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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Queering Democracy: From Identity Blurring to Identity Abolition as [ ]

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**Abstract**
This article invites a rethinking of political subjectivity in democracy as fluid and transformative through engagement with queer theory and practice. Liberal democratic theory conceptualizes participants' identities as stable and unitary, enabling representation and identity politics. This, however, inhibits individual democratic subjects from self-determining their identities, exploring their multiple selves, and engaging in self-transformation. By combining queer and democratic theory with interviews with queer activists and artists in urban Finland, the study reconceptualizes the democratic subject as constantly transforming. The article identifies two strategies: identity blurring through improper names and identity abolition through [ ]. The unspeakable concept of [ ] demarcates a space void of identity that is yet full of democratic freedom, challenging the contention that identity is a prerequisite for democratic engagement.

**Keywords:** democracy; identity; political participation; queer; transformation

Democratic theory has long grappled with a dilemma: On the one hand, democracy relies on the recognizable and stable articulation of the self to others; on the other, it requires the individual's freedom of self-expression, which includes the freedom to change and express inner multiplicity. Liberal democratic theory often conceptualizes identities as stable and takes participants' identities as a precondition for democratic politics. Without stable identities, democratic subjects cannot express themselves and be held accountable. The stability and perceptibility of identity are central to theories of democratic representation, which require a recognizable subject who is made present in democratic institutions (Celis and Childs 2020; Montoya et al. 2022; Phillips 1995, 2015; Pitkin 1967). In the same vein, democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies employ selection practices based on statistical quotas for gender and class (income, education level; Curato et al. 2021; Khoban 2021; Landemore 2020, 2026; Pow 2023; Wojciechowska 2019). Even the radical democratic practices of social

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movements manifest as identity politics and, in doing so, reify marginalized identities (Little and Lloyd 2009; Schubert 2023; Young 2000). Democratic institutions and practices thus rely on recognizable and stable identities. Simultaneously, however, this stability curtails the democratic subject's freedom of expression. From classic pluralists (de Tocqueville 2003 [1840]) and feminist democracy scholars (Young 1989) to radical thinkers (Rancière 1999), democratic theorists argue that identities confine subjects to a particular version of themselves, engender essentialist tendencies, and hold the potential for stereotyping.

The past two decades have seen a decisive shift in democratic theorizing toward reconceptualizing identities in the context of democratic participation in more fluid terms. Poststructuralist thought and theories of performativity have inspired democratic theorists to rethink representation as a performative process of claim-making in which participants' identities are generated in the moment and are, moreover, always contestable (Disch 2021; Rey Salamanca 2023; Saward 2010, 2020). Feminist democratic theorists have conceptualized democracy as a performative process of shared and embodied identity construction (Ferguson 2012; Machin 2022). Others explore disidentification and transformative becoming as a democratic practice (Asenbaum 2021; Mendonça and Marques 2023; Mühlhäußer 2025). Agonistic democrats have gone furthest in advancing an understanding of identities as socially constructed and hence prone to deconstruction (McManus 2008; Mouffe 1995). They argue, however, that any attempts at deconstructing identity always require its reconstruction, as the hegemonic confrontation that constitutes politics always necessitates recognizable and (at least temporarily) stable identities. In Chantal Mouffe's (2006: 6) words:

> It is not enough to simply foster a process of 'de-identification' or 'de-individualization.' The second move, the moment of 're-identification,' of 're-individualization' is decisive. To insist only on the first move is in fact to remain trapped in a problematic which postulates that the negative moment is sufficient.

In this article, we contribute to the debate on fluid identities in democratic participation by going one step further and challenging the necessity of identity reconstruction after its deconstruction, advancing the claim that a politics beyond recognizability is possible. We do so by bringing queer theory and practice into conversation with democratic theory. Queer conceptions of subjectivity have a lot to offer for democratic scholarship—specifically for its uneasy relationship with identity—generating an understanding of identity as transformative and deconstructable, which is sorely needed in contemporary democratic scholarship. We pick up and contribute to a recently emerging debate at the intersection between queer and democratic theory that, in our opinion, harbors great potential for rethinking identity in democracy in fluid and transformative terms (Asenbaum 2023; Chambers 2009; Lloyd 2005; Lorey 2022; Miller 2022; Quan 2024).

In advancing an understanding of democratic practice beyond identity, we do not contest the democratic value of identities. Identities can enable political claim-making, contestation against marginalization, and the attribution of accountability. Our aim is to expand the repertoire of democratic subjectivities by recognizing not only the political significance of identifiable subjects but also the democratic potential of remaining

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unrecognizable. Our understanding of democracy is also far-reaching, including not only political institutions but every sphere of life in which power relations matter. While our point of departure and comparison is liberal democracy, we are interested in democratic living as an everyday practice (Gagnon et al. 2025; Quan 2024). This understanding of democracy resonates with queer theory and activism, which develops a sensitive and nuanced understanding of how identities are (de-)constructed through everyday interactions and thus raises the question of how these interactions can be democratized.

This article engages in queering democracy by conceptually proposing and empirically investigating two distinct political strategies of identity deconstruction. First, democratic subjects may blur identity by employing improper names as collective monikers that foreclose individual recognizability (Deseriis 2015; Rancière 1999). Second, democratic subjects may engage in identity abolition and attempt to overcome identity altogether (Bey 2021). To express this more radical deconstruction of identity, we propose the concept of [ ]. Since identity is refused, it cannot be rendered nameable. Instead, [ ] signals a space void of identity—one that is filled only with the democratic freedom of unrestrained self-expression.

While the investigation of queer democratic theory equips us with the concepts of (1) identity blurring through improper names and (2) identity abolition through [ ], it remains mostly abstract and tells us little about how these concepts are put into action. To substantiate queer theories of self-transformation, we draw on an empirical engagement with queer activists and artists in Finland. Specifically, through 21 in-depth interviews, we found that, for them, queer serves as a conceptual tool for bracketing a space for freedom from identification. Queer can serve both as an improper name and as [ ]—a tool for removing oneself from the process of identification altogether.

The article proceeds as follows: It first reviews the literature at the intersection of queer and democratic theory to generate transformative accounts of both identity and democracy as fluid and mutually constitutive processes. This section develops the conceptions of identity blurring through improper names, as well as identity abolition through [ ]. We then introduce our methodological approach, after which we present our empirical insights into how queer activists engage in identity blurring and abolition. To conclude, we discuss how queering democracy, in the sense proposed in the article, may advance democratic theory and practice.

## Queer democratic theory: from improper names to [ ]

In contrast to the stable and representable identities envisioned in liberal conceptions of democracy, queer theory proposes an understanding of identities as volatile and fluid constructs produced through embodied performance. To grasp the transformative potential of queer theory, it is necessary to note that "queer" goes beyond describing a sexual identity. It is not a category that labels being but a practice of becoming (Jagose 1996), of refusing to arrive at a certain destination. Instead of serving as an identifier, queer subverts the very logic of identification (Mühlhäußer 2025).

This is best illustrated by contrasting "queer" with "LGBT." The initialism for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" has undergone—and continues to undergo—expansions. These include "Q" for queer and/or questioning, "I" for intersexual, "A"

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for asexual, "P" for pansexual, and "2S" for two-spirit, as well as "+," which signals every non-cis-heterosexual identity category that cannot be put into words, resulting in LGBTQQIAP2S+ initialisms with letters in various orders. These letters, even when incorporating "queer," follow a different logic that stands in opposition to queer. They each signal an identity category, while queer marks a fundamental opposition to this very approach of labeling (Kjaran and Mohammad 2022: 6). The LGBT initialism, in its diverse variations, corresponds to the liberal logic of categorization and identification. "The acronym [sic, initialism] congeals into a tamed, neoliberal description, the referential letters equated with one another as something one simply is" (Bey 2021: 2). Its expansionary move strives for liberal inclusion yet never breaks out of the logic of identity reification.

Accordingly, "LGBT politics is a politics of inclusiveness of diverse categories of gender and sexuality; queer politics is a challenge and resistance to dominant and debilitating norms of gender and sexuality" (Chambers 2009: 2). The logic of "queer," then, follows a logic opposite to that of "LGBT." While the initialism reifies identity, queerness stages a revolt against identity. It contests the act of categorization and advocates the freedom to remain uncategorized. By incorporating the "Q" for "queer" into the initialism LGBTQ, "queer" is degraded into an identity label and hence depleted of its subversive power—the capacity to open a path "to a life away from identity categories" (Fleischmann 2019: 94).

In democratic theory and practice, defining identity categories has served many important purposes. In liberal democracies, inclusion requires recognition. We need to be seen by others *as someone*, as distinct persons (Hacking 2007), belonging to predefined categories, in order to be recognizable (Adut 2018: 122–124; Lamont and Mizrachi 2012). Recognition, in turn, is not only the foundation of our experience of being treated as equals in a democratic society (Lamont 2018) but also the foundation of representation, which constitutes the primary mode of participation in liberal democracy. The identity categories produced on the basis of recognition enable descriptive representation, whereby one person can stand for another on the basis of shared identity features (Pitkin 1967). Stable identity categories have also served as the foundation for identity political social movement organizing and the claiming of minority rights through the politics of presence (Phillips 1995).

However, as noted powerfully by both feminist democratic scholars (Young 1989) and queer theorists (Miller 2022), fixed and stable identities are also problematic from a democratic perspective. The stable identities required by descriptive representation forestall the freedom of identity transformation. In addition to enabling the articulation of unique selves and the formation of alliances, fixed identity categories serve the purpose of ordering, governing, and disciplining (Quan 2024).

In contrast, "queer" enables a shift toward a post-identity politics (May 2009), that is, a "non-identity politics, predicated not on the presence of identity but on its absence or undoing" (Lloyd 2005: 160). Non-identity politics, according to Lloyd, does not understand the democratic subject as pre-political, which would enable its representation. Instead, identity is constructed through political processes as part of democratic participation. This performative view of identity augments the politics of presence with a politics of becoming. Instead of capturing one's identity in the form of a "minority,"

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identification is interrupted, and the democratic subject is reassembled in novel and unforeseen ways (Asenbaum 2023; see also Quan 2024).

The roots of these reconfigurations of subjectivity do lie in earlier radical and revolutionary liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s. Guy Hocquenghem (1993 [1972]) conceptualized homosexuality as fundamentally non-identitarian, constructed through fluid and disruptive connections and desires, thus challenging politics structured around "the relation between signifier and signified … between representative and masses" (p. 145). More broadly, while at times producing and relying on identity categories (Farred 2000), these movements also developed repertoires of collective action that treated the self as multiple and as mobilized in the service of common struggle, thereby subverting hierarchies that depend on fixed identity and separation (Hardt 2023).

Against this backdrop, and granting this conception of queerness as fluid, multiple, and subversive, which form does democratic subjectivity then take in queer democratic theory? In *Queering Democracy*, Daniel Miller (2022) describes collective subjects as inherently transformative. Here, "the demos's morphology is fundamentally fluid and shifting, preventing its emergence in any final, fixed form" (p. 73). The queered demos engages in its own continuous deconstruction and reconstruction: "Queer democracy, enacted in dissensual social and political practice expresses the demos's constant unmaking, taking shape around its ongoing expansion and the maintenance of its own (un)becoming as an anticipation of the unforeseeable emergence of novel political subjects" (Miller 2022: 73). Miller's conception of the queer collective subject draws on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2004) idea of the multitude, which describes "the *living flesh* that rules itself" (p. 100). The multitude emerges as a heterogeneous assemblage bringing together diverse people into a single collective subject without assimilating their individual identities and thus preserving its internal multiplicity. In theorizing the multitude, Hardt and Negri draw on queer theory, maintaining that "Queer politics … is not really an affirmation of homosexual identities but a subversion of the logics of identity in general" (p. 200).

In this article, we bring Miller's notion of queering democracy to the level of the individual democratic subject. We ask how a fundamentally fluid and shifting subject could be conceived and conceptualized as well as how such fluidity can be practiced in democratic living. We identify two approaches to queering democracy in the literature: first, identity blurring—that is, articulating collective identities through improper names—and second, identity abolition, which we propose to describe using the concept of [ ].

Bringing together queer and democratic theory, Hans Asenbaum (2023) proposes a politics of becoming that advances the subject's freedom to change through radical acts of disidentification. The self is constituted as an assemblage of blood flows, skin tissue, and brain cells; culturally coded objects, such as clothes and makeup; and discursive concepts of race, gender, and sexuality. The politics of becoming interrupts and temporarily reconfigures these everyday assemblages. The emerging subjects articulate themselves through improper names (Deseriis 2015), which blur the line between identification and unidentifiability, resulting in temporary monikers like the one used by the hacktivist collective Anonymous (Asenbaum 2018). Jacques Rancière's (1999) original conception of improper names describes them as located in a gray

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zone between individual identification through proper names and complete imperceptibility. Improper names, then, are characterized not by overcoming but by blurring identity. They function as collective pseudonyms that employ the anonymizing multiplicity of the crowd to shroud identity while articulating political content. Here, identity is only temporarily stabilized, which allows for blurring and switching between various identity performances that articulate the fluid and multiple self (see also Meriluoto 2024).

The politics of becoming draws on queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's (1999) concept of disidentification, which entails two steps: the critical analysis or deconstruction of hegemonic identities and the creation of alternative counter-identifications: "Disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as a raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (p. 31). Identity, here, is not entirely overcome. It is still inherent in the available discursive concepts and facilitates the articulation of political content, while simultaneously being obscured—working within and against hegemonic codes, resisting full capture, and remaining open to resignification.

Similarly, Judith Butler's contributions to democratic theory focus on disidentification. For Butler, the critique of established categories, such as "woman" and "man," underlines their incapability to fully capture an individual's experience of identity. Therefore, there always remains an excess that cannot be captured through identification. This inability of identification results in ambiguity or blurriness: "It may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that the failure of identification, is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference" (Butler 1993: 219). Crucially, for Butler, any disidentification is followed by a reconstruction of identity. For marginalized groups, the malleability of discursively constructed identity opens pathways toward resignification (see also Lloyd 2007): "The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable … in the participatory sphere of political deliberation" (Butler 2004: 4).

What the above accounts of identity blurring through improper names and resignification have in common is that they posit a necessary reconstructive move in which novel identities are produced following the deconstructive move.

The identity abolition approach breaks with this logic and proposes a democratic politics *without identity*. Marquis Bey (2022) explores the cross-fertilization between blackness, transness, and feminism. In contrast to an essentializing category of race, blackness signifies for Bey both the mutability of, and a mutiny against, identity. Fugitivity from slavery—breaking out of imprisonment and crossing the borders of a forbidden land—resonates with the transness of breaking out of gender roles and crossing identity boundaries. Here, abolition goes beyond doing away with racism, slavery, and the carceral state; it also includes abolishing identity: "We, too, *become* through abolishing the ways we ourselves have been formed" (p. 25). In practice, identity abolition calls for a politics beyond identity: "Black trans feminist gender self-determination avows a subjective cultivation of ways to do illegible genders … It means we advocate for the ethical requisite to say 'No'—or better, to decline to state—with regard to the imposition of gender" (Bey 2022: 24).

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Similarly, H.L.T. Quan (2024: 150–151) draws on concepts of abolition and fugitivity to probe the "speculative praxis" through which we can make ourselves "unavailable for governing." Quan contends that these practices of refusal generate freedom, and this is where the true essence of democracy lies. For that reason, she contends that "making democracy queer means unsettling the terms of order—a disorientation from elitism and the consent to be governed, including governing analytics and the grammatology of gender" (Quan 2024: 153). Bey and Quan find support in Isabell Lorey's (2022: 119) queer-feminist concept of presentist democracy, which staunchly opposes liberal representation:

> Refusing the figure of a bourgeois capitalist, autonomous, identity-bound subject, a democracy detached from primacy of representation can be practiced. This is a democracy whose demos cannot be represented as a people, but instead unfolds as a manifold multitude … It breaks with the discrimination based on identitarian categories such as class, gender, sexuality, and 'race' and opposes the valorization of difference.

By overcoming the representational logic of rearticulating identity performances of the past, presentist democracy allows the self to be lived in the moment. Cutting ties with the past makes identity illegible.

Finally, in a recent reflection on the politics of becoming, Asenbaum pushes the logic of identity blurring further and explores what enacting the opposite of identity, its absence, which cannot be captured through language, means for democratic politics. In doing so, he suggests that a democracy beyond recognizability is possible:

> Being unrecognizable, then, does not entail being imperceptible. Encountering the unrecognizable subject may be compared to listening to an unknown language. Hearing the words and listening to their melody, we can nevertheless not decode their meaning. In the same vein, while the unrecognizable subject takes form as an embodied being, their identity remains undeciphered within the established racial, cisgender, heterosexual matrix. (Asenbaum 2025: 3)

The above exploration of the literature at the intersection of queer and democratic theory provides important learnings for democratic theory. Instead of stable subjects that can be identified and represented, queer democratic subjects appear as inherently transformative. While queer democratic theories are conceptually rich, they also remain abstract. So, which forms do identity blurring and abolition take in practice? How can democratic subjects become [ ]? In the following section, we substantiate queer democratic theories by enriching them with queer activist practice.

## Methodological approach: queer theorizing of democratic living

Our work builds on methodological approaches developed by queer democratic theorists (Lorey 2022; Quan 2024). Following Quan (2024: 49–53), focusing on the concepts and institutions of liberal democracy limits our "democratic thinkability" by reducing democracy to the existing order. This, Quan argues, may in itself be constitutive

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of the exacerbation of antidemocratic trends in contemporary societies (pp. 68–69). In response, Quan urges democratic theorists to abandon theorizing democracy from the point of view of "form and structure" (p. 72)—that is, by looking at existing modes of governing. Instead, we should start our work from the practices of "democratic living" that people employ to become ungovernable.

To understand the democratic value of queer practices of subjectification, and to substantiate empirically the queer democratic theories discussed above, we draw on 21 in-depth interviews with queer activists and artists in Finland. The interviews were conducted by Heini Salminen in spring 2023. We identified and approached participants through Salminen's contacts, both via social media and in person, as part of their ethnographic research in local queer communities. This involved sharing an open call on the author's personal Instagram account, which was then reshared by other users as well as local nongovernmental organizations and LGBT+ associations. The call was addressed to people over 18 years old who identify as queer for research on political action and identity. The participants consisted of queer activists and artists who practice queer living. They were between the ages of 21 and 46 and lived in large urban areas in Finland. When quoting research participants, we use pseudonyms.

The setting of the interviews, Finland, is often ranked among the most progressive countries in terms of LGBT+ rights, placed sixth in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association-Europe 2023 assessment (ILGA-Europe 2023). But despite these legal protections, its reputation coexists with a conflicting sociocultural climate and public attitudes: prejudice and hostility toward LGBT+ individuals and organizations remain widespread (Leppänen 2024), with the number of hate speech and discriminatory acts continuing to rise (Seta 2023). These tensions sustain a lively field of subcultural collectives and independent activists for whom normative, assimilationist politics and formal rights are insufficient, making Finland an engaging site for this study.

In our analysis, we followed an abductive approach circulating between the theoretical literature and empirical data (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). We first conducted a scoping review of the literature at the intersection of queer and democratic theory. We then conducted 21 in-depth qualitative interviews with queer activists and artists, which provided sufficient depth and variation within this abductive, theory-oriented design to achieve thematic saturation, offering rich descriptions of the many dimensions of subjectification and everyday political practices. Of these interviews, 19 were conducted in-person and 2 online, and each interview lasted around 2 hours.

The interview questions were mostly broad and open, and they aimed to encourage participants to reflect on their understanding of the term "queer" and how they defined their own identities. We were particularly interested in "queer democratic living." In other words, we wanted to know how queer activists live and transform their identities from day to day and how they infuse their everyday lives with political activism. We then read their descriptions of the interconnectedness of their self-making and political action as a key site of democratic renewal. Following Quan (2024), we locate democracy also—if not primarily—in everyday actions of imagining and doing otherwise (also Luhtakallio et al. 2024), which not only transforms our democratic cultures

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but also moves our democratic imaginaries forward into seeing what democracy could be in the future.

We initially coded the data inductively with the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti, identifying common patterns and themes at the intersection of queerness, identity, and democracy. We sought to find democracy as action in everyday practices, remaining loyal to the participants' own meaning-making on what constitutes political action, and what democracy as practices entails. The preliminary broad categories identified included "queer as freedom," "queer as self-chosen," "queer as resistance," "queer as inclusive," "queer as alternative temporality," and "queer as a community." After the first round of analysis, we returned to the literature to reflect on how these categories resonate with established queer democratic theory and, inversely, what remains unexplained.

In our analysis, we identified two distinct logics of subjectification that resonated with our review of queer democratic theory: the blurring of identity expressing inner ambiguity and fluidity through a collective misnomer, or an improper name as the literature describes it, and the attempt to undo identity altogether. The first captures queerness as a vague, blurry collective identity that is sustained, though its content remains mutable and open to contestation. The second, in contrast, entails an abolition of names, pasts, and futures—an insistence on the present moment without attachment to processes of identification. This unspeakability we conceptualize as [ ] to illustrate a pause as an interruptive experiential (but unnameable) moment in the present. In our analysis below, we present how these distinct democratic subjectivities are practiced in action, and what democratic values the activists and artists interviewed assign to the subjectivity constructed through the notion of queer.

### *Queer as an improper name*

> If I have to put a label on myself … I like to go with 'queer'. I guess I could also say that I am *nothing*. But in a way, queer is the same thing to me: everything and nothing in the same box. (Kim)

In a world where existing without a name of any kind seems unviable, a world with the need for "some concepts and categories to talk about things," Kim, an artist and activist, describes opting for "queer." For them, it is a label carrying as few requirements and expectations as possible, containing "everything and nothing." It disrupts the logic of conventional categorization of identity, while simultaneously providing some form of perceptibility and recognition. In the same vein, queer activist Emel describes their use of "queer" as allowing for "exploring and redefining oneself again and again," under one name, without, in the words of Usva, another activist, "having to go into particular micro terms to describe yourself accurately … and getting a terrible identity crisis every time."

In this way, we suggest, "queer" functions as an improper name: a collective misnomer that places the subject in a blurry area between identification and imperceptibility (Rancière 1999)—an open multiplicity that is "nameable but difficult to identify" (Deseriis 2015: 5). Its significance for democracy lies in enabling a formation of a political subject without succumbing to an identity category that would define subjects from the outside, and thus risks curbing their freedom. The use of queer,

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as described by the interviewees, enables democratic agency that embraces "all that fluidity," as Sharon, an artist working on queer identity and belonging, notes, while providing a sense of community:

> I've tried on different categories but ultimately, queer is what allows all that ambiguity and fluidity … And I feel like when I'm using 'queer' in this broad sense, I'm also contributing to the understanding of queer as such. There's a collective, inviting power in it. (Sharon)

Unlike other collective identities, which tend to be more tightly controlled and constructed from the top down (Hekman 2000: 297), "queer" as an improper name is cocreated and constantly revised by the collective in a horizontal, radically democratic manner—opening communal space without fixed meaning. Miska, an activist, echoes: "We keep using the word because it allows us to meet without agreeing." Following these accounts, then, the temporary reification of the self through queerness allows democratic subjects to blur individual boundaries under an umbrella that names not a singular person but rather its transformative capacity and multiplicity (Pustianaz 2018: 15). It not only allows fluidity but also disagreement and ambiguity within the subject, which holds great promise for democracy in its capacity to value conflict as a constructive force.

This collective and flexible dimension of queerness, as a shared, deliberately unstable concept, is reflected in participants' accounts of identity negotiations. Activist and teacher Kettu talks about living and growing up in the "women's category" and "still identifying with some women's political struggles." But queerness has allowed them to detach from the categorical expectations tied to femininity, instead opening up a "wider sense of agency" and a "greater space and freedom for diverse life choices." Similarly, for activist and artist Aala, queerness is a way to evade the assumptions embedded in more specific categories: "If I say I'm, for example, non-binary, I feel like people will immediately have some expectations on what it means, who I am." Thus, choosing "queer" can serve as a democratic act of disidentification, maintaining ambiguity as a form of political agency, as described by queer activist Noah: "I've deliberately refused to use more specific words because they would make it easier to categorize me in a way that I don't think is necessary."

As an improper name, queerness is therefore inclusive yet radically open-ended, founded on its very undefinability. It rejects the rigid clarity imposed by normative identity frameworks and instead affords the possibility of being the author of one's own self. In our data, this work of disidentification and reidentification through blurring was often described as playful—creating democratic spaces for experimentation, curiosity, and, as one of the activists put it, "embracing the chaos" within. As such, it can hold democratic potential also in fostering and enabling democratic imaginations and practical utopias (Salmenniemi et al. 2024).

An example of this identity play is offered by Kippura, an activist and artist in their early twenties living in a commune with other queer activists. One of the walls in the commune's hallway is entirely covered by a chalkboard entitled "Pronouns of the day." All guests entering the apartment are invited to write their preferred pronouns on the

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wall, creating an environment that values ever-evolving expressions of the self and providing an opportunity to explore identity. The board with the pronouns of the day appears as a "tabula rasa"—a blank canvas or a space of possibility, borrowing this definition of queerness from Aala. Furthermore, the practice ridicules the expectation of identity stability, which was illustrated by tongue-in-cheek, made-up pronouns written on the wall.

Similarly, Jirka, who reported previously identifying as a transman but recently finding more resonance with queerness, talked about sometimes still referring to themselves with gendered terms, such as "bloke" or "dude," and described their use as "soft and playful." The gendered terms serve as part of the masquerade (Butler 1990) in which one tries on old clothes to see how funny they look and feel. Thus, playfulness caters to the cause of illegibility in queerness by resisting classifications through humor and experimentation. Further, it allows stepping out of the linear progression of the self and understanding the self as fundamentally fluid—a journey without a point of arrival—as described by activist Ella:

> I don't think my identity will ever be complete, and this is crucial to me. In other aspects of my life, I've struggled to accept the fact that things remain unfinished … However, my queerness is ever-evolving; it's incomplete in so many ways, but still complete in a way that I'm enough as I am. (Ella)

Importantly, "queer" as an improper name equips the activists with a vague collective signifier, one that claims space for freedom and ambiguity while simultaneously enabling democratic agency by blurring stable identities. Here, democratic action is not confined to street protests or other established forms of activism. Rather, queerness infuses everyday life with democracy (Fish et al. 2018). It equips everyday situations with a politicizing potential—a possibility to render visible, interrogate, and resist the cultural norms and unspoken principles we live by. Kaari, a visual artist and activist, elucidates:

> I used to think that maybe this queerness wasn't such a big part of my identity. But now I think it's actually really, really significant – not so much the category or the definition, really, but the way you live through it. (Kaari)

In this way, queerness allows the participants to shift away from what one *is* in categorical terms toward how one moves in the world in ways that disrupt and complicate normative boundaries. For Kettu, queerness is ultimately a tool for "observing and deconstructing norms, and living in an analytical relation to them," allowing democratic agency to be found in the mundane. Kettu gives an example of this work of "de-normalizing everyday situations" by narrating an instance at a public swimming pool, inquiring of the staff which of the two changing rooms they should choose as a genderqueer person:

> It's about those small moments when, say, a receptionist is compelled to think about what gender *actually* is and how it's regulated. If it were up to me, I wouldn't want any names or categories at all. But in this environment, with increasingly oppressive and norm-enforcing politics, I want to be furiously queer – I want

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> to demand our existence, even in some damn swimming pool … I often feel so hopeless when facing the big structures, but you can still find places of influence in your own communities and everyday life. (Kettu)

Queerness thus functions as a vague collective name, one that blurs identity and simultaneously generates a platform for collective action, but its contents remain open, multiple, and in motion. As an improper name, it allows its bearers a distance from predetermined categories yet resists reaching a new fixed destination. At the same time, it enables political mobilization by providing sufficient recognizability to act as a democratic subject, while preserving the instability necessary to resist capture by normative regimes.

### *Queer as [ ]*

Identity blurring through "queer" as an improper name does not, however, suffice to meet some activists' political aspirations. While it allows for ambiguity, these activists go further and seek political expression beyond identity. For them, illegibility and, therefore, radical freedom are achieved by temporarily detaching from names and categories altogether and experiencing identity abolition in a presentist democracy (Lorey 2022).

We articulate this shift toward the abolition of identity with the concept of [ ], which acts as an empty space, a pause, for becoming "unrecognizable, unbounded, unself" (Bey 2022: 27). The empty bracket marks a disruptive moment in the present, a fleeting interval of transcending identity. While participants acknowledge the impossibility of escaping identity altogether—the compulsion to conform persisting through encounters with institutions and others (Winer 2025)—they seek instead to cultivate "glitches" (Russell 2020), claiming the present moment as their experiential domain. By challenging systems of recognition that force complex experiences into fixed terms and flatten fluid selves into labels, these activists make sense of queerness as an abolitionist, radical democratic practice, employing it as a tool to reimagine the very foundations of our social coexistence, but also of how our societies are democratically organized and governed. Kettu describes this as a practice that builds on "a very fundamental understanding that everything is open to questioning and is deconstructible," one that dismantles "everyday structures of othering." Aleksandra explains: "I've never fit any fixed definitions, yet I've always had to settle for something *roughly right*, but still not. In these structures, who I am doesn't exist." Instead, queerness signals a movement toward doing away with identity, as Remi implies: "a deliberate path towards refusal … abandoning what once abandoned you."

Such refusals take shape in multiple registers. An example is given by Kaari, for whom it means declining participation in processes of gendering by declaring their pronouns as "whatever." Elaborating on this stance of "whateverness" (Pustianaz 2018) and insisting on a space beyond identification, Kaari gestured with a far-reaching leap of their hand:

> If I have to say, I'm like he/they/she, any or whatever, it doesn't really matter to me, and I don't really care about defining it. I'd rather just not. Like, why do I have to choose some damn box again? … I'm already somewhere over there. (Kaari)

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The fact that Kaari uses a gesture instead of words lends credence to our understanding of queer as unspeakable [ ]. Rather than negotiating the limits of available categories, Kaari's enactment of [ ], a disruptive moment of abolishing identity in the present, unfolds through a refusal to name and instead inhabiting an indeterminate elsewhere, without recourse to past or future. Similarly, for Usva, this subjectification emerges through performances of the self that generate "moments of confusion," as Usva describes: "people can't define me and don't know what terms to use." While for some these practices take the form of linguistic or stylistic choices that render them unrecognizable, for others they entail more embodied enactments of refusal.

Noah, who describes their gender as "none," articulates this radical presence through what they call deliberately pursuing an "unfinished" body:

> I want my physical characteristics to be unrecognizable so that I can't be categorized. With partial hormone replacement therapy, for example, I'm not trying to arrive at an identity but to remain unfinished. (Noah)

Rather than transitioning into a legible binary or even adopting a new category, Noah describes undertaking partial hormone treatment to cultivate expression without the need for identification. For them, this constitutes an act of rendering themselves unreadable, claiming democratic agency through undoing the terms of recognition. As they elaborate, "I want to be seen without being interpreted," refusing legibility within governing gendered regimes while still asserting agency and democratic presence. This abolitionist practice therefore seeks to do away not only with constraining and oppressive categories but also with the practice of creating them and the societal structures that are constructed based on their logic.

This broader abolitionist critique of institutional compulsion is reflected, for example, in activists' opposition to the introduction of a third gender category in official state documents. The discussion around this issue became heated during the drafting of the so-called "transgender law" in Finland in early 2023. On February 1, the Finnish Parliament passed the long-awaited and fought-for law, which grants transgender people the right to legally affirm their gender by self-declaration without having to undergo a lengthy medical procedure, as they did under the previous law. As part of this debate, the question of whether a third gender designation should be available in official documents emerged. Many of the interviewees opposed the idea, resisting what they saw as merely the creation of "new boxes":

> During the parliamentary election, they asked if people were in favor of a third gender option in official documents, and I was like, well, actually, no [laughs]. I don't know what I would do with it … In a way, it doesn't matter to me if we have 3 or 72 genders. How about if we don't focus on this whole gender identity aspect all the time? (Remi)

Through these strategies of positioning themselves outside and beyond the categories, activists refuse to participate in the established logic of identification. Instead of resignifying, creating improper names, or blurring identity categories, they contest the entire existence of identification. This refusal is articulated as a desire for a democratic

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exit (Warren 2011) by "leaving the field, throwing away our equipment, depriving funding from restoration efforts, and joyfully watching the stadium crumble—not because we smashed it to bits, but simply because we left and refused to come back" (Bey 2022: 56).

Consequently, for the activists, this refusal offered a form of democratic agency detached from both past and future—specifically from assumptions of linear, sequential life progression (Halberstam 2005) structured around milestones such as getting a job, getting married (Freeman 2010), or forming a stable identity (Israeli-Nevo 2017). Enacting [ ] instead enabled alternative temporalities and the reliving of specific life stages: a second or delayed puberty, new forms of relationality after "coming out," or "teenage-like" crushes with first queer loves. Insisting on the present thus creates a space to reclaim agency over one's own narratives and experiences—in the words of Ella and Emel, a "joyous letting go of 'should' statements" and "being and going in the moment." In this sense, then, [ ] functions as an alternative to identification, enabling democratic practice that "does not have to be postponed to the future," supplying "all being with change, acting and experimenting" (Lorey 2022: 143–145). Crucially, it also comes without the burden of having to possess a clear blueprint for what a future democracy would look like. Instead, it gives value to the temporary interruptions that engender a presentist democracy in the moment.

As the analysis has shown, abolishing identity through [ ], an empty space, allows democratic subjectivity to emerge through illegibility—a refusal of categorization and an embrace of the moment. At the same time, however, participants emphasized that this possibility is always situated and partial: achievable only fleetingly, through temporary interventions and disruptions, before being pulled back into recognizable categories. In the words of Ava, an activist and writer: "There are moments when I feel like I have to explain myself, and I immediately feel the familiar pressure to fit expectations—shrinking, back in the box." Many also recognize that their ability to claim such illegibility is contingent, as Sharon noted, depending on having "less on the line." "*I* don't need these categories," they explain, while simultaneously acknowledging that, for others, recognition through names and categories can provide belonging and a sense of security.

Participants who pursued identity abolition also grappled with the tension and grief of letting go of the categories to which they found themselves attached. While committing to this strategy as a desirable politics, to fully embrace [ ] also entails, as Bey (2022: 4) observes, letting go of the "categories we love": "If we want freedom, we need to free ourselves, too, of the things with which we capture ourselves." Malva S. illustrates this dynamic:

> I have this feeling of fascination, of being in love with queerness and things around it, so, of course, it's difficult to want to get rid of it [laughs]. I don't want it to blend in, blend into normalcy. If one's self-understanding, such a positive one, is built on being different from normal, then you don't want to conform to that … But this isn't a political feeling, and I wouldn't want to say this out loud, because there aren't really good political consequences to this. (Malva S.)

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## Conclusion

In this article, we have reconceptualized democratic subjectivity through queer theory and practice. We have suggested that liberal conceptions of democracy rest on, and thus reify, stable identities and consequently circumscribe one of the fundamental values of democracy: freedom. By infusing democratic theory with queer theoretical insights, we have challenged the role of stable and singular identities in democracy. Through our analysis of interviews with queer activists and artists, we have further developed these abstract theoretical propositions by inquiring into the concrete shapes democratic living can take. By abductively moving between theory and empirical practice, we identified two strategies: identity blurring through improper names and identity abolition through [ ].

In the case of identity blurring, "queer" was mobilized as an improper name—a collective pseudonym that facilitates withdrawing from existing identity markers and attaining a certain degree of anonymity while retaining some level of recognizability that affords communication and political action. As an improper name, "queer" opened up novel spaces for activists to self-define, change, or conceal their selves, yet still act politically as ever-evolving democratic subjects. The second form of mobilizing queer went beyond blurring and contested the logic of identification at its very root. Identity abolition means generating democratic subjectivity and hence enabling democratic action without a recognizable identity. We propose that this empty space of unnameability be circumscribed as [ ].

We argue that this radical pause and presentist experience constitutes a dimension of democratic politics that has been neglected thus far. Crucially, the democratic transformations in which the queer activists in this study were engaged did not transpire through representative structures or require future planning and coordination. Instead, they were marked by immediacy and a novel logic of transformative political action. Queerness as [ ] allows the activists an interruption of the temporal flow from past to future and an experiential halt of time in the present, enabling them to simply *be* without any commitments to existing identity categories or future identifications. Queerness, then, affords the emergence of political subjects without definability or recognizability, comprehensible only through its norm-defiance, constant change, and radical immediacy.

What are the institutional consequences of queering democracy as developed in this paper? How might a queered democracy operate at larger scales beyond the micropolitical interventions discussed here? While a full answer lies beyond the scope of this paper, we offer some preliminary reflections. If participants in democracy were enabled to freely construct their own identities, representative institutions would no longer be tenable, as their attempt to replicate existing identities actually generates dominant identities that curtail the personal freedom of self-definition. As suggested by our participants, acts of self-organizing democracy in free associations challenge the idea of representation itself. Practices of generating identity—both individually and collectively—and practices of democratic engagement collapse. Every participatory act shapes identity and vice versa (Lloyd 2005).

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The literature at the intersection of queer and democratic theory often concludes that, given the impossibility of representation and the diminished role of accountability, institutional frameworks that upscale democracy are neither feasible nor desirable. Queer democracy is thus frequently positioned as anti-institutional, locating democracy instead in self-organized activist spaces and their everyday micropolitics. Miller (2022: 70), for example, contends: "Within a queerly democratic imaginary, we should understand democracy as a form of dissensual social and political practice, rather than a determinate set of institutions or procedures." While we agree that the performative and embodied nature of the presentist democratic subject undermines representation, and thus calls for unmediated participation, this does not entail forgoing institutional structures that can afford and nurture democratic action.

Theories of radical democracy, which inspire much of queer democratic thinking, open generative pathways toward upscaling and institutionalizing democratic practices rooted in subjectivities shaped by blurred or even imperceptible identities. Hardt and Negri (2017: 289) call for the invention of "institutions that establish and consolidate democratic social relations among a multiplicity of subjectivities … A democratic, nonsovereign institution can be a structure that allows and encourages us to repeat productive and joyful habits and encounters." While these authors open up the prospect of radical democratic institutions, they remain vague about their concrete form and functioning.

Alexandros Kioupkiolis, by contrast, takes a decisive step toward institutionalizing radical democracy. His conception of a "common democracy" builds on the practice of commoning. Rather than denoting the ownership or governance of a resource, commoning refers to a democratic practice of making and becoming together. When democracy becomes a common, it transforms into a collective practice of cocreating the decisions and rules that govern a community. These collaborative processes overcome representation, as they "smash any standing division between the rulers and the ruled, enabling anyone who so wishes to involve themselves in political deliberation" (Kioupkiolis 2019: 226).

At the same time, a commons-based democracy depends on institutionalization. It requires "designed processes of egalitarian, consensual deliberation that are open to all, fomenting diversity and knitting horizontal, decentralized networks that propel collaboration without suppressing the freedom of singularities" (Kioupkiolis 2019: 230–231). Such institutions take the form of open assemblies that anyone can join. The immediacy of these assemblies, grounded in direct participation rather than representation, frees participants from the constraining demands of fixed identification, allowing them to blur or even abolish identity. Participants can "show up any way," as Bey puts it in their account of identity abolition: "an anonymous gender provides a way of showing up, being present, without adhering to the terms and conditions of being able to be present. Anonymous genders *show up anyway*" (Bey 2025: 4).

Our theoretical and empirical investigation, then, suggests that a democratic subjectivity unbound from identity is possible. In contrast to Mouffe's (2006) contention that any dearticulation requires a rearticulation of identity and to Rancière's improper names, which constitute a hybrid between identity and non-identity, our study of [ ] reveals the potential for democratic action beyond identity. In [ ], identity abolition is both a tool and an objective of political action. By radically detaching one's present self

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from any past and future interpellations, [ ] creates an interruption as empty space for a presentist democratic subjectivity without recognizable identity. Its refusal of identity is its only denominator.

The two strategies of identity blurring and identity abolition might raise concerns: Isn't politics always a *collective* endeavor? What happens to society, collectivity, and mutuality in a post-identity world? Queer performance through improper names and [ ] appears to carry individualizing tendencies that impede collective democratic subjectivity (Meriluoto et al. 2023). However, we contend that this individually performed political act is embedded in a vision of societal transformation that is characterized by a deep commitment to mutual care. As identified in extant literature on queer democracy of care, mutual dependency and building of resilient communities are the conditions for queer visions of democracy. In Lorey's presentist democracy, challenging and even overcoming the boundaries of individual identities are vehicles through which a new social order "grounded in care, connections, affections" can emerge (Lorey 2022: 145). Quan (2024: 170) equally envisions shared vulnerabilities and networks of solidarity as fundamental components for an ethic of democratic living. By focusing on existing patterns of care, Quan contends, we can start imagining a democracy that allows radical inclusivity, solidarity, and self-determination (p. 182). Butler (2004: 4) agrees: "with respect to what body and what gender to have and maintain, … self-determination becomes a plausible concept only in the context of a social world that supports and enables that exercise of agency." Finally, Bey (2022: 6) argues

> we might become anything at all, something wildly other than what we are, and in order to give in to that we need to be encountered by a world that really, actually truly holds and loves us by never, ever presuming to know what shape we will take, what we will want, before we show up.

Queering democracy, then, means engendering broader democratic transformations by questioning and destabilizing the capitalist and extractivist logics of liberal democracies (also Quan 2024: 188). For the activists, this meant contesting hegemonic normativity *throughout* society and claiming freedom—not only for oneself but also for others—through coalitional networks and everyday practices of mutual aid and care. Queer, then, envisions a freedom that far exceeds the freedom from identity. Yet how these caring relations and mutual dependencies materialize in actual democratic practices cannot be reduced to romanticized or abstract notions of care (Tronto 2013: 48); rather, it requires critical interrogation of how such commitments are organized, who carries their burdens, and how these relations may also reproduce or reconfigure hierarchies and inequalities.

While we have detailed some of the democratic practices through which the activists in this study engage to carve out spaces to construct democratic subjectivities through identity blurring and abolition, several questions remain, which we recommend for future investigation: How can democratic subjects express themselves without articulating their identity? Which form does perceptibility without identity take? How is the freedom afforded by [ ] related to democratic equality? How can the imperceptibility of identity avoid making marginalized groups invisible? While we recognize the dangers and pitfalls of challenging identity, we maintain, alongside recent abolitionist

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feminist democratic theorists (Bey 2022; Lorey 2022; Quan 2024), that these questions are vitally important to explore for conceptualizing democracy. We do not see [ ] as a political solution to the "identity question" but as one mode in the varied repertoire of identity performances that enrich diverse democracies.

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