queerness is not like this. The term "queer" is better understood as analogous to explicitly political terms, such as "socialist" or "Canadian".

The point here is not merely that desire cannot, and should not, be constrained to the bedroom. The point is that decisions about with whom and how we choose to have sex are embedded in background social and political structures that both shape our individual sense of what is possible and in turn shape these structures. "Enigmas from the sexual past haunt the gay bar's darkroom as much as they permeate the marital

bedroom," argues Tim Dean, "and only the willfully ignorant persist in believing that sex takes place between couples."[21]

To insist that the sexual is political is to emphasize that sexuality is not merely a private or personal matter. Instead, our sexual expressions, identities, and relationships are deeply influenced by, and in turn themselves influence, social power structures, norms, and politics. Sexuality is shaped by cultural, legal, and institutional forces that reflect broader systems of power–systems such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, white supremacy, and capitalism. Challenging societal control over sexuality is thus a form of resistance, making individual sexual liberation a political act. When queers question who and how they should have sex with, or how they should use their bodies during sexual activity, they are thereby questioning authority. They are, in a real sense, engaging in anti-authoritarian acts.

Sexuality is political both because sexual activity can directly challenge the social order, and also because the sexual acts one engages in can have immediate repercussions for one's place in the social world. This is not to say that when queers engage in sex they are all and always aware that they are engaging in political acts that destabilize the heteropatriarchy. People who identify as queer often know, on some level, that the sex that turns them on has anti-heteropatriarchal implications, but from the first-person perspective some queer people might experience sex just like anyone else. Still, what starts in the bedroom often spills outside of it.

3. Is a focus on sex at odds with radical politics?

Centering sexuality in queer politics raises a problem that's illustrated by reflecting on the aggregating function of the term "queer". The problem here is that umbrella terms can erase important differences between people who are grouped together by them. Cis gay men, for example, are in a different social position vis-à-vis a heteropatriarchal world that sanctions the supremacy of cis men than are lesbians (trans or cis): cis gay men generally benefit from that world in a way that lesbians do not. Similarly, cis and trans women who have sex with cis men may benefit from a heteropatriarchal world that rewards them for their sexual services in a way that lesbians do not. White queers are granted power and privileges that queers of color are not. Insofar as cis femme lesbians and bisexual people can pass as straight, they too can face fewer discriminatory disadvantages than those whose queerness is more visible. Wealth can afford queers who are not poor with protection from some of the most dangerous

[21] Dean 2017, p. 359.

manifestations of anti-queer discrimination. The overarching concern here is that in grouping people together through the single frame of nonnormative sexuality we risk not only—and paradoxically—essentializing queerness, but also becoming oblivious to the different relations to power enjoyed by different members of the queer community.

History has shown that when power relations within an oppressed group are ignored, those with the fewest intersectional disadvantages tend to take control of liberation movements, often claiming to represent the entire group while focusing primarily on the relatively privileged interests of those most similar to themselves. This dynamic is captured by a metaphor introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, in the same influential paper in which she coined the term “intersectionality”. Crenshaw argues that intersectional oppression can function like a basement, where people with fewer marginalized identities stand on top of those with a greater number of marginalized identities.[22] Anti-oppressive movements often focus on helping those who are closest to escaping the basement, she argues, rather than those who are most oppressed. According to Crenshaw’s “but for" rule, only those who can claim that "but for" a single barrier they would succeed are usually allowed through: “those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that ‘but for’ the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room.”[23] Essentially, the only ones who escape are those least affected by oppressive social structures.[24]

Several prominent authors have raised issues with centering sexuality in queer activism. We discuss here and respond to two such authors both because of their historical importance, and because this will further clarify the political dimension of our proposed analysis.

3.1. Cohen’s punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens.

Cathy Cohen, in a classic paper, argues that by identifying a single characteristic of queer identity—namely, homosexuality, as opposed to heterosexuality—and by organizing our politics around it, we risk undermining the radical potential of

[22] Crenshaw 1989.

[23] Crenshaw 1989, pp. 151-52.

[24] The history of liberation movements confirms this analysis. Betty Friedan’s white feminism, for example, invokes the specter of a “lavender menace” of lesbians threatening to derail the second wave feminist movement (1963, 1998). Writing of her experiences dealing with the sometimes brutal sexism of the Black Panthers, Elaine Brown writes, “A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of the black people” (1992, p. 357)

queerness.[25] When "queer activists prioritize sexuality as the primary frame through which they pursue their politics," she argues, we unwittingly reinforce a dichotomy between heterosexuality and queerness that leaves unexamined "the ways power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalized subjects on both sides of this dichotomy."[26] Centering sexual orientation in queer politics thereby risks losing sight of the ways heteropatriarchal norms interact with other oppressive norms (such as those governing race and socioeconomic class dynamics), resulting, in effect, in a pernicious implementation of Crenshaw's "but-for" rule.

Cohen goes on to argue that focusing on sex also risks failing to recognize political allies in members of groups that, while possibly heterosexual, also reject the norms of heteronormativity, and are ostracized precisely because of their violation of these norms (such as "punks," "bulldaggers," and "welfare queens").

> I envision a politics where one's relation to power, not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. I'm talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work. Thus, if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms.[27]

Cohen thus recommends moving away from the term "queer" altogether: "Personally speaking," she writes, "I do not consider myself a 'queer' activist or, for that matter, a 'queer' anything … like other lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered activists of color, I find the label 'queer' fraught with unspoken assumptions which inhibit the radical political potential of this category."[28]

There is a clear sense in which we agree with Cohen. Like her, we explicitly advocate moving away from identity politics, by keeping separate the issue of identity from the question of what to center for the purposes of political action. Our main point of disagreement consists in the fact that we argue that the radical political potential of

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[25] Cohen 2001.

[26] Cohen 2001, p. 440 and p. 438.

[27] Cohen 2001, p. 438.

[28] Cohen 2001, p. 451.

queerness can be protected while centering sexuality. The kind of sexual activity that queers engage in (or desire to engage in when closeted) has radical political import insofar as this sex undermines sexual norms that themselves have political implications.

Queers, of course, might fail to realize this, or they might refuse to concede the point. Queer people can and do sometimes reject the radical political commitments that come with queerness. A straight stealth trans man—a man who was assigned female at birth and after transition completely passes as cis, and whose sexual partners are exclusively women—might choose to reinforce traditional gender norms in his relationships with women and is thus not committed to queer politics. He is queer, *if at all*, only to the extent that he does not permit the gender and sex assigned at birth determine his gender expression and sexual activity. A log cabin Republican whose political commitments reinforce heteropatriarchal cis white supremacist hierarchies, or a suburban lesbian mom motivated solely by an assimilationist desire for a minivan and white picket fence, are queer, *if at all*, only insofar as they challenge the elements of heteronormativity that proscribe sexual or romantic relationships between people of the same sex.

Members of the LGBTQIA+ community might refuse the label "queer" also for valid reasons. As Stella Nyanzi explains, some members of the African LGBTI community resist the term "queer" as a "western paradigm through which neo-imperialism is sustained".[29] This charge speaks to legitimate concerns about the implications of exporting identity categories crafted in the Global North to other cultural contexts.

But, again, we are not interested in issuing recommendations for who should or shouldn't identify as queer. Labeling a trans person as queer even when they possess solely heterosexual desires, for example, could amount to something akin to misgendering if the label is one they personally reject.[30] In providing our analysis, we rather aim to explain why all trans people, regardless of whether they are stealth or not, and regardless of their sexual preferences, are targeted as queers and grouped as such. Trans people belong to a community that subverts the sexual norms of the heteropatriarchy. Since these norms have great social and political import, queerness, when centered on sexuality, represents a radical movement.

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[29] Nyanzi 2014, p. 62 and 64.Given our lack of standing (as white scholars of European and North American descent) to speak to these concerns, we should make clear that our analysis in this paper is restricted to queer organizing in Europe and North America although we also expect what we say to be useful to activists in other cultural contexts. See Camminga, B. and Marnell, J. eds. (2022) for further analysis of this issue.

[30] Thanks to [omitted for blind review] for raising this point.

Cohen is also correct in calling for solidarity with groups that reject heteronormativity. But, we argue, it is precisely the focus on sexuality, and on the political dimensions of sexuality, that makes the failure of queer movements to seek solidarity with such groups problematic, and possibly even incoherent. Not every instance of counternormative sexuality might be "queer" (although, again, the category has fuzzy boundaries and so this will likely be an indeterminate matter). Heterosexual sex workers, straight couples engaging in polyamory, straight kink, and, more generally, heterosexual people who "feel marginalized because of [their] sexual practices"[31] are the natural allies of, and should feel at home in, the queer movement.

But the focus on sexuality also explains why certain sexual practices are at odds with a queer vision of the world. Some counternormative sexual activities fail to undermine heteropatriarchal essentialism about sex, gender, or sexual orientation. An extremely sexually promiscuous cis straight man, for example, reinforces rather than subverts existing heteronormative sexual norms of masculine virility and sexual dominance. A play-party space where cis white men dominate is at odds with how queers imagine a new society.

Cohen's resistance to allowing queer politics to turn into a single-issue movement focused on sexuality was motivated by her conviction that if queerness is to retain its radical potential it must remain committed to oppositionality to heteropatriarchal dominance in all its intersectional manifestations. This call for the need for intersectionality in queer politics is particularly understandable given that she was writing in the late 1990s, when the importance of intersectionality was only beginning to gain traction in academic theorizing and beyond. Cohen raises a legitimate and important concern about the possibility of intersectional failures within the queer movement, but, we contend, does not show that centering sexuality in an understanding of queerness needs to necessarily result in these failures.

3.2. Hooks and the creative possibilities of queerness.

A second argument for de-emphasizing sexuality in understandings of queerness is suggested in a passage from bell hooks that's so well-known it's transmogrified into a meme, seen gracing everything from coffee mugs to t-shirts.

> I think of … queer not as being about who you're having sex with—that can be a dimension of it—but queer as being about the

[31] Haplerin 1995.

> self that is at odds with everything around it, and has to invent, and create, and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.[32]

It's natural enough to read hooks' queerness that is "at odds with everything" as suggesting an expanded understanding of queerness that de-centers sex. However, this reading is complicated when the quotation is put into its full context: hooks actually talks about queerness in this way in a panel discussion entitled "Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body." In a broader discussion of Black female sexuality, she is asked,

> How do we understand and acknowledge a historical trajectory of Black women being subject to sexual commoditization and exoticization, but also create a liberatory sex positive framework for Black women in ways that honor our sexual agency?

Hooks' fascinating response to this question is to raise the possibility that "*celibacy* may very well be the face of [this] liberatory sexuality." She continues,

> I would rather not be sexual than to be sexual in a context where I'm mistreated, where I have doubt, … where I am triggered as an abuse survivor... What are our choices when we think about journeys to sexual freedom?
> …
> I often identify myself as '*queer past gay*.' And I came up with this with one of my white colleagues, lesbian colleagues, where we were saying that all of our lives we've experienced ourselves as queer, as not belonging, as the essence of queer. I think of … queer not as being about who you're having sex with—that can be a dimension of it—but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it, and has to invent, and create, and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.

Hooks' comments on queerness that seem to decenter sexuality, and her embrace of the identity "queer past gay," must be understood within the broader context of her claim that celibacy is a legitimate self-protective response to a Black woman's embodiment in a racialized, sexually violent, and exploitative world. Celibacy, in this context, should be understood as a form of sexuality. And, importantly, this celibacy must be understood as having political import.[33] The apparent turn away from sexuality in hooks'

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[32] hooks 2014.

[33] Hooks' politicization of celibacy also captures the condition of queers who live "in the closet" – those who consistently desire sexual interactions that violate patriarchal sexual norms, but who do not act on

understanding of queerness, then, is in fact a turn toward the counternormative radical politics that queerness represents.

Immediately after invoking this liberatory understanding of queerness, hooks continues on to emphasize the creative utopian possibilities of the queer movement:

> I think that is where we are going towards in trying to find that sexuality. And I think it's so crucial that trans people are so at the forefront of that, because that is where, among trans people, that the imagination is called forth in the reconstructing and re-envisioning of self and possibility.

Hooks understood, remarkably presciently, that trans people are at the forefront of the queer movement because their very existence undermines the connections between sex assignment, gender presentation, and sexual orientation that are so crucial to heteropatriarchal ideology.

This centering of trans experience also reminds us not to lose sight of the positive valences of the term "queer". After all, queerness need not be understood purely as an oppositional or negative notion–as merely whatever is "not straight." Queerness is also a positive identification that picks out a rich, proactive, and creative movement. Instead of understanding queer people primarily in terms of what they are not, queerness also gestures at the creative possibilities of imagining a world of equality and justice in which both communities and individuals can thrive.

Queer chosen families, for example, provide deep familial support that is not bound by biological ties, and that is freed from conventional gender norms. The radical political potential of queer chosen families parallels the revolutionary import of the alternative parenting practice of "other mothering" famously described by hooks.[34] The community-based childcare found in many Black communities is revolutionary, she argues, insofar as it upends the sexist expectation that parents, especially mothers, should be solely responsible for the rearing of children. Similarly, queer chosen families can undermine social institutions and dynamics such as norms that prioritize the biological family in matters of inheritance, healthcare decisions, and social status, as well as the very idea that the state should have control over intimate relationships.

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such desires. Queers who are closeted—either by choice or by necessity—usually suffer grave psychological and material consequences by keeping their queerness a secret. Being deprived of a space to live as queer can be devastating for a person's well-being.

[34] hooks 1984/2000.

A queerness that is “about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” thus need not be understood as a queerness that is not crucially about sexuality. Hooks clearly did not mean it to be taken in this way. The oppositionality of queerness, for hooks, has to do with reinventing sexuality against the backdrop of heteropatriarchal ideology. This also means a reconceiving of our social structures.[35]

4. Allies & Assimilation

We have been arguing that a crucial aspect of queerness, and one that should be centered in queer politics, is the sexual subversion of patriarchal ideology. This understanding also allows us to better understand what queer allyship consists in. Queer advocacy involves actively arguing against, and rejecting, every aspect of the heteropatriarchy. Solidarity with queer causes cannot be divorced from arguing against racism, sexism, biological essentialism, and other inequalities. Allies can play a crucial role in spaces where queer perspectives are not present or heard, but their advocacy should align with an understanding of just how radical queerness is.[36]

In this context, it is also important to address assimilationist arguments. One strategic reason to decenter sexuality in queer politics is if the goal of queer activism is taken to be assimilation. Michael Warner argues along these lines, insisting that what queer people want is a full recognition of their lives, struggles, and identities–to be fully represented in American culture, and to have their voices heard not only in mainstream discourse but also in the politics of resisting the heteronormativity of this discourse.[37]

While, in some sense, it is obvious that queer people seek acceptance, acceptance should not be confused with assimilation. Assimilation prioritizes fitting into existing norms, and in so doing it leaves oppressive structures like heteronormativity and white supremacy untouched. It dilutes or erases the diversity of queer culture, privileging those willing or able to conform while marginalizing gender-nonconforming queers, queer kink communities, and others who defy mainstream expectations. It sidelines intersectional struggles, weakening solidarity with other social justice movements. The LGBTQIA+ movement has arisen to challenge norms, not merely to request inclusion within them.

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[35] Card 1996; Stanley 2021.

[36] Mann 2012.

[37] Warner 1993, p. xiii.

With assimilation comes the risks of cooptation and commodification, where corporate marketing tools like rainbow-washing[38] and queerbaiting[39] promise inclusivity but defang queerness of its power to do much of anything at all. The apotheosis of this dilution of queerness is a world where multinational corporations sponsor Pride parades marketed as family-friendly events where police officers are welcomed but nudity, kink, and leather are sidelined or banned. Bland slogans like “love is love” reduce the intersectional fight for equality and justice to an anodyne apolitical mantra, and the violent and subversive realities of queer activist history are sanitized or erased as the goal of radical liberation is traded for mainstream palatability.

So, we argue, queers should push back against assimilationist approaches that prioritize fitting into existing structures. Such approaches weaken the queer movement’s transformative potential.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that respecting and preserving the radical history and potential of the queer movement demands centering sexuality in queer politics. Queers belong to a community whose existence subverts the heteropatriarchy by challenging its sexual norms. Recognizing the political dimension of sex is crucial to understanding the radical import of being queer.

[38] Rainbow-washing is an advertising technique in which a company superficially signals support for the LGBTQIA+ community without engaging in meaningful action.

[39] Queerbaiting is a screenwriting technique that incorporates ambiguously LGBTQIA+ characters, relationships, or storylines into the script for a film or tv show in an attempt to appeal to queer audiences while simultaneously maintaining plausible deniability about characters’ sexuality in order to avoid offending more mainstream sensibilities.

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