

# **Activism and Innovative Methods of Historical Inquiry**

## **The Haifa Queer History Project as a Case Study**

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## **Introduction**

When one thinks of the work of a historian, especially if one is a layperson and not a practicing historian or at least a history student, one probably imagines a person that spends most of his or her time in the archive, alone, deciphering ancient handwritten manuals or dusty texts, pale of skin from lack of sunlight and wearing glasses as a result of excessive reading. This imagined figure probably leaves the company of the dead who inhabit the texts only to assist an archivist, teach a history class or attend conferences. One rarely imagines the historian as an interviewer of living human beings, as someone who works outside the ivory tower of academia, or as a collaborator with other researchers, both in history and in other fields. In any case, one definitely does not imagine the historian as an activist.

Nevertheless, contemporary historical work is defying the aforementioned image. Diverging from traditional – indeed mostly solitary – archival work, public history has opened up the process of history making for local communities and for activists, and allowed the latter to build platforms for communities to narrate their stories. Simultaneously, oral history has become a useful tool in the hands of researchers\activists in narrating previously muted voices.

This paper examines the Haifa Queer History Project, that the author is one of its founders, as a case study to explore the relations of queer activism and innovative methods of historical inquiry, namely oral history and public history, facilitated by a digital platform.

## **The Haifa Queer History Project**

The Haifa Queer History Project (HQHP) is a documentation and research project, aimed at researching the histories of queer existence and experience in the city of Haifa, Israel's third largest city and home to a mixed population of Jews and Arabs from diverse socio-economic and religious backgrounds. The project was initiated at the end of 2015, as part of the *Haifa Rainbow Association*, Haifa's queer activists' organization. In the time past, the project expanded and now includes an ongoing research – tracing a history spanning from the 1940's to the present; a small but growing archive; a Facebook page used for reaching out to potential sources, and for the dissemination of the project's products; and some other means of dissemination - like lectures and historical walking tours in the city. The research is held from a “history from below” approach, thus focusing on the lives of people who have not been part of the hegemonic stratum of Israeli society, at least in the sense of defying heteronormative imperatives.

Central to the HQHP are video recorded oral interviews, conducted by the project's team. The process for reaching out to interviewees has used primarily social media and local human networks. The recorded interviews, together with documents provided by informants, are assembled into our archive - available for the public in Haifa's LGBT center, and will also be made available as a website in the future.

## **Public History**

The late Robert Kelley, a professor of history and one of the founders of the department of history in the University of California at Santa Barbara, who was interested in public history, defined it so:

“(...) Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies, and museums, even in private practice. Public Historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process. An issue needs to be resolved, a policy must be formed, the use of a resource or the direction of an activity must be more effectively planned - and an historian is called upon to bring in the dimension of time: this is Public History.”<sup>1</sup>

When Kelley wrote this definition in 1978 it was only a short while after the genesis of public history as a practice. In his essay, Kelley expressed his wish for public history to gain normalcy within public systems, such as political and corporal decision-making processes. Now, four decades later, it seems like public history has made a long way but hardly in the trajectory set by Kelley. Instead of becoming institutionalized, it has become a tool of opposition. Whilst commonplace in museums and public archives, public historians are still scarce in governments and businesses and are considered unorthodox amongst mainstream academic historians. Outside of these formal institutions, nonetheless, in such places as communities that were (and are) underrepresented in the mainstream historical narrative, public history projects sprung like mushrooms after the rain. Andrew Flinn, a UCL researcher of archival studies, termed these projects “archival activism” and “radical public history”.<sup>2</sup>

What property of public history makes it liable to be radicalized or used as means of activism? The answer to this question is not surprising. History is a powerful component in shaping the public consciousness and worldview. Historical narratives are pivotal in socialization and acculturation

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1 Kelley, Robert. *Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects*, *The Public Historian*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 16.

2 Flinn, Andrew. *Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions*, *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2011).

processes. Public history, by definition, extracts the historical method from academia and casts it into the use of the non-academic public. By doing so, it invites members of this public to participate in history writing – thus, in shaping the public worldview. It is a natural choice for non-hegemonic communities to initiate public history projects that will allow them to correct under- or ill-representation in mainstream historical writing, and to narrate from their own point of view a story that has been told so far from the point of view of the hegemony. Public history, when used in such a way, shifts the role of often times neglected or discriminated against groups, from mere actors to narrators - or historical subjects. In other words, public history contributes to the democratization of history writing.

### **Oral History**

Similar to the effect that public history has on the historical research and documentation, oral history – the introduction of oral interviews as a historical primary source - revisits our concepts of sources, validity, and memory. Like public history, oral history is considered unorthodox by many mainstream historians. Oral history too is involved in the democratization of history writing but goes one step further than public history: while the latter alters the processes of sources interpretation and of history production, oral history opens up a whole new type of sources.

Alessandro Portelli, the renowned Italian oral historian, points out to the richness of the auditory source: human speech has dimensions of pitch, velocity, intonation, and accent that are absent from a written text. These dimensions may not add a lot of factual information, but certainly reveal much of the speaker's attitude towards the narrative – a whole layer of meaning that is added by implementing oral interviews to the work of historians. The orality of the sources also assists the historian to work a way around the formality of written documents and to reach the narrator's less censored utterances.<sup>3</sup>

Oral history does not only tell us more about already known historical events but also enables the historian to give voice to previously muted communities. The expansion of the historian's work, from the mere interpreter of sources to the facilitator of their creation, can be analyzed through the theoretical framework of the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, as a way to combat an inherent silence in the process of history writing. Trouillot claims that

“Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of

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3 Portelli, A., “What Makes Oral History Different”. Inside: Perks, R. & Thomson, A., **The Oral History Reader**, Routledge, London & New York, 2003, pp. 63-74.

*archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)". [all italics are in the origin].<sup>4</sup>

According to this historiographical approach, the question of what is documented, what is archived, what is extracted from the archive to form a narrative, and what is ultimately remembered – is a political one. History, as they say, is written by the victors; Individuals and communities who do not usually leave a written record (or who are only mentioned in the record by others) – due to illiteracy, cultural norms that do not encourage writing, censorship, self-censorship or the lack of interest in the eye of the archivist – are silenced, stripped from the possibility to shape the public memory according to their historical narrative. The oral historian, by reaching out to these individuals and communities and by appreciating their orality as a source of value rather than an obstacle, regains the opportunity to hear a non-hegemonic history and thus gains a richer understanding of the past.

### **The Haifa Queer History Project as Historical Activism**

Queer history poses unique problems for the researcher. In depth coverage of these intricate historiographical challenges is beyond the scope of this paper, but one aspect of them is the scarcity of written documents describing the experiences of queer people in their own voices. Obvious reasons are the nature of the discourse about sexuality throughout modern history, the relative novelty of modern queer identities, and of course the secrecy that surrounds the queer existence in heteronormative societies. All of these may impose self-censorship on the possible queer historical narrator.

The prominent historian and sociologist of sexuality, Jeffrey Weeks, describes three waves of historiographical reactions to this scantiness of written sources. At first, starting at the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's, historians turned mainly to the aid of oral history to document the elders of the queer communities – regarding them as primary sources to obtain factual knowledge about the past. The second wave, somewhat overlapping the first one, raised questions about the very nature of sexuality and sexual identity, as it was reflected from traditional archives and oral testimonies. Historians of this wave, heavily influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault and the nascent queer theory, asked whether sexual identities were essential constants of human existence or contingent cultural constructs. These theoretical developments led to the third wave of queer historiography, that

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4 Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. **Silencing the Past**. Beacon Press, Boston, 1995. pp. 26

dealt with the intersections and power relations of gender and sexual constructs with other cultural and social constructs, such as race and class.<sup>5</sup>

The HQHP has a bit of every of these waves. Our main method of historical inquiry is oral history. Haifa's queer history suffers from a double marginality: it is both queer and in the geographical and cultural periphery of Israel. The little Israeli queer history that was documented so far primarily concerns with Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. In utilizing oral history we are able to somewhat compensate this lack of sources by creating new ones. The new oral sources are assembled into our archive and serve as the most important database to draw factual knowledge of the past from.

At this point, I would like to shortly address some issues concerning activist aspects of the interaction with the interviewees. Queer oral history was largely molded into the already existing methods and ethics of feminist ethnography, in which

“Feminist researchers try to empower (rather than exploit) historical narrators by trusting their voices, positioning narrators as historical experts, and interpreting narrators' voices alongside the narrators' interpretations of their own memories”.<sup>6</sup>

In our project, we are trying to balance this approach with a critical reading of the interviews. In any event, empowerment of our interviewees is both a one of our objectives and a natural byproduct of giving our informants a chance to tell their story.

One of the difficulties in doing queer oral history is that interviewees occasionally internalize their marginality in the historical writing as equivalent to insignificance in history itself – if no-one acknowledges their existence and agency, they think to themselves, perhaps they are truly historically unimportant. I find that the fact that the project views their story as valuable has a profound effect on the informants' perception of themselves and their place in history. Our interest in their experiences helps them frame their lives in a community context, as a link in a chain of generations.

Approaching our research from a queer perspective and taking off the second wave of queer historiography, we are trying to avoid projecting modern concepts of gender and sexuality on the past. Keeping an open mind and being sensitive to the different possible shapes and dynamics of human sexuality, we were able to spot subtle changes throughout the short history we deal with. For example, we identified a process of consolidation of (homo)sexual identities in Haifa throughout the 1960's – a

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5 Weeks, Jeffrey. *Making the Human Gesture: History, Sexuality and Social Justice*, History Workshop Journal, Vol. 70, no.1 (September 2010), pp. 5-20.

6 Alamilla Boyd, Nan. *Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History*, Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May 2008), pp. 177-8.

shift from a more liquid, behavior-oriented and secretive approach towards male (homo)sexuality in the 1950's and 1960's, towards a more crystallized, binary and progressively more political gay identity.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the options opened by public and digital histories are opening the doors of the (probably digital) archive to the public - letting the queer community to narrate its own histories based on the sources in hand. The juxtaposition of the aforementioned queer approach with these new options creates the opportunity to diverge from the classic narrative, that perceives homosexuality as a trans-historical identity that has always been oppressed, and make room to narratives that are not oppression-oriented next to the narratives of overcoming oppression (important as they definitely are), or to narratives that perhaps tell stories that are not centered around the dichotomy of homo\heterosexuality. Third wave ideas regarding intersectionality are also extremely important when researching such a diverse and complex city like Haifa. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Haifa has been a home to Arabs and Jews alike, from several Muslim, Jewish and Christian denominations. It was an important city during the Ottoman rule and became even more important during the British Mandate in Palestine, a fact that drew Europeans to its shores - mainly Frenchmen, Germans, and Brits - carrying their European ways of thinking with them. The 1920's saw an increase in the Jewish population, as European Zionists immigrated to Haifa from Eastern and Central Europe, and later also from North Africa, Greece, and other places; the latest massive wave of immigration being of Russian speaking Jews emigrating from the former USSR. Haifa was also the backdrop of important class struggles and clashes between political movements. All of this complexity calls for an intersectional analysis of history. In the HQHP we put effort into reaching out to Arabic and Russian speaking communities, by disseminating calls for participants in these languages, even though we are currently only Hebrew speaking Jews in the project's team.

In addition, as described before, we are not perceiving our position as researchers as equivalent to an authority over the historical knowledge. We are committed to the creation of history according to the historical method (perhaps with some reservations), but we welcome the local queer community to use our archive and weave a multiplicity of complementary and multivocal historical narratives, that will reflect and serve the polyphony of the Haifa queer community.

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7 In this we were also influenced by the works of Prof. Yuval Yonay of the University of Haifa.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to explore the relations of queer activism and innovative methods of historical inquiry. Hardly exhausting the topic, I demonstrated the activist potential of public and oral history and examined the ways in which they are implemented in the Haifa Queer History Project. We have seen how oral history is put in use in the HQHP as an activist effort to recover silenced histories, and how public history democratizes the process of history writing and opens it up for the queer community to narrate its own histories. As discussed, these strategies endow the community's elders with a sense of meaning and historical context, while their legacy is bequeathed to a younger generation. Witnessing the rich local queer history helps the entire community to develop a distinct local identity, that reclaims the peripherality as an asset, together with developing a sense of queer pride.

In order to stay focused on the questions I set to answer, I had to leave out of this paper some issues that should be addressed in the future. Such issue, for example, is the balancing of the ambition to democratize history writing and the queer approach of annihilating the dichotomy of the researcher/research subject, with the commitment to the historical method and the quest for a historical truth. Another issue that could be further developed in future papers is the use of digital platforms, such as a website or a Facebook page, as means to enhance the interactivity of the community in writing its own history.

I would like to conclude with again referring to Weeks, that claims that

“To assert the value of LGBT identities and ways of life, in all their invented modalities, is to express that developing sense of outrage, to challenge existing realities, and to show that there are many different ways of being sexual – and of being human. The struggle over sexual rights is in the end a struggle about what it is to be human. Just as discrimination, prejudice, oppression and exploitation are denials of full humanity, so a positive claim for rights is an assertion of the rich diversity of human possibilities.”<sup>8</sup>

I hope that the Haifa Queer History Project is a modest contribution to the challenge of existing realities by contextualizing them on a historical timeline, and that it succeeds in showing that indeed there are, and also has been, many different ways of being sexual – and of being human.

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8 Weeks, Jeffrey. *Making the Human Gesture: History, Sexuality and Social Justice*, History Workshop Journal, Vol. 70, no.1 (September 2010). pp. 17-8.



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