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"The Pride Revolution"

Homonationalist Remembering in an Israeli Documentary

ABSTRACT

Israel has recently undertaken a branding strategy that has created a problematic image of the country as an LGBTQ haven in a supposedly sexually retrograde Middle East. Interestingly, while there is a large body of critical scholarship investigating the workings of Israeli homonationalism outwards, as a form of soft diplomacy, wooing international constituencies, the question of how homonationalism is discursively produced and circulated inwards for Israeli audiences has remained relatively unexplored. In order to gain a glimpse of homonationalism within Israel, we analyze the documentary *hamahapexa hagea* ("The Pride Revolution"), which was broadcast in Hebrew by the Israeli public broadcasting corporation on May 2020. With the help of the notions of collective remembering, scale and affect, we demonstrate how the remembering of the Israeli LGBTQ movement and its affective loading, pride, is characterized by specific spatio-temporal discursive moves that position Israel as an exceptional context. On a national scale, Middle-Easternness is highlighted as a key feature of Israel's exceptional character, enabling Israel to "come out" as simultaneously pro-gay and Mizrahi (lit. "Oriental"). On a global scale, the more traditional and Middle Eastern traits of Israel are downplayed, with a view to portraying Israel as a positive exception of LGBTQ progress compared to the West. Interestingly, the military is made to play a key role in the construction of Israeli exceptionalism with regard to LGBTQ rights, and grief and trauma for fallen soldiers is presented as the emotional litmus test for acceptance of non-normative sexualities in Israel.

Keywords: homonationalism, scale, collective remembering, temporality, militarism

IN A RECENT book titled *Screening Queer Memory*, Anamarija Horvat (2021) pointed to a research lacuna that is particularly important in the context of this special issue on the tensions and temporalities of Pride politics. Horvat (2021, 2) argued that although temporalities have undoubtedly been a key topic of investigations within queer studies over the last two decades (see e.g., Edelman 2004; Freeman 2010; Muñoz 2009), relatively little attention has been paid to the role played by cinema and television in the discursive production of queer memory (however, see Padva 2015). Conversely, while the field of memory studies has taken the motion picture industry as a key epistemological site for investigating the construction of collective remembering, "a sustained role in the creation of LGBTQ memory specifically has yet to be undertaken" (Horvat 2021, 2). While we agree on the importance of analyzing cinema and television in order to understand how queer memory is formed, we take exception to the geopolitical privileging of Anglophone visual artefacts that (re)produce particular narratives of British and North American queer pasts, even when scholarship tries to redress the gap between queer scholarship and memory studies, as Horvat (2021) did convincingly.

The present article shifts the analytical gaze towards the Israeli documentary series *hamahapexa hagea* (lit. "The Pride Revolution"), which was created and directed by Gal Uchovsky and Liron Atzmor, and broadcast in Hebrew by Kan, the Israeli public broadcasting corporation on May 2020. By exploring how queer remembering is produced semiotically – and what is at stake – in this mainstream Israeli televised production, we attempt to offer a counterpoise to the Anglocentric bias of scholarship on queer visual memory. In critically analyzing an Israeli documentary about LGBTQ issues, we also seek to engage with a point made by Palestinian scholar Sa'ed Atshan (2020), namely that "the more Israel fashions itself as a gay haven and invests in that self-image, the more opportunities queer Israeli activists will have to point out the discrepancies between image and reality and to call for action toward bridging those gaps" (2020, 125). This article is just one step towards illustrating how such a homonationalist image has been constructed in

the documentary "The Pride Revolution" through selective remembering of particular historical moments, and the strategic highlighting of specific affective choices that bring to the fore Israeli grieving and erase Palestinian suffering. At this juncture, however, we first want to outline what we mean by homonationalism.

Over the last few years, Israel has come to occupy a prominent, but not uncontested, position in the global LGBTQ imagination. In understanding this process, a key analytical tool is the concept of "homonationalism" (Puar 2007), by which successful LGBTQ struggles for civil rights and recognition are co-opted into the national self-image. Understanding this discursive process is essential for unpacking "the complexities of how 'acceptance', and 'tolerance' for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated" (Puar 2013, 336). Whether one is a supporter or a critic, it is hard to deny that Israel has managed to brand itself as a gay and lesbian oasis in relation to what is problematically presented as a retrograde and homophobic Middle East (Milani & Levon 2016, 70).

This form of Israeli self-promotion has received considerable criticism and has been labeled "pinkwashing", a notion that highlights its insidious role in enabling the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine (Maikey 2017). Such a branding campaign is underpinned by a mixture of (1) a capitalist imperative to expand the tourist economy by attracting increasing numbers of "pink tourists" to the country, and (2) a homonationalist agenda that uses the enfranchisement of sexual minorities as a strategy to bestow Israel with the credentials of a "gay friendly" nation-state. Interestingly, while a large body of critical scholarship has investigated the workings of Israeli homonationalism *outwards*, as a form of soft diplomacy, wooing international constituencies, what has remained somewhat underexplored is how homonationalism is discursively produced and circulated *inwards*, for Israeli audiences (however, see Hartal & Sasson-Levy 2021).

We believe that the documentary *hamahapexa hagea* ("The Pride Revolution") offers a window into such inner workings of homonationalism *within* Israel and its entanglement with Israeli queer memory. Using an

analytical framework informed by the notions of collective remembering, scale, and affect, we illustrate how the remembering of the Israeli LGBTQ movement and its affective loading, pride, is characterized by specific spatio-temporal discursive moves in which Israel is simultaneously positioned *within* and *outside* the Middle East. Such spatio-temporal positionings, in turn, lead to a series of recursive oppositions. Furthermore, we show the role that trauma and grief play in the construction of homonationalist pride against a backdrop of settler colonialism and armed conflict.

Although we make a distinction here between "inwards" and "outwards" aspects of homonationalism, we are not claiming that the two are as neatly separated as such labels may suggest. Rather, the two are intertwined: the ideologies used in Israel's marketing overseas most certainly reverberate within Israel itself. And while the show was made for the Israeli audience, Uchovsky likely had an eye on the international market as well, as can be evinced by his promoting the series in the UK.[1] Nevertheless, we believe the inward–outward distinction is analytically useful, since, as we will show, homonationalist discourse that addresses local audience has some distinctive key aspects that are far less prevalent elsewhere.

Below, we begin by outlining the key concepts that inform the analysis of the data, followed by a brief overview of our positionalities as "implicated subjects" (Rothberg 2019) in relation to Israel.

Collective remembering, scale, and affect

Memory and memorialization have gained considerable momentum in the humanities and social sciences, giving rise to the establishment of a field of study in its own right with dedicated international associations, academic journals, and yearly conferences. It is beyond the scope of this article to give a comprehensive overview of this extensive body of scholarship. Suffice it to say that there is a great deal of disagreement about how to label public acts of recollection, whether queer or not. While "collective memory" is perhaps the most established expression, we concur with Milani and Richardson (2022) that it does not adequately cap-

ture the dynamics underlying the processes through which a "memory that may have been initiated by individuals" is "mediated through networks of communication, institutions of the state, and the social groupings of civic society" (Rothberg 2009, 15).

Therefore, in this article we prefer using collective remembering (see Wertsch 2002; Milani & Richardson 2022) as an umbrella term to conceptualize the discursive production and circulation of acts of remembrance involving a variety of institutions, platforms and constituencies, including cinema and television, which, as Foucault pointed out, play a key role in *perspectivating* the past, showing not so much how people "really" were, "but what they must remember having been" (1975, 25). Terminological choices aside, our interest is in casting a critical eye on a recent mainstream artefact of collective remembering of the Israeli LGBTQ movement, to explore the semiotic production of queer remembering therein. In our view, scale – a notion that has gained considerable momentum in anthropology, geography and sociology (see the contributions to Carr & Lempert 2016a) – can be particularly apt for providing a granular account of the ways in which queer collective remembering and forgetting are discursively produced through meaning-making choices in the documentary.

In its most basic meaning, scale captures the fact that "as human beings, we are uniquely endowed with the powers of perspective", allowing us to grasp how "the huge is but a marble or a pool ball if we look at it in a certain way" (Carr & Lempert 2016b, 3). In this sense, scales should not be viewed as ready-made objects or static yardsticks through which we can measure social life in a neutral way. Rather, they are dynamic processes that human beings *do* with the help of meaning-making resources such as language(s) and visuals. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to talk about practices of *scaling* or *scale-making*. These are ideologically driven projects through which a variety of social actors "carve and cleave … their worlds" (Carr & Lempert 2016b, 2) by creating specific vantage points on reality and simultaneously positioning themselves and other people, things, and situations in relation to such viewpoints.

It is true that scaling is most often understood in depicting *spatial* relations, as in the prototypical case of maps, in which, say, the tightly packed grid of streets in Rome visible on a smaller scale map of the city blend into an undifferentiated black dot on a larger-scale atlas of Italy. However, time also plays a key role in scale-making because "when one tries to apprehend things and their qualities, a present moment may be linked to and authorized by a moment figured far back or projected forward in time" (Carr & Lempert 2016b, 2). This point resonates well with our interest in teasing out the selective nature of collective remembering and forgetting. But how is it possible to operationalize scale as an analytical tool with which to deconstruct cultural artefacts such as the documentary under investigation here?

Carr and Lempert warned against the seduction of a "perfectly comprehensive or synoptic view of scale that could encompass and exhaust all relevant spatial and temporal distinctions" (2016b, 20). This is because practices of viewing the world are potentially infinite and constantly changing, although they are never random but are constrained by specific historically and socio-culturally situated factors. In order to remain attuned to such a variability, scholars have been encouraged to espouse "a pragmatic sensibility" (Carr & Lempert 2016b, 20) that allows us to track the different scaling techniques used by social actors to represent the social world in spatiotemporal terms.

One such technique is that of *fractal recursivity*, which can be defined as a semiotic process that "involves the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level" (Irvine & Gal 2000, 38). It is *recursive* because a specific feature on one level (such as support of LGBTQ rights) is taken as the basis upon which to dichotomize and partition at other levels, "creating either subcategories on each side of a contrast or supercategories that include both sides but oppose them to something else" (Irvine & Gal 2000, 38). Like fractals in geometry, "each distinction repeats a pattern within itself" (Gal 2016, 92).

The geometric metaphor of the fractal, and the way it captures how dichotomies are nested within each other (Abbott 2001), is particularly useful for examining queer sexuality politics in the Middle East. In his

discussion of how Beirut is marketed to gay travelers as "the Paris of the Middle East" or "the San Francisco of the Arab world", Moussawi (2013) argued that it creates "a form of 'fractal Orientalism', or an Orientalism within the Orient" (Moussawi 2013, 863). Thus, instead of a simple East/West binary, a nested hierarchy is created, by which Lebanon is cast as more "Western" and hence more "progressive" and "gay-friendly" than the rest of the Middle East, and the process is replicated in the opposition of a more "progressive" Beirut compared to the rest of Lebanon.

In a similar vein, we will show in the analysis below that, in remembering the history of the LGBTQ movement in Israel, the documentary is characterized by a spatial tension about the position of Israel vis-à-vis the Middle East. On one scalar level, Israel is firmly positioned *within* the Middle East. On another scalar level, Israel is imagined as a sexually progressive Western oasis – an island even – separate from and in opposition to a sexually backward Middle East. Interestingly, such an opposition is then refracted internally in order to create a partition *within* Israel between those who are LGBTQ supporters (those who fight in the military and thereby defend the Israeli state) and those who are not (religious Jews and Palestinians).

Crucially, there is a high degree of emotional investment in projects of collective remembering. In this respect, it is important to mention that the field of heritage studies has offered convincing analysis of the "affective qualities of the practices of commemoration and remembrance [...] to reveal not only their emotive nature, but also to identify the flexible, contextual and contingent nature of affect and the way it is often actively managed and negotiated in social relations and collective practices of remembering" (Wetherell, Smith & Campbell 2018, 10). Since "memory encompasses within itself a wide range of affect, sometimes startlingly negative, sometime painful, and sometime marked with utopian potential" (Horvat 2021, 10), a study of collective remembering – queer or otherwise – will need to lay out the palette of emotional hues that tinge different scaling projects. As we will see in more detail below, grief and trauma form a key emotional resource in the scaling practices of pride in the documentary.

Overall, we believe that a framework that brings together the notion of scale with a sensitivity to affect offers useful heuristics through which to pursue a fine-grained analysis of the processes of remembering and forgetting of the Israeli LGBTQ movement in the documentary under investigation here. Since, from a scalar perspective, there is no view from nowhere, we first want to spell out more precisely our vantage points as "implicated subjects" (Rothberg 2019) in writing critically about Israeli queer politics.

The role of critique and the figure of the implicated subject

The analysis in this article is informed by Foucault's ideas about the role and function of critique as an academic practice:

> Critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest … Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. (Foucault 1988, 154–155)

This article is an attempt to illustrate how the narratives in the documentary, which may be familiar and perhaps even seen as unproblematic and commonsensical (at least to some Israeli audiences), are not self-evident, but are deliberate strategies of *perspectivation* that serve a specific homonationalist agenda. However, writing critically about Israel is a mined territory, not least because of the hegemonic role of Zionism in Israel (even in leftist political circles) and the dominance of right-wing political parties over the last twenty years or so. On one hand, a view espoused by many academics as well as politicians is that any critique of Israel is inherently anti-Semitic because of the definition of Israel as "the Jewish state". On the other hand, some prominent scholars of sexuality would argue that any attempt to engage with Israeli pinkwashing – even

very critical ones such as anti-pinkwashing activism – may ultimately reiterate those very terms on which pinkwashing rest: This is because such critiques can "reproduce the very discourse of pinkwashing in their attempts to redress it, by treating gay rights as if they operate in a legal vacuum, separate and separable from the legal system as a whole" (Puar & Mikdashi 2012, n p).

With this complexity in mind, we believe, as scholars and activists, that the "vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men" (Arendt 2003, 157–158). In other words, whether we want it or not, and whether we are directly responsible or not, we are ultimately always *implicated* in complex global histories of discrimination and inequality. Here, the notion of implication seeks to complicate facile distinctions of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, and captures "the fact that most of us feel torn by our relation to divergent, intersecting histories – in this case, histories of anti-Semitism, genocide and occupation" (Rothberg 2019, 19). Therefore, the category of the "implicated subject allows us to retain our sense that situations of conflict position us in morally and emotionally complex ways" (Rothberg 2019, 19).

The first author of this article is a gay Israeli man in his forties who was born and raised in a city on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Like most Israelis of his generation, immediately after high school he served in the Israeli Defense Force (henceforth IDF) – a decision he came to question later in life as he developed a more critical view of Israel's military actions. His own lived experience as a closeted gay solider in the late 1990s differs considerably from the rather rosy picture presented by the show, which motivated his interest in critically analyzing the documentary.

The second author, a queer man born and raised in Italy, has a complex kinship history, split between a petit bourgeois paternal line with fascist alliances and a maternal line of possibly Jewish Sephardic origin with Socialist political affiliation. Israel attracted him first to the

kibbutzim movement and then to Tel Aviv Pride, and the history of the LGBTQ movement in Israel. At the same time, first-hand experience of the injustices and violence caused by the Israel/Palestine conflict fueled the moral imperative to pursue research that offers critical reappraisals of Israeli politics. The intention herein is to offer a robust contribution that seeks to complexify dichotomies of good/bad, perpetrator/victim, at the same time locating the Israeli/Palestinian conflict within a more long-standing history of Western colonialism and treating antisemitism and Islamophobia as parts of overlapping histories of othering.

Coming out as Jewish, Israeli, Mizrahi, gay in the Middle East

The documentary "The Pride Revolution" does not attempt to offer a comprehensive history of the Israeli LGBTQ community, but rather tells the story of the community's route into gaining wider mainstream acceptance and legal rights – a trajectory that is portrayed as an unequiv- ocal "success story". This framing is apparent right from the show's first moments, as the opening credits feature Uchovsky asking:

> How is it that in Israel, in the heart of the Middle East, in a country
> that revolves around the army and security, a country that is right-wing,
> traditional, religious, sexist, suspicious towards the other – how could it
> be that in such a country the pride revolution was such a success?

Here, the question not only sets up a "puzzle" that the show aims to solve, but in doing so also establishes what is seen as the common ground – that the pride revolution was indeed a success – leaving only the ques- tion of *how* that came to be. The prominent use of past tense strongly conveys that the struggle for rights and recognition is now complete. However, even though the show adopts a binary view on the matter, "success" and its affective counterpart "pride" are scalar issues: a matter of perspective. As Irvine reminds us, "the concepts of scale and ideol- ogy are linked, both of them requiring us to consider a point of view … scale-making practices are ideological, hence semiotic, activities reliant on perspective and social positioning" (Irvine 2016, 214). There is no

ideologically neutral way to quantify "success" or determine when it has been achieved – deciding at what point one can refer to the LGBTQ struggle for equality in the past tense crucially relies both on one's own values and on the point of comparison.

So how can Israel's "pride revolution" be projected as having already succeeded? Part of the answer can be found in the spatial reference in the opening question, which emphasizes that Israel is "in the heart of the Middle East". While Israel is indeed located in the Middle East, the spatial reference here is anything but a trivial statement of a geographical fact. By wondering how LGBTQ rights could possibly flourish in the Middle East, a binary opposition is set up between the Middle East and rights. In this way, Israel is framed as a place in which LGBTQ enfranchisement seems extremely unlikely, miraculous even, and success against all odds is portrayed as the main reason underpinning the key emotion the documentary seeks to feature: pride.

The feeling of pride in succeeding in an otherwise hostile geopolitical space is further intensified visually and acoustically by a collage of images set to the soundtrack of *zan nadir* (lit. "rare species"), a popular song by Korin Allal, one of the first openly lesbian singers in Israel, who is also featured in the show. Various elements in the lyrics suggest that the "rare species" in the title refers to queer constituencies, which is what contributed to turning this song into something of a gay anthem in Israel.[2] However, the references in the lyrics to "digging shelters" (*xofrim miklatim*) are not simply metaphors of what some queer constituencies do when they try to hide away, "ashamed of our bodies" (*mitbayšim begufenu*), but also resonate with the broader lived experiences of all Israelis, who are no strangers to bomb shelters. Visually, the opening credits consist of a montage of moments from Israel's LGBTQ history, arranged more or less chronologically in a sequence – from black and white archive footage of a humble demonstration to the boisterous party of Tel Aviv Pride in current days. Notably, the sequence of images ends with a voice jubilantly announcing "we won!" as the Hebrew word *nitsaxnu* ("we won") appears on screen.

The masterfully edited collage, with its exhilarating music and imag-

es, is admittedly moving, and evokes a strong feeling of triumph, thus delivering a highly emotional message. However, the opening sequence serves a further function, as its lays out the context stated in the opening narration, providing visual cues for those aspects of Israel claimed to be in opposition to LGBTQ rights: its being Middle Eastern, militarized, traditional, and religious.

A key moment appears towards the end of the sequence, which portrays Amir Ohana, Israel's first openly gay minister, giving his first speech at the Knesset and introducing himself as "Jewish, Israeli, Mizrahi, gay". Here, the term *Mizrahi* refers to Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, who have been historically marginalized by the Israeli elite (Cohen et al. 2019), which was predominantly *Ashkenazi* (of Eastern European descent). Positioning Ohana's words as a parallel to the opening narration constitutes a recursive move that is not uncommon in Israeli media; while Israel is envisioned as less Middle Eastern than its surroundings, among Jewish Israelis it is the Mizrahis who are perceived as more Middle Eastern than the "European" Ashkenazis (see Shohat 1989 for a discussion). The visuals during this moment (see pictures below) show: Ohana himself, Harel Skaat, an openly gay Mizrahi Israeli singer, as well as clips from promotional videos for *Arisa*, a queer-Mizrahi line of club parties that play with Orientalist stereotypes and traditional Jewish imagery (Levon & Gafter 2019). As Ohana's speech comes right before the triumphant "we won!", it marks the end of the linear progression suggested by the lyrics: the openly gay Mizrahi as the culmination of Israel's gay success, against all odds.
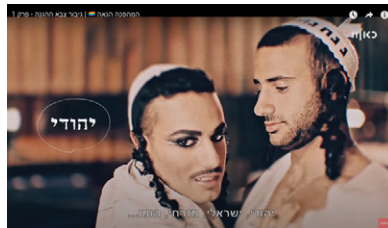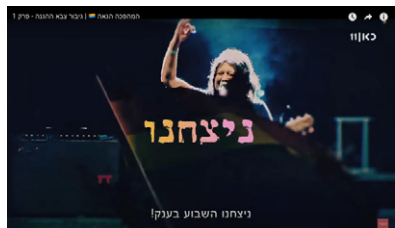

Jewish
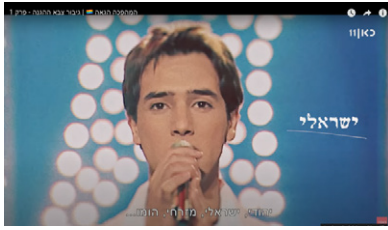
Israeli
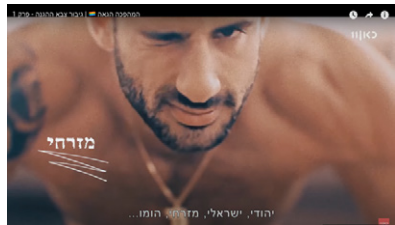
Mizrahi

Gay

We won

Here, it is worth noting the emphasis on Israel's Middle Easternness. Israeli self-identity involves a basic tension between its claim of authentically belonging to the Middle East and its reluctance to fully embrace it, often seeing itself instead as Western European space detached from its surroundings (see Lefkowitz 2004; Levon & Gafter 2019; Hartal & Sasson-Levy 2019). The homonationalist discourse that Israel typically directs outwards uses a Western understanding of LGBTQ rights as the basis for a scale of "progress", thereby singling out Israel as distinctly more progressive and "Western" than its neighbors (Milani & Levon 2016). Not unlike the nested Orientalism embedded in notions of Lebanese exceptionalism (Moussawi 2013), the Israeli homonationalist discourse has its underpinning in a more general ideology that celebrates "Israeli exceptionalism", casting Israel as a beacon of Western democracy in contrast to its totalitarian, backward neighbors, as encapsulated in the popular slogan "the only democracy in the Middle East" (Levon & Gafter 2019).

However, the documentary targets an Israeli audience, and the scale of comparison is quite different. Middle Easternness and religious traditional values are still seen as diametrically opposed to LGBTQ rights and progress, but they are attributed to Israel itself, not to its neighbors. According to such a logic, Israel has a disadvantageous starting point (compared to, for example, the US or Western Europe), and it is only from that perspective that the gains made by its LGBTQ community can be seen as an unmitigated "success story". In other words, rather than using LGBTQ rights to champion Israel as more Western, the homonationalist world view here does the opposite: uses Israel's non-Westernness to make its LGBTQ rights track record appear more impressive.

At no point does the show consider that Middle Easternness or Mizrahis may not be inherently opposed to LGBTQ rights. In fact, as we will discuss below, it does the opposite. Therefore, the focus on the Middle East here is opportunistic; it uses Israel's position as not fully "Western" to improve its perceived location on the scale of "progress". Ironically, as it adopts the homonationalist view by which these

scales line up, Israel's Middle Easternness becomes what makes it more aligned with the West. From a scale-making perspective, Ohana's personal "coming out" at a very specific moment in a very specific place is remembered in the documentary with a view to projecting it onto a national scale and applying it to the entirety of Israel: a state that comes out as simultaneously pro-gay and Middle Eastern. Yet, on an even larger geopolitical scale, the same discursive move allows Israel to also come out *of* the Middle East – an exception or a "rare species", as the song goes, that detaches itself from its geographical surroundings. It is to such an exceptionalism that we will now turn.

Remembering and forgetting: what the documentary omits

In the remainder of the article, we turn our attention to a part of the documentary that deploys the scale-making strategies that we have observed in the opening credits. The documentary is structured in a way that ostensibly offers an answer to the big "puzzle" presented in the opening. It has three episodes, each of which is dedicated to a smaller, more specific question about how LGBTQ rights in Israel were achieved. These questions, which are stated in the information box of each episode on Kan's official YouTube channel, are as follows. The first episode, titled "A hero in the defense force",[3] raises the question "How and why did the IDF become the engine of gay progress in Israel?" The second episode, titled "This is not Europe", asks "How did the pride revolution and the Mizrahi revolution intertwine? Can we say that the big victory of the pride revolution was when the Mizrahi street embraced it?" The questions underlying the final episode, titled "In the light and not in the shadow", are "How did the major coming-out of the closet and visibility on TV affect the pride revolution? Is visibility indeed the most important thing in making the LGBTQ community accessible to every home in Israel?"

Sociologist Baruch Kimmerling argued that Israeli society can be characterized by civilian militarism, a form of militarism that "is systematically internalized by most statesmen, politicians and the general public to be a self-evident reality … The socio-political of the collectiv-

ity are determined and maintained by participation in military service, its manipulation, and sacrifice" (Kimmerling 1993, 207). However, even given the disproportionately central place of the IDF in Israeli society, the first episode's focus on the army, rather than on more obvious choices such as civil rights groups, is quite striking.

While it is, of course, a filmmaker's right to pick and choose what to focus on, it is important to keep in mind that the show – starting with its title – frames itself as telling *the* story of the Israeli LGBTQ community as a whole. The format of the show is such that Uchovsky interviews various members of the LGBTQ community and also narrates via voice-over. Although the guests often offer points of view that are at odds with Uchovsky's position, there is no doubt that his voice is the one promoted as "the official narrative". Horvat (2021) has pointed out the important role that commemorative cinema and television play in shaping the queer memory, since the familial transmission of shared memories between generations, typical of other minorities, can rarely occur among the queer community (Horvat 2021, 5). As there is a paucity of other popular media sources offering other views on the history of Israeli LGBTQ history, "The Pride Revolution" is likely to shape Israeli queer memory for years to come. As such, the importance of what it chooses to include – and more importantly, not to include – goes beyond that of a single show and shapes the very narrative of the Israeli LGBTQ community. Also, as the attention paid to the IDF suggests, the narrative being offered here is very homonormative indeed.

The documentary has been met with considerable criticism in Israeli queer activist circles. In a thought piece published on the Israeli website *Haokets*, Noa Bassel criticized the show's "selective memory", arguing that "The problem is that the final result lacks voices, characters, events and major topics in the struggle" (Bassel 2020). The most glaring omission is that of the Palestinian LGBTQ community, which is never mentioned. The existence of Palestinians is acknowledged a few times, but always as a threat to Israel and its LGBTQ constituencies – never entertaining the thought that the history of queer Palestinians is part of the story allegedly being told, and certainly never discussing the

hardship imposed on queer Palestinians by Israeli settler colonialism. The complete erasure of Palestinians is quite striking, even given that the show aims to present an Israeli narrative. However, even when one considers only the lived experience of Jewish Israelis, the scope of the show is rather limited. As Rachel Said pointed out in a thought piece on the website *Sixa Mekomit*, although the show is supposedly about the LGBTQ community, people who identify as bisexual are not mentioned at all, and only few trans persons are featured and co-opted into the general narrative. Although many of the interviewees are women, there is virtually no discussion of a lesbian narrative, and lesbians are also subsumed into a cis-hetero male perspective.

With respect to ethnicity, it is true that the show does dedicate its second episode to the Mizrahi LGBTQ community. However, it is portrayed in a stereotypically Orientalist fashion, and the entire premise of the episode is that Mizrahi families were lagging behind Ashkenazis in their acceptance of gay rights. As Bassel (2020) cogently pointed out, the documentary assumes that Mizrahis were late in accepting LGBTQ people but does not consider the possibility that it was actually the Ashkenazi LGBTQ community that rejected their Mizrahi queer peers, as part of the long lasting systemic ethnic asymmetry in Israel (Cohen et al. 2019). Finally, many key moments in the history of the Israeli gay community are curiously missing. As the show tries to portray a strictly monotonic increase from hardship to "success", traumatic events that do not fit within this trajectory are barely dealt with. For example, the AIDS epidemic is only mentioned briefly, and only as a catalyst for certain erstwhile celebrities to come out of the proverbial closet. Similarly, the 2009 fatal shootings in the Barnoar, a Tel Aviv gay youth center, hardly receive a mention, and the murder of Shira Banki at the 2005 Jerusalem Pride parade is never brought up at all.[4]

Much more can be said about the various omissions, and especially of the series' skewed presentation of Ashkenazi–Mizrahi relations. However, in the following section we analyze mainly the first episode, which is dedicated to the IDF. We do this for two reasons. Firstly, Mizrahi authors have already offered thoughtful critique of the ethnicity-related

aspects of the show (see Bassel 2020; Said 2020). Secondly, the focus of the first episode, the military, is an important epistemological site to understand the imbrication of gender, sexuality, and nationalism (Yuval-Davis 1997). Being read through the notion of scale and fractal recursivity, the first episode allows us to explore in more detail how Israeli-specific aspects of homonationalism rest on a scalar logic in which "local", "regional", and "global" axes create a complex fractal pattern of spatio-temporalities.

"A hero in the defense force": The role of the military and bereavement in LGBTQ enfranchisement

As mentioned earlier, the premise of the first episode is that the IDF was a major force in obtaining LGBTQ rights in Israel more broadly, due to its acceptance of LGBTQ soldiers. The episode begins with Romy Abergel, a young trans woman and well-known Instagram influencer, receiving her "*tsav rišon*" – the initial summoning that represents an Israeli's first step into the mandatory draft to the IDF. Uchovsky's narration then states that "I believe that the IDF is nowadays one of the most progressive armies in the world in the acceptance of LGBTQ people, and it all starts here, in the *tzav rišon* of trans men and women." Thus, from its opening moments, the show strives to present itself as representing the diversity of the Israeli LGBTQ community; however, that is by no means the main focus of episode. Rather, the drafting of a trans soldier is portrayed as evidence that the process of recognition of sexual minorities in the IDF – which started with cis gay men – has now fully come to fruition.

The heart of the episode, as Uchovsky's narration puts it, is dedicated to "trying to understand when exactly the big change happened in the army, from a complete ban of conscription of gays to the acceptance of today". As in the opening credits, the question establishes a few tacit assumptions as common ground: most importantly, that there was one such a particular moment of "big change", as asking "when exactly" it happened would otherwise be meaningless. As an answer to that question, Uchovsky offered 1993 as the year when change abruptly occurred.

Up till that point, according to the show, IDF soldiers were invariably closeted, since being out of the closet meant having one's security clearance revoked, which essentially ended that person's prospects in the army. This changed largely due to the struggle of Uzi Even, at the time a professor of chemistry at Tel Aviv University. Even initiated the first Knesset hearing on gays and lesbians, in which he testified that he had lost his security clearance – and was therefore dismissed from the IDF – after it was discovered that he was gay. This hearing led to the IDF revoking the restrictions on gay soldiers (see Gross 2014 for a detailed discussion), whereas Even himself went on to a successful political career, notably becoming the first openly gay member of the Knesset. Unsurprisingly, the "Pride Revolution" includes a lengthy interview with Uzi Even, which is worth looking into in some detail:[5]

> Uchovsky: "Why did it happen in the army of all places?"
> Even: "The army was a track in which you could change things because the Arabs and the religious people have no say about what goes on in the army. The Arabs, what do they care what goes on in the army? The Haredim [ultra-orthodox Jews], what do they care what goes on in the army? So they kept quiet, "let them fool around", they didn't understand the extent to which it could serve as a key for all the trajectory…"
> Uchovsky: "So that's why the army was ahead of all of Israel, because the army is without Arabs and Haredim?"
> Even: "That's right. A lot of gay people were mad at me."
> Uchovsky: "Why?"
> Even: "Because now they needed to serve in the army."

This conversation describes a discrete moment in time, after which discrimination in the army "stopped at once"; crucially, the framing makes it appear as if this moment was the first substantial gain for LGBTQ rights. Now, while the Knesset hearing was undoubtedly a pivotal moment, the show ignores the broader context of a civil struggle for rights which was going on around the same time, and in fact, predated the army's lifting of official discrimination; most importantly, the

repealing of the anti-sodomy law in 1988, and the amendment of the law, which banned to explicitly mention sexual orientation at a workplace, in 1992. Thus, the change in the army regulation was not the harbinger of sexual enfranchisement, but occurred against a backdrop of other recent legal struggles. Moreover, while gay men, lesbians, and later trans persons were formally accepted into the military, the Israeli military was and continues to be a patriarchal site and the figure of the soldier is the embodiment of a macho-homophobic military culture and ultimately the pinnacle of normative Israeli masculinity (see Lomsky-Feder & Sasson-Levy 2018).

Possibly the most striking part of the interview with Even is his claim that the army could be the catalyst for change because it has no "Arabs and Haredim". Even is referring to the social make-up of the army – conscription is mandatory in Israel for both men and women, but two demographics are mostly exempt: the Palestinian citizens of Israel and ultra-orthodox Jews. Both these demographics are typically seen as more traditional and therefore less tolerant of LGBTQ rights than other segments of Israeli society. However, the conversation is somewhat anachronistic; it is worth recalling that in the 1990s there was not much open acceptance of LGBTQ people anywhere in Israel. The Haredim, who are rather insular, and the Palestinians, who had little power to influence Israeli politics, may certainly have held homophobic beliefs, but the homophobia that young Jewish non-Haredi LGBTQ persons had to deal with was typically experienced in their own homes and workplaces, from other non-Haredi Jews. By lauding the army's lack of "Arabs and Haredim" as the factor that could make it the initiator of social change (which, again, is not fully true to begin with), the army is given the role of a gatekeeper, circumscribing the boundaries of a "good" non-homophobic Israel and relegating the homophobia that existed to an essentialized Other.

Irvine and Gal's (2000) notion of fractal recursivity is a useful prism through which to examine how Israeli society is conceived in this show. As described earlier, fractal recursivity is a semiotic process that uses parallel qualitative distinctions to replicate categories and sub-catego-

ries. In this case, we see that the set of qualia that Israeli homonationalist discourse typically ascribes to Israel in opposition to its neighbors – namely being Western, progressive, and thereby non-homophobic – is recursively repeated to draw distinctions between segments of Israeli society, rendering those Israelis who go to the army as the most Western, most progressive, and least homophobic; that is, the most Israeli of Israelis, or the "true Israelis".

As Gal (2016) noted, fractal recursivity operates as a comparison and scaling technique, and the show makes opportunistic use of the scale by which Israel's LGBTQ rights are evaluated and compared. When useful, as in the opening credits, the show highlights the more traditional aspects of Israeli society in order to portray the LGBTQ struggle as succeeding against all odds on a national scale and a Middle Eastern scale. In this section of the documentary, they are instead downplayed with a view to shifting to a larger scale, which yields yet another contrast through which Israel can come out in a good light. This is apparent in another comment by Uchovsky: "They [the IDF] could have settled for just being an okay army with gays, one that doesn't terribly discriminate, but they are an army that keeps marching forward and declares that it wants to be the *most progressive* army in the world" (emphasis added). By narrowing the scope of what is relevant in Israel to the IDF, the scale can shift to a worldwide comparison in which the Israeli LGBTQ struggle is not only parallel to that of the Western world, but even seeks to exceed it.

In their discussion of how LGBTQ immigrants from the former USSR in Israel relate to the IDF, Kuntsman (2008) pointed out that a "queering" of the army may not serve the interests of LGBTQ people, but rather be wielded as a tool to normalize Israeli militarism among those who may oppose it. Whereas the heavily militarized nature of Israel's civil society is arguably a key aspect of what sets it apart from the Western European nations it aspires to be compared to, here it becomes the yardstick that defines what counts as "Western" Israeli. Against this backdrop, it is worth reconsidering the question that the episode is trying to answer: "How and why did the IDF become the engine of gay progress in Israel?" The question is built on the assumption that the

acceptance of LGBTQ people in the army led to broader acceptance elsewhere. However, the order of inference is actually reversed in the answer provided by the documentary: the show deploys the IDF's relative acceptance of LGBTQ soldiers to define the military as an "engine of progress" and makes it the epitome of the good qualities of Israel (as opposed to those associated with Palestinians and Haredim).

The valorization of the army as what makes Israel exceptional is most apparent in the episode's final segment, in which Uchovsky brings up a major Israeli fear: that of dying in combat during military service. Due to the ongoing cycle of military violence that has defined much of Israel's history, grief over fallen soldiers has a particularly salient place in Israeli society, in which a so-called "culture of bereavement" (Witztum et al. 2016) glorifies their deaths as heroic sacrifices for the nation. This exaltation extends to "the family of bereavement", the term used for close relatives of the fallen, who are "viewed as heroic figures in their own sake, worthy of admiration and emulation" (Bilu & Witztum 2000, 13). Uchovsky's opening narration for the segment draws immediate attention from the Israeli viewer: "I think that one of the reasons why it's easier to come out of the closet is bereavement". During this portion of the episode, Uchovsky interviews Shlomit Siboni, a mother whose eldest son died in a helicopter crash in 1997 during his military service. Siboni's remaining younger son, who is gay, is also present in the interview, and mentions how his brother's passing delayed his own coming out of the closet, for fear it would add to his mother's worries.

> Uchovsky: "I'm trying to understand if in Israel, because of the salient presence of bereavement, because the parents know that their child might, God forbid, die in the army, if, when you have a gay child, it's easier to accept them."
> Siboni: "I don't see any connection, I don't. The boy who died is a boy who was physically always with me, and physically isn't with me anymore, but he's with me on a mental level; the only thing that is missing is that I can't feel him and hug him. Yuval exists here, Yuval with his warmth, we talk, we hug. I have him. How could you not accept him?"

The interview with Siboni contrasts sharply with the tone of the rest of the episode, which presents a benign picture of what army service may entail. As she barely holds her tears, the interview is brimming with emotions and it is hard not to imagine her feeling of loss. This moment is remarkable since it is the first time the episode seriously engages with grief and trauma. As mentioned earlier, major traumatic events in the LGBTQ community's history that do not fit the narrative of "progression to success" are barely addressed. The idea that the military service itself may be traumatic for LGBTQ conscripts is not entertained, and the issue of homophobia in the IDF is presented as a problem of the past. Thus, the only kind of grieving that the episode shows is one that is not specific to LGBTQ concerns at all, but rather, the grief that the national Israeli ethos deems as respectable, and even worthy of admiration.

Uchovsky's choice to dedicate such a big part of the episode to bereavement is another step down the fractal recursive ladder. If the IDF is seen as Israel at its best, then the "family of bereavement" is the apex of that – the most Israeli of all Israelis, the ultimate emotional embodiment of all that is good. Siboni herself is a paragon of what the Israeli ethos expects from "good" bereaved parents, showing "gallant efforts to endure the pain entailed with magnanimity and pride" (Bilu & Witztum 2000, 13), rather than questioning the circumstances that had led to her loss. Although she is reluctant to accept Uchovsky's hypothesis that the salience of bereavement is helpful for LGBTQ acceptance, he does not relent and raises the same question with some of the other interviewees on the show, after which he concludes "and that's why I think that in the end, when you're accepted here, they accept you more than anywhere else in the world, because it is compared with the thought of you not being". Analogous to what we saw above in relation to Amir Ohana's coming out, a personal experience of grief such as that of Siboni's is remembered in the documentary with a view to projecting it onto a national scale. By blurring the lines between personal and national grief, Uchovsky aligns LGBTQ rights with Israel's holiest of holies – the culture of bereavement. By doing so, Israel is again presented as exceptional, with LGBTQ people here allegedly being more accepted than

"anywhere else in the world".[6] A discourse of national exceptionalism in relation to sexuality is arguably not unique to Israel and has also been found in Sweden and other Scandinavian contexts (see, e.g., Kehl 2020), where exceptionalism in relation to gender and sexuality enables distinction between an exceptionally gender and sexually liberated national Self and an imagined retrograde immigrant Other. In Israel, by contrast, exceptionalism works as a sorting mechanism that determines who is positioned as a good and grievable Jewish Israeli and who is not.

Concluding remarks

In line with the topic of this special issue on the tensions and temporalities of Pride politics, this article has taken the recent documentary "The Pride Revolution" as the empirical grounds upon which to understand how the Israeli LGBTQ movement is remembered, which aspects are highlighted, and which others are backgrounded or even erased. Unlike existing scholarship that has either concentrated on Anglophone visual artefacts of British and American queer memory or investigated the outward facets of Israeli homonationalism, our article focuses on a Hebrew-language documentary to illustrate how homonationalist pride is discursively produced and circulated *inwards* for Israeli audiences.

With the help of the notions of collective remembering, scale, and affect, we have demonstrated how the success of the Israeli LGBTQ movement and its affective loading – pride – are constructed through specific spatio-temporal discursive moves that position Israel as an exceptional context. On a national scale level, Middle-Easternness is highlighted as a key feature of Israel's exceptional character that enables Israel to "come out" as simultaneously pro-gay and Mizrahi. On another, global, scale, the more traditional and Middle Eastern traits of Israel are downplayed with a view to presenting Israel as a positive exception of LGBTQ progress compared to the West. Interestingly, the IDF is made to play a key role in the construction of Israeli exceptionalism with regard to LGBTQ rights, and grief and trauma for fallen soldiers is presented as the emotional litmus test for acceptance of non-normative sexualities in Israel. In the documentary, LGBTQ enfranchisement in

Israel is not a success story *in spite of* a disadvantageous starting point, but *because* of it. According to the show, it is not simply the military, but literally dying in combat, that forges an exceptional acceptance of gays. This is a step beyond the typical homonationalist discourse, co-opting not only LGBTQ bodies into the national ethos but their actual lives and deaths.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, this Q&A session, intended for an international audience: https://www.facebook.com/IsraelinUK/videos/744754583016510/.

2. For example, this article on the Israeli website Mako prominently listed the song among "the 12 songs that define our LGBT soundtrack": https://www.mako.co.il/pride-culture/cultura/Article-3fb15b6bda92261006.htm

3. Each episode is named after a famous Israeli song.

4. See Misgav and Hartal (2021) for more information on these hate crimes and their effects on the community.

5. For the sake of brevity, we only show select excerpts of the interview here.

6. Ironically, another aspect of Israeli bereavement culture that the show does not discuss is that, in 2016, the Knesset rejected a bill that proposed to recognize bereaved widows and widowers also in same-sex couples. https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2016-02-25/ty-article/.premium/knesset-scraps-bills-for-lgbt-community/0000017f-db84-db22-a17f-ffb5aef80000