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# Engaged Queer Scholarship: Probing a New Paradigm of Knowledge Creation<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article features a reflexive iteration of engaged scholarship regarding the Queer Liberation Theory Project, a community-based research study with the social justice group Queer Ontario, which involves academics, activists, and artists, a number of whom are cross affiliated. We explore the tensions and challenges involved in developing and creating knowledge via an engaged scholarship process that must respect the historical philosophical perspectives of a social movement as well as today's academic theories. This article addresses the challenges of developing new knowledge (a theory) that counters a powerful, neoliberal, mainstream segment of today's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movements, with implications for society at large. The layered issues associated with engaged scholarship are disentangled, including vulnerability to neoliberalism, navigating competing perspectives, and how academics/activists/artists both understand and engage in knowledge creation.

## Keywords

Community-based participatory research; Engaged scholarship; Neoliberalism; Queer liberation theory; Queer theory; Theory development

## Résumé

Cet article propose une itération réflexive d'érudition engagée en ce qui concerne le Queer Liberation Theory Project, une étude de recherche communautaire avec le

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groupe de justice sociale Queer Ontario impliquant des universitaires, des militants et des artistes, dont un certain nombre ont de multiples affiliations organisationnelles. Nous explorons les tensions et les difficultés liées au développement et à la création de connaissances par le biais d'un processus d'érudition engagée, lequel doit faire le recoupement des sensibilités entourant le respect pour les perspectives philosophiques historiques d'un mouvement social avec les théories académiques d'aujourd'hui. Nous abordons les défis liés au développement de nouvelles connaissances (une théorie) qui s'opposent à un puissant segment néolibéral intégré du mouvement LGBT d'aujourd'hui, avec des implications pour la société en général. Les problèmes associés à l'érudition engagée sont démêlés, y compris la vulnérabilité au néolibéralisme, la navigation de points de vue divergents et comment les universitaires / militants / artistes comprennent et participent à la création de connaissances.

### **Mots clés**

Recherche participative communautaire; Érudition engagée; Néolibéralisme; Théorie de la libération queer; Théorie queer; Développement théorique

This project began with the modest goal of producing a short documentary film that provides a modern definition and explanation of queer liberation discourse to represent the work of the not-for-profit provincial social justice group Queer Ontario<sup>2</sup>, but it blossomed into a much larger nuanced study. Queer Liberation Theory (QLT): Resurrection and Development is a project (henceforth referred to as QLT Project) that deconstructs history by recovering the old principles and tenets of a once-fledgling gay liberation movement and bridging them with today's progressive and complex queer liberation movements. A community-based study involving academics, activists, and artists (a number of whom are intersectional), is being undertaken against the backdrop of an insidious neoliberalism that contributes to the mainstreaming of today's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movements<sup>3</sup> at the community level and the prominence of queer theory at the academic level. This project, currently a work in progress and now to include a feature-length documentary, is engaged in a form of resistance at the level of knowledge development and community development and is in keeping with the ethos of a queer liberation perspective.

University-community engagement, or engaged scholarship, is not new but reflects a historic commitment made by institutions of learning to enrich the civic and academic health of any culture. This engagement notably declined between the 1970s (Boyer, 1996) and the development of more contemporary strategies. Five practices of engaged scholarship have emerged in recent years, namely public scholarship, participatory research, community partnerships, public information networks, and an emphasis on civic skills and literacy (Barker, 2004).

Engaged scholars and universities have taken up knowledge translation, transfer, and exchange strategies. Knowledge translation is defined by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research as "the exchange, synthesis and ethically-sound application of knowledge ... within a complex system of interactions among researchers and users" (Graham, Logan, Harrison, Straus, Tetroe, Caswell, & Robinson, 2006, p. 15). Integrated knowledge translation includes utilizing strategies for knowledge exchange, such as community-based participatory research (CBPR), which "involves the active

collaboration and exchange between researchers and knowledge users through the research process” (Gagnon, 2011, p. 28). Knowledge transfer has been described as the first stage or step in disseminating knowledge (Graham et al. 2006); tacit and explicit knowledge that has previously been inaccessible is made available for individual and/or organizational use (Government of Alberta as quoted in Graham et al., 2006).

CBPR (St. Denis, 2004) is an orientation toward conducting research that incorporates the practices of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Hall, 1979; Kondrat & Julia, 1997; Smith, 1997) with community partnerships: all partners participate equitably in the development of the research that “ideally ... begins with a research topic or question that comes from the local community” (Minkler, 2005, p. ii5). Underscored by a Community Dialogue Approach (Anucha & Mitchell, 2007), this research method incorporates the development of knowledge, discourses, and application of research findings into community development strategies, as defined by the participants (Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow, & Brown, 2005). “CBPR is an orientation interested in the co-creation of knowledge, where lay people are involved in theory making and ‘self-critical’ communities are established” (Minkler, 2005, p. ii4). CBPR also relates to community action research in which the goals and objectives of the study/project are based on “values of participation, reflectivity, empowerment, relationships, and change espoused in action-oriented, community-based research traditions” (Reitsma-Street & Brown 2004, p. 304). Through collaboration and participation with the very communities being studied, CBPR creates a rich opportunity for knowledge engagement that benefits the community in practical ways (St. Denis, 2004).

As social scientists conduct CBPR research, a growing body of literature is available. Yet, these community-based approaches can also create blind spots. For instance studies based in LGBT communities have addressed health and wellness issues (Clements-Nolle & Bachrach, 2008; Marshall, 2012; Northridge, McGrath, & Krueger, 2007; Reece & Dodge 2004; Reed, Miller, Knawulezi, & Valenti, 2012; Rhodes, Hergenrather, & Duncan, 2007), largely to the exclusion of other issues that queer people and communities face.

This literature does not consider those instances when the researchers are also members of the community partner, or vice versa, both of which are the case with this project. Such unique positionalities, which include queers researching queers, call for an ethic of honesty that can decentre and destabilize traditional research processes and ways of knowing (Herising, 2005). No literature could be located that addresses theory development using a CBPR orientation; instead, focus is on creating interventions to issues (Rhodes et al., 2007; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010), developing new community services (Clements-Nolle & Bachrach, 2008), and revising public policies (Minkler, 2010). Our study addresses some of these gaps. The QLT Project takes an anti-oppressive approach – ensconced in critical, difference-centred perspectives (Moosa-Mitha, 2005) – to celebrating the unique contribution of queers to social diversity. Although a project of theory development, it is premised on dialectical social analysis (Harvey, 2004), how theory and practice influence each other, and the implications of such processes on queer liberation movements, LGBT movements, and society in general.

This article predominantly focuses on the engaged scholarship process and features numerous stakeholders in multiple social locations and positions that contribute to the QLT Project. We begin by looking at the knowledge engagement process. We then examine a number of tensioned engagements, including revisiting the historical roots of the gay liberation movement: its principles, tenets, accomplishments, and limitations. The social and discursive processes of developing and defining queer liberation theory based on the core values of gay liberation – yet reshaping it to accommodate the more inclusive and complex formations of today’s queer liberation movements – is explored as a countercultural act that resists neoliberalism and provides a community-based perspective to academic-based queer theory. Also, we share preliminary research findings that reveal internalized tensions within today’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movements in the context of our modern-day, multiplicity-based poststructuralist world. We delve into the complexity of engaging in knowledge exchange between numerous key stakeholders, knowledge transfer among multiple levels, and knowledge mobilization of a theoretical perspective that challenges today’s dominant worldview. We then conclude with an overview of the complexities involved in such engaged scholarship work and its knowledge development implications on the queer community, academe, and society at large.

### **Knowledge development and creation through knowledge engagement**

The QLT Project is a CBPR study, a type of interactive knowledge exchange (Gagnon, 2011). It is also an example of public scholarship, linking communities to engaged universities that seek to address “important civic issues, while simultaneously producing knowledge that meets high academic standards” (Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 173). This project is derived from the need identified by Queer Ontario for a more nuanced and thorough consideration of queer liberation, as a theory and practice. In essence this project is about developing the various streams of knowledge we have acquired over more than four decades and carefully fusing them in the creation of new knowledge, utilizing a knowledge engagement process. A research team was formed led by the principal investigator (PI), a university-based academic, and three research assistants: one academic, activist, and community-based researcher and two activists and community-based researchers, one of whom is also an artist. All are or have been members of Queer Ontario. The PI is the Chairperson of Queer Ontario, and the QLT Project bridges his academic and community work. The study received ethics approval by the PI’s affiliated university. Additionally, an advisory committee that was struck from Queer Ontario’s membership has been directly involved with designing the research, including defining the QLT Project’s purpose and focus, developing and iterating the research questions, identifying prospective participants to interview, and considering options for disseminating the results (Gagnon, 2006). The research team continues to consult with the advisory committee at various junctures in the research process.

Forty semi-structured qualitative interviews ranging from 60–90 minutes were conducted with academics, activists, and artists chosen via purposive sampling for their queer liberationist work. CBPR is particularly well suited to “respond to problems of exclusion by reaching out to a marginalized or previously excluded group” (Barker, 2004, p. 130), and efforts were made to solicit participation from among the more marginalized segments of the already marginalized queer communities. For instance, having conducted most of the interviews, it was determined that too few youth and

transgender women had been interviewed, which resulted in additional interviews with such individuals. Recognizing that language is an expression of power (Whitemore & McGee, as quoted in Fenge, 2010), participants were provided with a study participant package that included background information on the QLT Project, Queer Ontario's definition of queer liberation, and the list of interview questions. Participants were asked to answer six mandatory questions and were asked to choose a further seven or eight questions from a list of 27, which were varyingly assembled under six categories. Additionally, participants had the option to formulate a question for us to ask them. This unique approach to engaging participants in the study allowed for familiarization with the questions prior to the interview, gave participants an opportunity to think through their responses, and prepared them for an interview that would be recorded for documentary filmmaking purposes. It also gave the participants a level of control in choosing questions that most closely related to their knowledge and experience of queer liberation. Interviewees who objected to the academic or theoretical nature of the questions were accommodated by conducting a more casual "off script" interview.

Excerpts from these interviews, along with archival and stock footage, are being combined into a full-length documentary film to be premiered at the Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film Festival, followed by screenings at other film festivals, academic and human rights conferences, and eventually community-based public forums. Participatory video, storytelling techniques, historical renderings, and creative interpretations can be effective ways to encourage dialogue (Robertson & Shaw, 1997; White, 2003) and to create work by and about various LGBTQ movements (Access Alliance, 2010; Dankmeijer, 2008), with broader implications. The documentary is being carefully developed to speak to a large and varying audience, in order to ensure knowledge is being transferred equitably in the hope of provoking new thinking. In addition to the documentary, Queer Ontario is producing a clear-language pamphlet, *Queer Liberation in the 2010s*, which outlines the ethos and arguments of queer liberation theory. Furthermore, published articles such as this one serve to share a knowledge engagement process involving university researchers and a community group, while disseminating the findings. This article outlines the process and the complex issues that arise in conducting knowledge engagement work as a research methodology, and can inform the research of similar joint knowledge engagement initiatives in the future. For this project, knowledge creation and development is undertaken through the mediums of a feature documentary and a pamphlet. This involves broad audiences of people interested in translating theoretical discourse into the development of new theory, activist strategies, and artistic creations within and beyond the queer communities in a process of knowledge engagement. The intent is not merely for the dissemination of such outputs to a passive audience, but rather to elicit discussion, debates, and dialogues.

## **Tensioned engagements**

### **REVISITING HISTORICAL ROOTS**

The very evolution of a social movement – the growth and differentiation of a population, the development of communities, and, with regard to LGBTQs, the pluralizing of each – inevitably leads to multiplicity. For a critical, progressive, and radical contingent of LGBTQ communities, there is an importance in returning to and

respecting the historical roots of gay liberation to counteract what is deemed as the wayward direction taken by mainstream LGBT movements in accordance with neoliberal aims toward respect and acceptance via assimilation (Queer Ontario, 2010a, 2010b). To some extent the latter is viewed as a moment of crisis in LGBTQ movements, one that has queers calling for the reemergence of tropes, frameworks, narratives and activist practices that more clearly inform the project of societal transformation within and beyond LGBTQ communities – in essence, sexual and gender liberation for all (Queer Ontario, 2010b).

Participants in our study who were active in the first wave of gay liberation shared a number of principles and tenets that informed the historic gay liberation project. They pointed out that the concept of gay liberation begins at the micro level with the core unit being the individual, someone whose interactions with society influence a macro perspective that goes beyond liberating the individual to altering the social order and creating an alternative, more desirable, society. Gay liberation was very much about the disruption of heteronormativity and its omnipresence by declaring one's minoritized sexuality through the powerful act of "coming out." As such, the importance of identity politics is recognized, particularly for collectivist reasons, yet without losing sight of the multiplicities that make up gay communities. Rights-based claims via legal reform are merely a means to the more important aims of transforming the social order and achieving social justice, not only for lesbians and gays but all of society. Power dynamics are at the core of analyses re-contextualizing all the stakeholders and redefining the kind of society we want to live in. Finally, all of these points are underscored by the essence of liberation – the freedom to live our lives as we choose to, with a particular focus on gender and sexuality.

Paradoxically, the ultimate success of gay liberation would be its demise (Altman, 1971) and, although it achieved a number of successes, it declined over the years until our current neoliberal climate revived interest in it. One of the greatest successes of the gay liberation project was the politicization of the act of coming out (Warner, 2002). As more and more people did so, gay movements were galvanized with an agenda that included legal rights in the hope of transforming the social order and freeing all people from prescribed binary forms of sexuality. Such a project continues, as gay liberation became increasingly splintered by internal power imbalances and identity politics (e.g., the assertion of lesbian issues as different than those of gay men, the increased recognition of bisexuals, the growing trans communities and their varied recognition); unresolved contentious issues (e.g., intergenerational relationships); a health crisis (i.e., HIV/AIDS and its impact on the LGBTQ communities); and an increased interest in legislative reform (e.g., adoption and same-sex marriage rights) (Smith, 1999; Warner, 2002). As the LGBTQ communities experienced more and more success in the courts, LGBT movements veered in a neoliberalized homonormative direction, seeking respect and acceptance via assimilation, and abandoning liberationist principles of celebrating diversity and progressive social transformation in the process (Duggan, 2003).

In the return to gay liberation principles and tenets, today's queer liberationists are engaging in a form of resistance to the mainstreaming of broader LGBT movements. This encompasses the foundational historical moments that inform gay liberation

bridged across today's disparate political terrains, which are often defined by social locations and positioning (e.g., racialization, ethnicity, class, (dis)ability, age, creed, etc.), and can present themselves in intersectional or compounding manners (Halberstam, 2011; Love, 2007). This terrain complicates matters, as it means that a return to gay liberation is not a mere transference of a set of principles and tenets, but also involves a degree of translation to address sociopolitical shifts over more than four decades. Such shifts include displacement (i.e., purist notions of gay liberation residing with the gay male entity only), substitution (i.e., "gay," even inclusive of lesbians, being replaced by the broadly defined politicized rendering of "queer"), and expansion (i.e., sensitized acknowledgement of the complexities of social locations/positions, fluidity, intersectionalities, and broadened notions of gender and sexualities). Hence, tensions arise not only between queer liberationists and LGBT assimilationists but also within the gay/queer liberation movements – not to mention the effects of the latter challenging cisgendered and heterosexist norms in mainstream society.

Hence, undertaking a CBPR approach on this issue with today's LGBTQ community presented the research team with a number of challenges. By returning to gay liberation tenets and principles and attempting to reframe them into a modern-era "queer liberation" conceptual context, we were faced with the following: traditional purists who questioned our integrity with the original ethos; disentangling the variable understandings of the term "queer" in the minds of many (including those who closely relate it to queer theory); addressing the concerns of some participants – whose positions on the political spectrum ranged from the outer edge of liberation to the inner edge of neoliberalism – who had not thought through or developed an understanding of the terminology we were using; and participants who have a stronger, clearer commitment to a historical understanding of gay liberation than to a newly developed rendering of queer liberation. These reactions initially surprised us to some extent. In retrospect, however, they make sense, for although such discussions are ongoing in the movement, they are rarely taken up in a conceptual resurrection and theoretical development context such as this research study. The way we addressed such concerns was to emphasize a knowledge exchange approach in which we would further educate participants regarding the goals and objectives of our study and invite them to engage with us on these issues, regardless of whether they agreed with our intentions or not, and encourage the latter if that were the case. The alternate surprise was that a good number of academics, activists, and artists so easily embraced the "queer liberation" concept based on their personal contributions to the movement. What this experience has taught us is the importance of conducting a respectful knowledge exchange process in CBPR, one in which knowledge is transferred in both directions toward the mobilization of new, current, and relevant ideas that will inform the objectives of our research. For the QLT Project, this complicated terrain involves knowledge creation in the form of theory development, a complicated work further explored in the next section.

### **Queer liberation theory development, queer theory, and neoliberalism**

Developing queer liberation theory as an outgrowth of the gay liberation movement represents challenges across the theory/praxis divide that are reflected within extant models of engaged scholarship and that question some of its assumptions. As crucial as the gay and lesbian historiographical work is to the development of queer counter-



knowledge, its basic epistemological premises were challenged by French post-structuralism, deconstruction, and the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and Michel Foucault (1990). It is undeniable that queer theory is now ensconced within academe and has largely been confined to the study of texts (Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003; Turner, 2000). At the same time, radical queer social movements represented by Queer Nation, HIV/AIDS, and sexual dissident/anticensorship activism energized new perspectives on power and subjectivity. The rise of such critical, progressive perspectives shed light on internecine struggles within LGBTQ movements regarding the tensions between those seeking social structural change versus those assimilating into existing social structures (Duggan, 2003; Seidman, 1997; Vaid, 1995; Warner, 1999). Hence, new iterations of queer theory's research agenda and more supple engagements with community-based activism within globalized neoliberal contexts have recently emerged (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005; Heckert & Cleminson, 2011; Puar 2007; Yekani, Kilian, & Michaelis, 2013).

The relationship between queer theory, activism, and the academy is a vexing one. Historically, the energy and critical power of queer theory emerged from an unstable concatenation and cross-fertilization of subaltern political organizing (e.g., AIDS Action Now!, ACT UP, Queer Nation, Lesbian Avengers, OutRage!, The Transgender Menace, Audre Lorde Project); gay and lesbian historiography; queer/trans and DIY punk and zine subcultures; developments in gay and lesbian studies in the academy; and key moments in queer cultural production (e.g., *The New Queer Cinema*; *Bad Object-Choices*, 1991; Cooper, 1992; Doty, 1993; Gever, Greyson, & Parmar, 1993).<sup>4</sup> Drawing from these earlier political and cultural struggles, queer theory enables key ruptures in theoretical approaches to identity and the investigation of the workings of power. Committed more to difference than identity and to the unstable, contingent elements of identity politics, queer theory seeks to rupture the normative dimensions of liberal civil rights that are founded on the representational character and minority rights status of liberal equity-seeking movements (Brown, 2007; Heckert & Cleminson, 2011; Jeppesen, 2010; Sycamore, 2004; Vanelslander, 2007). Given the erosion of the social welfare state, the increasing tenor of market and individuated solutions to social problems, neoliberalism effects vast structural changes to the ability of critical activist practices to be sustained, to endure, and to effect larger changes (Duggan, 2003; Shepard, 2010). As the pace of neoliberal projects increases and less public space is available for action and debate, we can expect a growing division between gay assimilationists – or those who have accepted, by and large, the global restructuring of capital and the mobility it affords some – and those who are calling for more fundamental changes.

Our engagement in the QLT Project points toward an amelioration of this process by sustaining the voices that have and that continue to revivify social struggles across a diverse range of social locations. The challenge for queer liberation theory is to be able to capture those critical angles while remaining alert to the forms of power and knowledge that organize people's experiences and identities as activists chart agendas and tactics in the social field. While there will always be critical analyses that may not be readily taken up given the composition of social norms, queer liberation theory remains open to multiple levels of knowledge production that "translate" into actionable knowledge for community struggles at varying rates. Thus, queer liberation

theory remains open to disturbing systems of normativity. Its critical and deconstructive logics relate to ongoing queer theory research, which seeks to continually interrogate the frameworks of knowledge and practices that comprise most contemporary social movement organizing. Queer liberation theory's promise is also an enduring challenge: the reframing of social movements and knowledge production as processual events unfolding within uncertain presents and, ultimately, unknown queer futures.

In the QLT Project's work of translation across multiple sites, it is important to retain the sense that queer theory represents *both* a complex institutional continuity and a rupture with previous models of activism entailing, in part, the epistemological underpinnings of identity formations implicit in gay liberation movements. Part of queer theory's tactics is its reappraisal of traditional feminist and gay and lesbian movement politics that appeal to a collective sense of identity and shared experiences of subordination and marginalization. Part of the evolution from gay to queer liberation is an acknowledgement of fluid and variant identities, and sometimes the outright rejection of identities – particularly binaries and essentialized identities. Examples involve the inclusion of diversified identities of racialized, classed, and gendered queers among other social locations and, importantly, how they inform our experiences. It is important not to engage in historical erasure and current-day exclusions, but rather to create spaces for diversified perspectives that more comprehensively reflect a modern-day queer liberation ethos. This allows queer liberation to retain collectivist identification categories based on gender and sexual diversity that are grounded at the community level for social action purposes and aim for social change, which has only begun to be materially taken up by queer theory.

### **Engaged scholarship at multiple levels**

In addition to the aforementioned research team, Queer Ontario's membership-based advisory committee – as well as study participants – consists of academics, activists, and artists. There were some questions as to who would ultimately benefit from opportunities such as this publication and the associated Engaged Scholarship Symposium, which had an impact on who volunteered to participate in drafting this article. The “differential reward structures” of CBPR is one of the major sources of insider-outsider tension identified in the literature (Minkler, 2005, p. ii9). Three of the authors of this article have academic affiliations, and publications are important for their advancement. One prospective community-based author decided not to contribute because of other commitments. For the non-academic queer activist author, participating in an engaged scholarship exercise offers the opportunity to work in queer liberation in a way that is valued by the academic community and is also a means to help bridge the intellectual and practical aspects of the movement.

However, because the QLT Project has multiple knowledge translation strategies, there will undoubtedly be opportunities for different members of Queer Ontario to contribute in different ways. Whereas peer-reviewed publications provide the project with an opportunity to circulate its findings among the academy, the documentary film will serve to disseminate the findings to broad audiences. Just as there are benefits to academic participants who receive authorship credit for their contributions to

published papers, there are benefits to non-academic participants who receive acknowledgment of their contributions in the closing credits of the documentary film.

As our efforts have underscored to us, the very essence of the QLT Project is based on knowledge exchange. The project's PI and community-based partner Queer Ontario are collaborating on a study that straddles an historic era in Canada when the gay liberation movement led an unprecedented public battle for recognition, identity formation, and institution-building that, in retrospect, limited itself to a predominantly gay perspective. Today's queer liberation movements seek to sustain the ethos of liberation, but reflect the more inclusive socio-political-cultural complexities of what it currently means to be queer. Our preliminary knowledge development on resurrecting gay liberation principles points toward tenets of that movement being further developed into a queer liberation theory. This was shared with participants in an information package. From there the QLT Project was very much dependent on receiving knowledge from the participants based on their respective work. Their knowledge, experience, and insights, attained through the interviews, produced a wealth of information that both contributes to and challenges the project's work in attempting to develop a queer liberation theory. Some participant's perspectives assisted greatly in furthering our work, others troubled what we are attempting to do – challenging us to drill deeper into the issues and address them in ways that will enrich our goals. It is through this kind of knowledge exchange that the researchers (both academic and community based) are able to undertake a process of knowledge engagement with participants of varying backgrounds and contribute to the crucial sustenance of a critical, progressive, radical, liberationist perspective within broader LGBTQ movements.

The implications of this project are expected to be widespread both within and beyond the LGBT communities due to its critique of their neoliberalization. For homonormalized LGBT movements, the queer liberation discourse represents an antithetical approach. Those movements embrace same-sex marriage and accept the increasing corporatization of Pride festivities, while queer liberation discourse questions the very existence of marriage as an institution and the motives behind corporate involvement in Pride. By asking these questions, the work of the project will assist in giving a voice to queer liberationists, a minoritized faction within broader LGBTQ movements. Importantly, raising such questions demonstrates the unique contribution of queer liberationists to a diverse society. Although these internal tensions are not new, the feature documentary will expose such debates and create opportunities for further dialogue. Both the documentary and the associated pamphlet will feature thought-provoking questions and ideas designed to challenge the audience's views of the current state of LGBTQ movements and where they want to see them go. Hence the major output of this project will contribute to ongoing knowledge engagement.

Queer liberation ultimately means that all of society will need to make adjustments. From a queer perspective this involves liberating all from rigid gender role and sexual orientation expectations. Like all change, this adjustment is destined to encounter resistance. Asking the question, "What would Harvey Milk think if he were alive today?", Dustin Lance Black (2013) noted that pioneering gay activist Harvey Milk worked hard

for all people and all minorities for whom the system was not working. “With a true coalition, every citizen, regardless of sexual orientation, would understand that this isn’t simply a gay and lesbian fight but a fight for justice and equality for anyone who has ever been singled out as second-class” (Black, 2013, para. 16). Similarly, within a Canadian context, a complainant accepting a hard-won pride proclamation for the Homophile Association of London Ontario (HALO) after a successful human rights case said: “This is HALO’s gift to all of London” (Van Brenk, 1998, p. A3). Hecklers in the crowd shouted back: “We don’t appreciate your gift” (1998, p. A3). The leaflet *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Liberation in the 2000s* states: “Society in general would feel less threatened by lesbians, gays and bisexuals who want to be like everybody else than by lesbians, gays and bisexuals who want to change society” (CLGRO, 2004). To simply stop at acquiring equal rights for gender and sexually diverse people would be to abandon the numerous other individuals who continue to be marginalized (e.g., trans, (dis)Able, racialized, impoverished populations). Queer liberation undertakes a continuity of resistance in two ways: first it continues to resist the LGBT movements’ slide toward a neoliberalized homonormativity and larger society’s drift into neoliberalism, and second, it means continuing to confront society’s resistance to change.

## **Conclusion**

Engaged scholarship currently being undertaken by the QLT Project is a complex multilayered process, one that evolves through variations and permutations based on sociopolitical world views, theory-building, social movements, social locations, and identities among other things. At once, queer liberation evokes historical gay liberation, while addressing the complexities of today’s world. It navigates theoretical tensions with queer theory; tempers concerns that arise within the queer liberation movement; and asserts a critical, progressive, even radical perspective in a largely neoliberal climate that mainstreamed LGBT movements have rode the crest on. Simultaneously, the intersectionalities of the researchers and participants of this project, which include academics, activists, and artists – some academic based, some community based, and others both – bring a unique and nuanced perspective to the work of engaged scholarship that contributes to both knowledge and community development. Foregrounding all of this is the complex yet necessary work of knowledge development and creation that, through engaged scholarship, works toward ensuring critical voices are not lost, theoretical discourse and practice are bridged, and transformative political strategies are forged toward the ongoing project of liberating queers and society at large.

## **Notes:**

1. See the appendix for a research snapshot of this project.
2. Queer Ontario is a provincially based network of individuals who are members of the gender and sexually diverse populations and their allies committed to liberationist and sex positive principles that focus on questioning, challenging and seeking reform to social norms and laws that regulate queer people. Queer Ontario engages in public education, political action, promoting access and diversity and coalition building.
3. For the purposes of this article, LGBT movements refer to the collective organizing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans communities for political action. Elsewhere in

the article other such movements are referred to as LGBTQ, the latter letter referring to queer, capturing a broader base of these movements. The queer liberation movements are distinguished by their more critical, progressive, and radical politics.

4. The term “queer” has antecedents that are not academic. It was used as a heterosexual and homophobic term of abuse and denigration directed at lesbians and gay men. It also applies to a form of argot (e.g., Jean Genet’s novels) found in working-class cultures of seamen, thieves, bohemians, artists, and others to denote a non-normative “street” life, where easy sexual exchange occurs among men and boys without the application of strict sexual identities. More recently, through the 1970s and 1980s, “queer” was an appellation picked up by anti-normative bisexual, lesbian, gay, and trans-identified folks who participated in and produced a subaltern cultural production in the form of zines, self-published tracts, videos and film, music, performance, etc. An ethics of difference and an anti-assimilationist politics was taken for granted in this urban, subcultural “scene,” and carried forward in increasingly neoliberal environs of the 1990s and 2000s.

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# research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



## The Queer Liberation Theory Project

### What is this research about?

Social science research on LGBT groups often focuses on LGBT issues, community services and public policy. But community-based participatory research (CBPR) has yet to explore the unique position of community partners who are also researchers and activists. The Queer Liberation Theory (QLT) Project is one example of work being done by partners with overlapping titles. It seeks to explore the diverse range of partners doing social research for queer liberation, and its impact on social movements and society overall. It is an example of engaged scholarship that seeks methods for knowledge translation (KT), transfer, and exchange (KE).

### What did the researchers do?

The QLT project used purposive sampling to hold 40 interviews with researchers, activists and artists doing queer liberationist work. Participants were given a package before interviews that included: background information on the QLT project, definitions of queer liberation, and the interview questions. They completed 6 mandatory questions, chose 7-8 optional questions,

### What you need to know:

Community partners who also serve as researchers and academics are in a unique position to do engaged scholarship. With the QLT project, researchers have both challenged homo-normative LGBT stances, and engaged wider audiences in the conversation.

and created their own question to ask the QLT project.

Strategies are planned to develop and share knowledge about queer liberation from the project. This includes a documentary film, pamphlets, and articles. For the researchers, KT was a crucial strategy to look at the tensions between initial gay liberation values like identity, social justice and social change; and mainstream, neoliberal LGBT movements today. By developing and creating new knowledge for QLT, the project opened multiple levels of critical thought from distinct time-based and socially positioned experiences.

Thus, the process of engaged scholarship was considered through the experience of

all partners. The researchers noted the multiple social positions that each partner brought into these complex engagements.

### What did the researchers find?

By doing CBPR, the QLT project offered differential rewards to partners with overlapping roles as researchers, community partners and activists. They were able to choose and feel valued by the activities that linked the academic and practical aspects of queer liberation. The knowledge from this project will also be shared in various ways to reach different audiences as well. These new findings and challenges for queer liberation theory could not be created without the diverse KEs from those who were interviewed.

The QLT project has also given queer liberation movements a voice among dominant, homo-normative LGBT movements. Thus, the major outputs from the project will create ongoing KE through dialogue on future directions.

### How can you use this research?

Community partners and activists working with LGBT and queer movements may find this research useful. It sheds insight on an important dialogue between diverse leaders and thinkers for LGTBQ issues. It also offers ideas on the various mediums that can engage people with queer liberation issues. This includes the strategy of using pamphlets, film and articles to engage both academic and non-academic audiences.

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*Queer liberationists, LGBT movement, Engaged scholarship, Knowledge exchange, Knowledge transfer, Neoliberalism*

### Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC.

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