

LGBTQ+ American History in the Digital Era: Still a Radical Enterprise? The Case of *OutHistory.org*

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Table of Content

INTRODUCTION	2
I. SEXUALITY : A HISTORY	13
1. Same-sex Relations, Homophobia and the Liberation Movements	13
2. Situating LGBTQ+ Research in the Historical Field	11
3. Writing LGBTQ+ History out of the Academic Circuit	19
II. <i>OutHistory</i> : Historians with a Mission	26
1. <i>OutHistory</i> and Education	29
2. <i>OutHistory</i> and the Communities	35
3. <i>OutHistory</i> and Activism.....	45
III. Mission Accomplished?	56
1. <i>OutHistory.org</i> : Patchworking History	59
2. A History with Multiple Voices	66
3. <i>OutHistory</i> : a Cacophonic Project?	73
CONCLUSION.....	85
Bibliography	89
APPENDICES	96

INTRODUCTION

Howard Zinn, in *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*, wrote:

History can come in handy. If you were born yesterday, with no knowledge of the past, you might easily accept whatever the government tells you. But knowing a bit of history [...] might make you skeptical, lead you to ask questions, making more likely that you would find out the truth.¹

This quotation by the famous historian of social movements and labor history presents the historical discipline as an instrument for political resistance against oppression. Zinn's conception of history was shared by other scholars who saw the discipline as a starting point for emancipation. It is the case of the independent scholar Jonathan Ned Katz. In 1976, drawing from his own research, he published *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York: T.Y. Crowell). Using documents he had retrieved, he collected and commented on the gay past and he was the first to do so in such an extensive way. He demonstrated the roots of the oppression of the homosexual minority and ended his work on gay people's reactions against oppression. In the introduction, he clearly stated his purpose and his radicalism: "The heterosexual dictatorship has tried to keep us out of sight and out of mind [...]. That time is over. The people of the shadows have seen the light; Gay people are coming out--and moving on--to organized action against an oppressive society."² Katz too believed in the causal relation between knowing history and fighting oppression.

In 2008, Katz resumed the project he had undertaken forty years earlier, this time in a digital form. He left the print support and turned to digital web pages to found *OutHistory.org*, a website conceived as a collective and interactive repository for LGBTQ+ history. The project features contributions from academic scholars and LGBTQ+ community members and collaborations with other existing LGBTQ+ organizations. The website aims at circulating LGBTQ+ issues as widely as possible and to keep the conversations over LGBTQ+ issues alive. It was destined to be a meeting point for everyone with an interest in LGBTQ+ history and a catalyst for social change.

In between Katz's *Gay American History* and *OutHistory.org* as we accessed it, LGBTQ+ history has been exponentially researched and circulated in various forms, in more and more places, by more and more people. In parallel, the LGBTQ+ community has obtained

¹ Howard Zinn, *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train, a Personal History of our Times* (Beacon Press, 1994), p. 105.

² Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (T.Y. Crowell, 1976).

more and more rights, suggesting that there is a causal link between the obtention of civil rights and LGBTQ+ history. Thereupon, Allan Bérubé described the work of historians of gay communities as a form of activism.³ Indeed, Historians of sexuality themselves are often part of the LGBTQ+ community and involved in LGBTQ+ activist activities in parallel to their academic work. They even at some point brought LGBTQ+ history to the Supreme Court who ruled in favor of LGBTQ+ rights. This last point really encapsulates the hybrid status of LGBTQ+ history: it stands at the crossroads of the academy, the community and the political scene.

The issue at stake in this thesis is that this double-status of historians seems to be contradictory. Indeed, at the early stages of academic LGBTQ+ history writing, scholars could risk their career if they carried out a Ph.D. thesis on LGBTQ+ issues. Today, tenure positions are really hard to get and researchers who couple their academic writing with involvement within a community see their community work undervalued despite it contributing to enriching their scholarship. They can even be prejudiced for devoting consequential time to off-campus activities. On the contrary, activists and community members address scholars with the reproach that they confine themselves to their “ivory tower” (i.e. the academic world) and that they do not really commit to the cause on the field. Yet, in spite of this perpetuated dichotomy, it rather seems that knowledge is not confined to universities and is not the property of scholars and that society has a political interest in the circulation of knowledge in a different circuit than the traditional top-down way.

Actually, history is public matter, and this is why public history developed. Public history is “the use of historical skills and methods outside of the traditional academic realm of history”.⁴ It is an approach of history which is often grounded in a city, a state or a community, and its aim is to circulate this history to the general public. *OutHistory.org* inscribes itself in the vein of public history but takes it one step further by eliminating the physical and material barriers between the audience and LGBTQ+ history. Its digital format enables anyone with an access to the Internet to meet with LGBTQ+ history on this website conceived for the general public.

³ Jeffrey Weeks, *What is Sexual History?* (Polity Press, 2016), p.41.

⁴ Department of History, Geography and Philosophy, *University of Louisiana*, “What is Public History?”, <https://history.louisiana.edu/graduate-studies/masters-public-history/what-public-history#:~:text=Public%20history%20is%20the%20use,business%2C%20or%20a%20historical%20society> (Accessed 23 November 2020).

This work explores the intersections of LGBTQ+ history production and LGBTQ+ history reception, which materialize on the website *OutHistory.org*. Scholars reach out to the community in the pursuit of the LGBTQ+ past. The aim is to circulate this history as widely as possible and to gather a vast array of historical articles, testimonies and artefacts about the LGBTQ+ past. Then, this collection of historical information can be used to pursue the fight against oppression which afflicts LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States. In this thesis, we investigate whether the radical ideals that animate *OutHistory.org* founders find radical political resonance among its users. We will wonder whether the use of digital technology in the service of LGBTQ+ history is instrumental or detrimental to collective action around LGBTQ+ issues by comparing it to the dynamics that existed at the birth of the discipline.

LGBTQ+ history has been an academic field since the 1970s and started in the midst of social upheavals: it was founded in reaction against the government and the institutions and was conceived as a tool for liberation: that is what scholars first wrote about. The first historiography was very male-centered and same-sex relations between women were overlooked mainly because historians first studied LGBTQ+ communities where they were vocal and visible (for instance, in protests and in social places).⁵ Great numbers of studies are centered around gay night life and the gay bar scene. Despite being indebted to women studies and feminist theories, a gender problem remained in LGBTQ+ historiography. It took time for LGBTQ+ history to become increasingly intersectional but gradually, researchers expanded their horizons and dived into more complex studies, looked out for the invisible, and produced new works with new paradigms. Domesticity came under scrutiny.⁶ Historians, for instance, researched LGBTQ+ in the workplace, or sexuality in prison.⁷ The geography of LGBTQ+ life was also expanded and, contingently, the intersection between race, sexual, and gender identity with was explored.⁸ LGBTQ+ history developed exponentially: while it long remained marginal, it gained practitioners and audience as time went by. Nowadays, historians have refined their analytical tools, archives are being filled with LGBTQ+ collections and so are libraries. Surprisingly enough, while societies witnessed a digital turn on the global scale, scholarship on digital history is still scarce and LGBTQ+ history is no

⁵ Margot Canaday, "LGBT History", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2014), p. 13.

⁶ Stephen Vider, "Domesticity", *Routledge History of American Sexuality* (Routledge University Press, 2020), quoted in Canaday, 2014.

⁷ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁸ Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

exception. It is this slot that we wish to contribute to with the case study of *OutHistory.org*, a digital, public history website devoted to the LGBTQ+ community and individuals.

The main theme of our thesis is the writing of history. But history is a discipline that comprises many subdivisions. The subdivisions we are interested in are digital history, public history, social history and cultural history. Digital history consists in the practice of history adapted to digital media. It goes beyond digitized written history: it defines history projects that take digital tools as media for the spread of history. It can be materialized by interactive maps or timelines, historical videogames, films or audio-visual historical material, and history websites like *OutHistory.org*. Public history also exists in various different forms but the common point of all these forms is that they are all destined to general audiences (as opposed to pupils, students or scholars). They can be historical documentaries made for television, history museums, reenactments of historical events, and all other manifestations of historical productions open to non-specialists. *OutHistory.org* is an example of these manifestations. Social history is a subdivision of history which draws largely on sociology in its approaches and in its themes. Social history is interested in the organization of society, tends to derive general trends, and explores all the population strata. In social history, we find history “from the bottom-up” which takes the base of society as a starting point (instead of focusing on the history of institutions). Since LGBTQ+ are a minority in the sociological meaning, LGBTQ+ history certainly pertains to social history. Finally, cultural history can be said to be a subpart of social history. It takes representations as subject matters. Cultural history is the study of the cultural “products” of the period considered: literature, music, consumption goods, clothes, idioms, and all the worldly things that give substance to daily life. *OutHistory.org*, rather than presenting narratives about striking events, tends to feature articles that dwell on cultural elements pertaining to the LGBTQ+ past experience.

We chose to focus on these four subfields of history because they offer alternative narratives to those that recipients first come to mind. They are the products of historians who take risks to explore the limits of the historical fields and who give voice to actors that are less heard in more standard narratives. The common point between these four subfields is the centrality of common people: indeed, they all take common people either as subjects of the history or as their recipients. They contribute to bringing down the barriers that separate people from knowledge.

In order to analyze the present of LGBTQ+ history in the digital age as exemplified by the website *OutHistory.org*, we need to put it in perspective by exploring the historiography of the study of sexualities in the United States. To do so, we examine a number of seminal secondary sources that directly and indirectly led to the creation of the website. The obvious one is *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the United States* by Jonathan Ned Katz, published in 1976. At that time, it was the first work in the field to be that extensive in the time period it covered (four centuries) and in the number of primary documents it presented. With this book, the independent scholar aimed at situating LGBTQ+ people in society and in history by replacing them and their lives in historical and social contexts. He intended to humanize LGBTQ+ Americans, to render them the citizenship they deserved, by demonstrating the institutionalization of their oppression and the denial of their humanity. By including narratives from top position leaders, police records, newspaper headlines but also extracts from charters of LGBTQ+ organizations like the charter of the Chicago Society for Human Rights (1954) or interviews of LGBTQ+ activists, Jonathan Ned Katz provides a solid basis for the understanding of the relation between society and LGBTQ+ people, and never fails to situate one in relation to the other. This work paved the way for upcoming historians of sexualities and had LGBTQ+ history (and historians) come out from the past's closet.

Jonathan Ned Katz was a founding member of the Gay Academic Union, an organization that fought for LGBTQ+ rights within the academia. Among the other founding members was John D'Emilio, an academic scholar who dedicated his career to LGBTQ+ history and who devoted his spare time to LGBTQ+ activism, reaching the position of director of the Policy Institute at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. In his book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, (University of Chicago Press, 1983), he used a historical methodology which was groundbreaking at the time: oral history. He directed his attention to the members of the community themselves and focused on retrospection to enrich his study with the feelings and the afterthoughts of the LGBTQ+ men and women who participated in the LGBTQ+ past. In the making of oral histories, the researcher stepped back from his authoritative position in order to stand at the disposal of the subjects and to give echo to people's voices. This process is an example of how knowledge can be a collaborative process.

French historian Guillaume Marche also illuminates our thesis with his 2017 book *La Militance LGBT aux États-Unis*. Indeed, in this work, the scholar presents the different

ideologies that underpinned LGBTQ+ political movements. More particularly, he highlights the tensions between individuals and collective movements as well as the articulation between LGBTQ+ citizens and American society at large. With movements from the intimate to the political, he retraces the debates that animated the community especially in times of political crises. His book provides insights into the constitution of the LGBTQ+ community in the USA, but also into its diverse points of dissension. His concluding remarks tend to explain how and why recent LGBTQ+ activism lost support from its base and consequently, became less collective and more individual. His work helped us to contextualize *OutHistory.org* in this period of apparent depoliticization of the LGBTQ+ experience in the USA.

As a synthesis of the work of these brilliant researchers, Jeffrey Weeks, in *What is Sexual History?* (Polity Press, 2016), retraces the historiography of LGBTQ+ history. With special emphasis of the paradigms underpinning the discipline, he analyzes the actors of the field and their relation to the community. His book goes back and forth between the academic sphere and the public realm to highlight the fact that history is not constrained to scholars' pen. On the contrary, he insists that LGBTQ+ history has been endowed with the mission to permeate all strata of society from its inception. His work is not exclusively centered on the USA, but it seems that the country is one of the most prolific and influential. His diachronic approach supplied our own survey of LGBTQ+ history and contributed greatly to our understanding of the evolution of the place and role of the discipline.

Howard Zinn's work also permeates this thesis. Indeed, we are indebted to his writings (among which *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train* (2002)) and to his conception of the historical discipline. His ideas provide us with the assumption that historians have a mission: they should take a stand in situations of oppression, through the writing of history and in their teaching.

A vast array of other sources is used in this work, like scholarly articles which enrich our discussion of the place of LGBTQ+ history in the academia, of subfields of history like social history, cultural history and public history. We attach particular importance to the status of knowledge in the USA: its accessibility, its producers, its recipients and scholarship on the subject sheds light on the relations between knowledge and the general public in the digital era. We also resort to scholarship on the LGBTQ+ community to understand their needs and to grasp the problematics of this part of the US population. Scholars in LGBTQ+ history have often crossed paths with members of the LGBTQ+ community and derived many writings from these encounters. Indeed, it is from these encounters that the practice of oral history developed,

a practice which is one of the focal points of this research. We also resort contingently to scholarship on LGBTQ+ and digital activism since our case study focuses on these issues. Matteo Cernison's article "Models of Online-Related Activism" particularly enlightens our assessment of *OutHistory.org*'s activist qualities. Finally, our methodological framework borrows significantly from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as set by Norman Fairclough in 1995.⁹ Even though we do not conduct many close textual analyses, we resort to CDA definitions of terms to frame our objects of study, we use segments of reception theory (Stuart Hall) to understand the relations between what is encoded on *OutHistory.org*, what comes out from the website and how it is decoded by the audience. We also stress the importance of language in minority studies and frame our main analysis according to principles found in other studies of this field.

The particularity of this thesis is that some of the authors of the secondary sources we use are also contributors to our primary source and case study: *OutHistory.org*. The website is a repository for LGBTQ+ archival materials ranging from buttons to police reports on the Stonewall riots, and serves as a publishing platform for LGBTQ+ historical articles. The articles are accessible in several different ways: from the homepage, one can click on the "featured" section to access the articles that the editors of the website want to put forward. Otherwise, users can use a search box, or else, find a section which presents other classifications. For instance, users can search by year, by places, by people. A special emphasis is put on oral history: a classification by oral history is available. One of the specificities of the website is that everyone can contribute by sharing historical articles. The submissions need to be accepted by the editors first, and if they pass and comply with a set of guidelines presented by the editors, they are published on the website. Users cannot search by 'categories' of authors, which means that amateurs' contributions are as valued as professional historians' ones. The website also presents users with the opportunity to share their experience about some pre-defined subjects (mostly marches and Pride parades), on the basis that people's testimonies are part of history. There is also a blog section in which any participant can write. The particularity of the blog section is that it is open for comments and so, for discussion about the LGBTQ+ past, for revisions, for feedback on the posts.

The website was founded in 2008 by Jonathan Ned Katz, as a continuation of his project *Gay American History* (1976). He wished to offer scholars of LGBTQ+ history a single, online

⁹ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Routledge, 1995).

platform on which to publish their work with the aim of forming a digital library for resources about the LGBTQ+ past. Some scholars joined his initiative and contributed to fill the website with their work. This is the case of John D’Emilio and Claire Bond Potter who, in addition to publishing some of their work on *OutHistory.org*, became co-directors of the website and took responsibility and time to operate it. In its beginnings, the website was produced by the CLAGS, a research center at the City University of New York, i.e. it was institutionally based. However, it no longer has a street-side gable and is now digitally managed.

We thus use the website as a case study to present the work of LGBTQ+ historians in the digital era. We analyze the website as a whole and study in more details some of its contents. For instance, we look at Jonathan Ned Katz’s manifesto “Envisioning the World We Make, Social-Historical Construction, a Model, a Manifesto” to understand the historiographical current in which *OutHistory.org* inscribes itself. We examine the oral interviews that John D’Emilio conducted for his book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1983) to reflect on *OutHistory.org*’s use of multimedia platform in doing history. We also derive sense from the proceedings of the first conference of the Gay Academic Union in which he participated. These documents have been published on *OutHistory.org* and are augmented with an introduction by D’Emilio who goes back to this moment of retrospective significance. Our interest in this piece is both the historical details it contains about LGBTQ+ campus organizing and the intersection of scholar and activist identities. In this vein, we also pay interest to Anne Balay’s “Blue Collar Queers, an Introduction to *Steel Closets*” to apprehend the relationship between scholars and community and the length at which researchers can go to grasp the living conditions of the subjects they research. Her style of writing is also examined for it is revealing of the tensions between academic and public history. We looked for articles that captured *OutHistory.org*’s mission to bring LGBTQ+ history in the public space. Svetlana Kitto’s piece, “The Subject Speaks” exemplified the importance of oral history and the necessity to turn to the individuals concerned by the historical events that are researched to produce knowledge. In this case, the historian interviewed Jimmy Paul, an ex-drag queen, who had been the model for a Nan Goldin photograph presented at an exhibition by the Smithsonian Museum and which was accompanied by an inaccurate description. At the same time, Kitto’s interview on *OutHistory.org* also illustrates the limits of this digital platform for history.

The study of the website will lead us to answer the following question: is LGBTQ+ history writing still a radical enterprise in the digital era? Indeed, we contend that from its beginnings, LGBTQ+ history writing was a corollary to the liberation movements of the

LGBTQ+ community. It emanated from them and at the same time, the field nourished the activists' efforts towards social and political justice. In a time when people are one click away from sources of information, when knowledge circulates better than ever before and when same-sex couples can marry, we wonder whether LGBTQ+ history has the same political importance that it once had. But before going to the heart of the matter, it is necessary to explain certain terms and concepts to provide a clear basis for the reflection.

First, we will repeatedly use the initialism LGBTQ+. The L stands for Lesbian, the G for Gay, the B for Bisexual, the T for Transgender, the Q for Questioning, and the + is a written sign to signify that more gender identities and sexual orientations are included. The first uses of the initialism occurred in the 1990s as "LGBT". Back in the 1950s, when a community of gay and lesbians started to emerge, they called themselves "homophiles". Then, they came to call themselves "gay" for homosexual men and "lesbians" for homosexual women. Gradually, bisexuals were included in the community and in the political struggles, and so did transgender people. In order to comprise these different identities under a common banner, the community chose the initialism. Variants exist, like GLBT. In recent years, as awareness about gender and sexuality progressed, more identities identified with the LGBT struggles and were included in the initialism for inclusivity. The Q can stand for Queer, but the term was once used as an insult so its meaning and use are still debated among LGBTQ+ community members. Under the "+" can be found Intersex people. Some choose to use LGBTQIA, including Asexual people. In other recent variants, "TS" has appeared and stands for "two-spirited", which is a conception of gender and sexual identity of Native American origin. Sometimes, "SA" is also added at the end of the initialism, standing for Straight Allies (heterosexuals who sympathize with LGBTQ+ issues). Our choice to use the "+" was a way to abbreviate all these conceptions of sexuality and gender for the sake of clarity. To the same intent, we will be using the same initialism throughout the thesis and, in some cases, its use will be anachronistic. The historical terms will also appear in those cases for disambiguation.

The thesis deals with the political resonance of LGBTQ+ history in the present: in various occasions, we will be writing about radicality and radicalism. Radicalism comes from sentiments of revolt against the established order. In reaction against this order, radical thinkers believe that issues should be tackled at their roots, and that the root of the problem should be eradicated. In our thesis, LGBTQ+ radical stances rise against: cis-heteronormativity — which consists in considering heterosexuality and cisgenderism — the equation of identity with the gender assigned at birth — as the normal — and only — model —, patriarchy (a social system

in which men have power and ownership), and oligarchy (the decisional power of a few people over the majority). In short, we understand radicalism as a will to get rid of the hierarchical system as it exists in the USA.

In order to conduct our research, we chose to use a mixed-method approach. Indeed, the subject of our thesis is itself mixed: we compare traditional print history to digital history; we compare scholarly publication to non-academic, open-access online publication; we compare American history to LGBTQ+ history (we do not propose that the two are opposed but rather that as yet, American history has left LGBTQ+ Americans behind). Our main approach is historiographical. Indeed, we seek to situate *OutHistory.org* in the wider LGBTQ+ historiography. Our aim is to understand *OutHistory* staff's conception of what LGBTQ+ history should be, in comparison to what other historians have done before. Specifically, we conduct a diachronic study of LGBTQ+ history. This approach allows us to retrace the evolution of the ideologies underpinning LGBTQ+ history, in relation to the political contexts of the time when it was written, and thus, to reflect on the evolution of radicality in this field. Since radicality deals with power dynamics, we also draw from Critical Discourse Analysis. Indeed, historical articles are a form of discourse and the analysis of their modes of circulation, their authors, their subjects and their structure, allows to situate them in terms of the power they exert on society. This approach will mostly be used in the second part of the thesis.

Finally, our original attempt was to conduct interviews of contributors and of visitors of the website to understand their personal relationship to history and to politics and to have insight about how they negotiate their identities (when they can appear contradictory). However, this aspect of the research will not be significant importance in this dissertation since we did not manage to get a sufficient number of participants to exploit the results. The interviews consisted in an emailed questionnaire that three participants returned completed. We had at heart to conduct interviews because one of the historical methods we emphasize in this thesis is oral history. Oral history consists in conducting interviews of people who lived through the events a historian writes about. This approach has been used extensively by the researchers of LGBTQ+ history because written sources were first relatively scarce. It presents the advantage of drawing on authentic testimonies (although not necessarily historically accurate ones). In addition, it allows to create bonds between academic historians and the LGBTQ+ community. In our turn, we wanted in our turn to study the production and the reception of LGBTQ+ in the digital era with the precious addition of new, original testimonies from people involved in these

processes. That was not possible but we still managed to collect three questionnaires, one of which is included in this work.

The present work explores the dichotomy between the status of researcher and that of activist. It raises the question of the role of historians in LGBTQ+ studies. We ask: is LGBTQ+ history still a radical enterprise in the digital era?

To answer this question, we divided our thesis into three parts. The first part will retrace the historiography of LGBTQ+ history: we will go back in time to the roots of the oppression of LGBTQ+ Americans, to the constitution of a LGBTQ+ community and to the first writing of their history. We will see that the academy is not the only natural place for LGBTQ+ history. Which will lead us to our second part: the intersections between LGBTQ+ history and American society. Indeed, in LGBTQ+ history, historians' role consists in the spread of their research to the public. In this axis, the academy is just one of the meeting points. The case of *OutHistory.org* will provide a basis for the analysis of the places where LGBTQ+ history exists: in the educational system, within communities, and in activism. The website aims at a collaborative writing of LGBTQ+ history on a platform where people from everywhere can participate and to which everyone can have access. The bigger perspective of the project is to enlighten the audience on LGBTQ+ issues to foster social and political change. The last part will analyze how these projects materialize: we will study the format of the historical material available and consider who effectively benefits from this initiative. These movements will lead us to wonder if the digital medium really is the best way to connect with audiences, and thus, to be the spark which ignites the fire of radical mobilization against oppression.

I. SEXUALITY : A HISTORY

LGBTQ+ people in the USA have a history which intersects with the history of the country at large but which presents its own specificities. LGBTQ+ Americans constitutes a ‘minority’, a definition on which we will dwell further in the course of the study. As a minority in the USA, they do not always benefit from the same consideration as their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts on several levels including with regard to the law and institutions, but also with regard to their place within American society (as a group of individuals sharing common cultural grounds). Indeed, LGBTQ+ people are often marginalized, oppressed and threatened, LGBTQ+ activism for civil rights and equal rights is met with opposition and scientific research about this social, historical and cultural group is not always well-received in academic settings. In this part, we will retrace the history of ideas which justify their being assigned to the margins of society and the evolution of their struggle against these oppressions, which led them to constitute communities throughout the country. Second, we will contextualize the place of LGBTQ+ history within the larger historiography. As a final step, we will see why this history does not always fit within academic settings or crosses the border between research and the public. We will study the case of *OutHistory.org*, an LGBTQ+ history website launched by professional historians and completed by students and contributors who have links with LGBTQ+ communities and their history but do not have academic credentials. Thus, we will place emphasis on the dynamics that unite different strata of American society in the creation of historical narratives which do not always fit in the shared history of the United States.

1. Same-sex Relations, Homophobia and the Liberation Movements

As previously said, the study of the LGBTQ+ minority comes with the study of its specificities. It encompasses specific vocabulary, as well as specific epistemological issues and theoretical frameworks. Certain terms will be used repeatedly, and it is necessary to clarify the meaning that will be assigned to them. This preliminary step is especially crucial if one adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis theoretical framework: it contributes to conducting rigorous research by eliminating sources of error provoked by the misunderstanding of certain words or concepts.

In this thesis, we understand the term ‘sexuality’ according to the definition given by linguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall: “the systems of mutually constituted ideologies, practices, and identities that give sociopolitical meaning to the body as an eroticized and/or reproductive site”.¹ Similarly, the researchers working on *OutHistory.org* present sexualities as being socio-historical constructions:

The social-historical construction of the terms and concepts heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual are presented here as evidence of the construction of the historically specific social order, the institution or system, that divides people, identities, desires, acts, relationships, and groups into heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual.²

The underlying argument is that the meaning assigned to sexualities is not fixed but is the product of the socio-historical context: the scope evolves. This definition rejects essentialist arguments:

Modern essentialism consists of a belief that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, and biologically determined. [...] Social constructionism, in contrast, rests on the belief that reality is socially constructed and emphasizes language as an important means by which we interpret experience.³

With regard to these definitions, we understand that sexualities do not have the same meaning nor the same socio-political implications depending on the periods of time and the social environment of the individuals studied. But the meaning is also different according to the stance of the researcher. As Vicki L. Eaklor presents in *Queer America: a GLBT history of the 20th Century*⁴, the tension between essentialists and constructionists is maybe the most heated debates in LGBTQ+ studies.

The initialism LGBTQ+ refers to Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders, Queers (or questioning), and the + is a written way of comprising other sexual and gender expression like intersex individuals:

Intersex is a term to describe an individual whose primary and secondary sex characteristics do not align with what is typically read as "male" or "female." Intersex people still have gender identities and sexual orientations, which may or may not be LGBTQ+.⁵

¹ Kira Hall, Mary Bucholtz, *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 369 – 394.

² <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/heterohomobi> (Accessed 3 January 2020).

³ John D. DeLamater, and Janet Shibley Hyde. “Essentialism vs. Social Constructionism in the Study of Human Sexuality.” *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1998, 10–18. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3813161 (Accessed 13 April 2020).

⁴ Vicki L. Eaklor, *Queer America: a GLBT history of the 20th Century* (New Press, 2011).

⁵ [Berkeley University of California, “Definition of Terms”, campusclimate.berkeley.edu/students/ejce/geneq/resources/lgbtq-resources/definition-terms](http://campusclimate.berkeley.edu/students/ejce/geneq/resources/lgbtq-resources/definition-terms) (Accessed 3 January 2020).

The initialism has evolved through the years to become more inclusive but the LGBT first four letters began being used in the 1990s. As a consequence, it may be used in an anachronical manner in this thesis for the sake of conciseness and inclusiveness.

LGBTQ+ studies are part of the larger ‘minority studies’ which can be defined as being interested in “a category of people whose physical appearance or cultural characteristics are defined as being different from the traits of the dominant group and that result in their being set apart for different and unequal treatment.”⁶ To identify groups that form a minority, sociologists use four criteria: “1) identifiability 2) differential power 3) differential and pejorative treatment 4) group awareness”.⁷ Following these defining features, we are going to study how the LGBTQ+ minority was constituted as well as how American LGBTQ+ individuals acted on and reacted to this status over time. Also, we understand that minority history is written in close relationship with sociological and anthropological concerns (among other fields of study).

When British people founded colonies on the American soil in the seventeenth century, they brought with them the British sets of law which included anti-sodomy laws. These laws, the name of which is influenced by the Biblical episode of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), “in which it is reported that God destroyed these two “cities of the plain” because of the sinful conduct of their inhabitants”⁸, condemned oral and anal sex. The primary population targeted by these laws were the men who engaged in anal intercourse in the course of same-sex relationships, but some statutes could also target acts of sodomy between different sex couples (married or not). Indeed, in Biblical terms, sexual intercourse was stated to be for procreation purposes only.⁹ This covers the first criteria of the constitution of a minority: same-sex couples engaging in sodomy made them identifiable among their community. As such, individuals not engaging in sodomy possessed a differential power: that of denouncing such practices which were subjected to a differential treatment for they were sanctioned by laws.

In the nineteenth century, when psychiatry and psychology emerged in the USA, homosexuality was registered as a mental disorder and as such, people “suffered” from this

⁶ Ruth Dunn, *Minority Studies*, Houston Community College, *LibreTexts* (online), 2020, [socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Minority_Studies_\(Dunn\)/](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Book%3A_Minority_Studies_(Dunn)/) (Accessed 9 April 2020).

⁷ Anthony Gary Dworkin, and Rosalind J. Dworkin, *The minority report: An introduction to racial, ethnic, and gender relations*, 3rd, (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999) quoted in Dunn, chap. 2.1.

⁸ Arthur S. Leonard, “Sodomy Laws and Sodomy Law Reform”, *gbtq, inc*, 2004, par. 1.

⁹ Leonard, par. 4.

“condition” and needed to be “treated” mostly through conversion therapies intended to take homosexuality out of them and restore heterosexuality as their sexual orientation. In parallel, the Biblical subtext that tinged the sodomy statutes was gradually replaced in the American public discourse by the notion of “crime against nature”,¹⁰ something out of the order of nature, out of the organic life rather than an offense to the will of God. The century’s sexual history was also marked by literary figures like Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde who wrote poems and novels comprising same-sex relationships of ambiguous nature. At the time, intimacy and displays of deep affection between people of the same gender were only natural. We know that in this period, two men sharing a bed did not come as a shock for the population, even if one of the two was the United States president like Abraham Lincoln or Andrew Garfield who had intense, intimate (but not necessarily amorous or sexual) relationships with men.¹¹ Today, we still cannot determine the nature of the relationships for sure. As far as women were concerned, acts of physical love were not per se punished by law but still were looked upon as abnormal or “deviant”.¹² In the nineteenth century, Henry James wrote *The Bostonians* (1886), a novel about two well-off, independent women who lived together without any need for financial support from a man. These associations between women from upper-middle classes were indeed something that existed and were called “Boston marriages”, after James’s novel. What these examples of same-sex intimacy reveal is that there is a great difference of treatment of the intimate and the sexual. In 1895, Oscar Wilde learned this at his expense: he was tried and jailed for sodomy. For his own defense, he tried to bring up the existence of homoeroticism from great artistic figures like Michelangelo and Shakespeare, but he failed to convey the impression of normalcy he felt about same-sex love to the Court.¹³ In other words, same-sex acts of love had to remain hidden, private, behind closed doors.

Eventually, same-sex sexual acts came to be considered as defining features of individuals thus coming to equate practices to identity. Legal condemnations were accompanied by stigmatizations (i.e. subjecting someone to different treatments on the basis of disapproval) of these ‘immoral’ individuals in cultural, social and medical environment.

¹⁰ Maxine Wolfe, “Invisible Women in Invisible Places: Lesbians, Lesbian Bars, and the Social Production of People/Environment Relationships”, *Arch. & Comport. / Arch. & Behav.*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (1992), p.142,.

¹¹ Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, “But Were They Gay? The Mystery of Same-Sex Love in the 19th Century”, *The Atlantic* (online), September 7, 2012 www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/09/but-were-they-gay-the-mystery-of-same-sex-love-in-the-19th-century/262117/ (Accessed 31 March 2020).

¹² Wolfe, p. 142.

¹³ Rothenberg Gritz,, par. 9.

With the fast urbanization and industrialization in the first part of the twentieth century, more women became workers, especially in blue-collar jobs that involved “masculine” outfits and attitudes. This display of masculinity was regarded as a sign of madness since they were not conforming to what society conceived of womanliness and what was ‘ladylike’. At the same time, the masculine attire provided a disguise for ‘passing’ couples: women couples who were thought to be one man and one woman.¹⁴ The twentieth century also witnessed the first uses of the term “homosexuality”, “homosexuals” and “lesbians”.¹⁵ As these names began to be used to refer to one’s identity, a group awareness could emerge. Gradually and mostly in great urban centers, homosexuals gathered in places reserved for them: bars, clubs, balls. Some upper-class homosexual men launched masquerade balls in which participants came in disguise as a performance of gender and sexuality, but also to camouflage their identity. It was in those occasions that the term “coming out”, the act of announcing one’s homosexuality, was coined. Nowadays, it is most commonly used when someone discloses their sexuality to their heterosexual peers but originally upper-class gay men came out to their homosexual community at masquerade balls.¹⁶

This survey of the dialectic between American law, American society and Americans engaging in same-sex relationships presents an old-established antagonism between the different parties involved. Two sides were identified: LGBTQ+ people¹⁷ were seen as enemies of God or of morality while the institutions and the antagonists of the LGBTQ+ way of life constituted a common adversary for sexual minorities. In reaction to this division, communities were created and began acting against this rejection of who they were and how they acted. This was the beginning of LGBTQ+ activism. Guillaume Marche distinguishes several turns in the activists’ methods and ideologies. The 1950s were characterized by the homophile movement that started off as reactionary but diluted in assimilationism. The term ‘homophile’ was the expression used before “homosexual” to refer to same-sex love.¹⁸ Historically, the period of gay organizing between 1940 and 1969

¹⁴ Allan Bérubé, “Lesbians and Gay men in early San Francisco. Notes towards a social history of Lesbians and Gay men in America”, 1979 (*Lesbian Herstory Archives Unpublished Papers File*, New York) quoted in Wolfe, p.143.

¹⁵ Maxine Wolfe, “Invisible Women in Invisible Places: Lesbians, Lesbian Bars, and the Social Production of People/Environment Relationships”, *Arch. & Comport. / Arch. & Behav.*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (1992), p.143,.

¹⁶ Olivia B. Waxman, “The History Behind Why We Say a Person ‘Came Out of the Closet’”, *Time* (Online), October 11 2017, <https://time.com/4975404/national-coming-out-day-closet-metaphor-history/> (Accessed 31 March 2020).

¹⁷ This terminology is anachronistic in this context but is used in a way to be inclusive of the people that the initialism encompasses. Periphrastic expressions can make the meaning unclear.

¹⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homophile> (Accessed 4 April 2020).

(pre-Stonewall riots) is referred to as the “homophile movement”.¹⁹ Homophile organizations appeared all around the Western world after WWII, fostered by prolonged same-sex contacts of army men as well as between women who remained on the home fronts. The Nazi exterminations and stigmatizations of gay people with the pink triangle marking also accounted for a need to group together against the plight of discrimination. Organizations like the Mattachine Society founded in Los Angeles in 1951 or the Daughters of Bilitis (San Francisco, 1954) respectively for gay men and gay women, were oriented towards assimilationism: a strategy which aimed at presenting gay people as ‘normal’ individuals, at putting forward their respectability and conformity with American values.²⁰

Marche then delineates the 1960s as a period marked by the Gay Liberation Movement (abridged GLM) and driven by a spirit of oppositions to the imposed norms and codes of conduct, a wish of LGBTQ+ to claim their sexual difference. These ideologies are distinct from the assimilationist strategy of the preceding decades. It must be said that the context helped: indeed, the 1960s were a decade of popular protests against conservatism, against nuclear tests, against the war in Vietnam, against patriarchy. They were also the decade of the Civil Rights Movement for desegregation and equal rights between black people and white people. It is borne by these anti-oppression dynamics that the Liberation movement for LGBTQ+ people could rise as a significant social movement. For example, Marche underlines that the same goals motivated anti-Vietnam war protesters, feminist and LGBTQ+ rights advocates²¹: they all organized against an idealized virility which encouraged machismo, violence and display of power and control over the “others” (women, black people, gay people, foreign nations, communists...). As far as the GLM participants were concerned, they began to re-appropriate what was held against them. For example, camp, effeminate comportments from gay men, was a symbol of pride and lesbians tended to reproduce heterosexual gender roles with some of them being very masculine (called ‘butch’ lesbians) and some of them being feminine almost to the point of the cliché (called ‘femme’ lesbians). As Marche puts it, sexuality, which was a motive for oppression, became an instrument for liberation. The movement is associated with liberation because the participants wanted nothing to do with the dominants’ way of life, and they felt and expressed pride in not being accepted by an America who felt omnipotent especially by the

¹⁹ Teresa Theophano, “Daughters of Bilitis”, 2004, *gltq, inc*, par.1, http://www.gltqarchive.com/ssh/daughters_bilitis_S.pdf (Accessed 4 April 2020).

²⁰ Theophano, par. 9.

²¹ Guillaume Marche, *La Militance LGBT aux États-Unis* (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2017), chap. 1.

way of its military. Growing tensions appeared and socialization places like bars for LGBTQ+ people were frequently raided by police forces, individuals were being charged with accusations such as lewd conduct “to suppress not just sex acts but any expression of intimacy at all, no matter how minor”²², gay activists reported. These tensions culminated in the Stonewall riots in 1969 which sparked at the Stonewall Inn in New York’s Greenwich Village after the NYPD raided the bar. Contrary to what usually happened, the bar’s customers fought back, threw bottles at the police car, slashed the tires of the vehicles and eventually, the rioters led the NYPD officers to retreat inside the bar. Fights occurred and after 4 AM, the situation dissolved. In the following days, the bar re-opened and gay activists and partygoers made the place a symbol of resistance and chanted slogans like “gay power” reminiscent of the “black power” chants coined by Stokely Carmichael²³ during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.²⁴ The extensive news coverage of the events forced a conversation both inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community and it led to increasing activism and organizing to demand equal rights and protest against police violence and discrimination. In 1970, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was founded. The name is said to echo the Algerian Liberation Front and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, a detail which underlines the dynamic of liberation that characterized the era. The GLF held a radical stance: it was also vocal against racism, gender roles, capitalism and in support of the Black Panthers.²⁵

Guillaume Marche tells us that the 1970s were marked by homosexual communitarianism and by an essentialist comprehension of homosexuality.²⁶ The decade opened on the Christopher Street Liberation Day March in New York City on the first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in June 1970 which “became the first annual NYC Pride March”.²⁷ The unprecedented character of the event led Lillian Faderman to comment that “never in history had so many gay and lesbian people come together in one place and for a

²² David Halperin, Trevor Hoppe, *The War on Sex* (Duke University Press, 2017).

²³ The activist first used the expression in June 1966 at the Meredith March, Emilye Crosby, et al. “Rethinking and Un-Teaching Entrenched Movement Narratives: A Virtual Roundtable.” *Fire!!!*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2013), pp. 78–108. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/fire.2.2.0078 (Accessed 13 April 2020).

²⁴ Sarah Pruitt, “What Happened at the Stonewall Riots? A Timeline of the 1969 Uprising”, *History* (online), June 29, 2019. www.history.com/news/stonewall-riots-timeline (Accessed 8 April 2020).

²⁵ ‘Gay Liberation Front’, wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_Liberation_Front (Accessed 8 April 2020).

²⁶ Marche (2017), chap. 1.

²⁷ “NYC Pride March”, *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*, www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/starting-point-of-nycs-first-pride-march/ (Accessed 13 April 2020).

common endeavor.”²⁸ The National Gay TASK force became the National Gay and Lesbian task force which testifies to a need for gay and lesbians to congregate in order to have more impact when mobilizing for equal rights. During this decade, the LGBTQ+ protests were successful in obtaining new rights. Psychiatrists began realizing that some homosexual patients were indeed suffering from mental disorders but that these were not linked to their sexual orientation. In 1973, “after extreme pressure from the Lesbian and Gay Liberation movement”²⁹ the Board of Trustees of the American Psychiatric Association proceeded, after having reached an agreement, to remove homosexuality from the list of psychiatric disorders and ruled that it should be defined as “sexual orientation disturbance” making it something abnormal but that did not need psychiatric treatment.³⁰ When the decision was issued publicly, debates ensued. Specialists made it clear that homosexuality was “abnormal”, that it was as much a psychiatric issue (without being an illness) as it was a “social, political” one. At the time, psychiatry had come to be seen as “an agent of social control” and it must be clear that the decision to remove homosexuality from the APA also stemmed from homosexual patients organizing and asking for the removal. Indeed, it is crucial to bear in mind that change did not happen overnight but was the result of homosexuals taking actions to make their voices heard. The 1970s also witnessed the first openly gay candidates for public office like Frank Kameny and Harvey Milk but the former was fired from his job as an astronomer for his sexual orientation and the latter was assassinated in 1978 by a former police officer with whom he had previously had disputes “over LGBTQ+ issues”.³¹

The following decade was characterized by different currents. In 1980, the Human Rights Campaign was founded “to provide financial support on behalf of the gay and lesbian community to political candidates who supported gay civil rights legislation”³². This initiative illustrates the decision to leave sexuality aside to focus on institutional achievements. One year later, the first cases of AIDS-infected gay males in Los Angeles

²⁸ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (Simon & Schuster, New York), 2015 quoted in “NYC Pride March”, *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*, www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/starting-point-of-nycs-first-pride-march/ (Accessed 13 April 2020).

²⁹ “The A.P.A. Ruling on Homosexuality”, December 29, 1973, *The New York Times* (online archive), www.nytimes.com/1973/12/23/archives/the-issue-is-subtle-the-debate-still-on-the-apa-ruling-on.html (Accessed 31 March 2020).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ On Kameny’s career, see “APNewsBreak: Gay rights papers shown at US library”, kamenypapers.org, May 8, 2011 and on Milk’s tragic death, see Scott Shafer, “40 Years After The Assassination Of Harvey Milk, LGBTQ Candidates Find Success”, *NPR.org*, November 27, 2018 (Accessed 13 April 2020).

³² Human Rights Campaign, <https://www.hrc.org/hrc-story/about-us/> (Accessed 13 April 2020).

were declared. At this stage, the disease was termed the “gay cancer”. Lesbians had tended to separate from gay males in the 1970s out of feminist concerns. However, when the epidemics broke, lesbians educated to reproductive health issues via feminist organizations brought massive support and a new form of cohesion between gay men and women emerged. Gradually, LGBTQ+ people tended to downplay the importance of sexual practices in their political struggle to turn to a desexualized representation of AIDS.³³ This political strategy was followed out of survival in an era of moral conservatism under Reagan’s administration. Still, many marches were organized, many associations were founded like ACT UP, in New York City in 1987. The AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power acted on numerous fronts: it started a memorial project with the constitution of a quilt bearing the names of the victims of AIDS, it acted against stigmatization, it sought to develop tools to present methods for safe sex. The organization’s logo is a pink triangle in remembrance of the mark imposed on gay people in Nazi Germany and the deportations and executions that followed, but the triangle on the logo bears its right-side up to overturn its meaning and become a symbol of fight and pride. This followed a declaration in which “conservative pundit William F. Buckley [who] suggested that HIV/AIDS patients get tattoos to warn partners in a 1986 New York Times op-ed”.³⁴ In parallel, in response to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis brochure to present educational material about safe-sex practices, Congress approved the Helms amendment forbidding federal funding for such programs because they were seen as an encouragement of homosexual activities³⁵. In the late 1980s, associations like Stop the Church or Queer Nation organized happenings where participants engaged in a re-sexualization of LGBTQ+ identity with kiss-ins (participants kissing each other) or tit-ins (participants taking their shirts off). They aimed at a *mise-en-scène* of the ordinariness of the homosexual body.³⁶ The 1980s really exemplifies the heterogenous currents within LGBTQ+ communities, their different, sometimes contradictory strategies and their relations with the socio-political context of the time.

The 1990s offered a relative break from stern conservatism and right-wing ideologies – or at least more permissive conditions. In 1990, Congress passed the Americans and Disabilities Acts which was “the nation’s first comprehensive civil rights law addressing the

³³ Marche (2017), chap. 1.

³⁴ Olivia B. Waxman, “How the Nazi Regime’s Pink Triangle Symbol Was Repurposed for LGBTQ Pride”, *Time* (Online), 31 May, 2018, time.com/5295476/gay-pride-pink-triangle-history/ (Accessed 13 April 2020).

³⁵ *S.Amdt.963 to H.R.305*, 100th Congress (1987-1988), www.congress.gov/amendment/100th-congress/senate-amendment/963/actions (Accessed 13 April 2020).

³⁶ Marche (2017), chap. 1.

needs of people with disabilities, prohibiting discrimination in employment, public services, public accommodations, and telecommunications.”³⁷ In the same year, the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act was passed to provide medical care to people with HIV without financial resources. In parallel, in relation to the private sphere, same-sex couples began to be legally acknowledged under domestic partnerships. In San Francisco and in Washington D.C., same-sex couples could register as such and obtain some benefits. However, it was not a federal decision. Bill Clinton’s Democratic presidency could have come as a relief for LGBTQ+ Americans. In fact, two notable acts were passed by the Clinton Administration. “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” was passed in 1994: the act prohibited discrimination against closeted LGBTQ+ people in the army while, at the same time, it prohibited open LGBTQ+ people to serve in the army. Homosexuality had been on the list of military regulations since 1942. President Clinton was torn between a part of the country who advocated for LGBTQ+ rights and action against the prejudices they suffered from and another part of the country who did not consider LGBTQ+ people morally fit to be employed in the U.S. military.³⁸ The DADT Act could not be considered an achievement for the LGBTQ+ activists and three years later, the Clinton administration issued the Defense Of Marriage Act which barred same-sex marriage for it “establishe[d] a Federal definition of: (1) “marriage” as only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife; and (2) “spouse” as only a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or wife.”³⁹ In the 1990s, most of the civil rights issues were discussed inside institutional buildings. During this decade, the ‘movement’ went from being horizontal (i.e. spreading from a center to the periphery and conquering more and more people and territory, as seen with organizations having branches develop throughout the country) to being vertical⁴⁰ (i.e. concentrating a lot of people around some issues likely to be acted upon by the Government). There were fewer grassroot activists because the issue was increasingly handled by politicians. The tendency within the existing movements was rather assimilationist: it drew a distinction between the “good gays” who were in favor of equal matrimonial rights and the “bad gays” for whom the issue of marriage was not central.⁴¹ It

³⁷ “The Americans with Disabilities Act”, www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/1990s/ada.html (Accessed 13 April 2020).

³⁸ Sarah Pruitt, “Once Banned, then Silenced: How Clinton’s ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ affected LGBT military”, *History* (online), www.history.com/news/dont-ask-dont-tell-repeal-compromise, 18 April 2018 (Accessed 13 April 2020).

³⁹ United States. Cong. H.R. Defense of Marriage Act, 3396, 104th Cong., Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, May 7 1996, quoted on www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/104/hr3396/summary#libraryofcongress.

⁴⁰ Marche (2017), chap. 2.

⁴¹ Ibid.

can be said that the centrality of same-sex marriage in public debates reinforces heteronormativity (i.e. following heterosexual family structures for the sake of blending in). However, some activist enterprises remained: the Task Force organized yearly “Creating Change Conference” to discuss community building and activist skills with the objective of “full freedom, justice, and equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in the United States”⁴², as well as its own Youth Leadership Training Program in 1993. If we look at the organizations’ budget, they reached an unprecedented peak in the nineties with \$40 million for the eleven largest groups combined in 1999. In contrast, the budget of the six largest religious antigay groups was \$404 million in the same year. These figures are representative of the importance of LGBTQ+ issues in the U.S. political lobbying at the time. The issues were strongly debated and illustrate the distinction between “effective rights” and “formal rights”⁴³: even though the community became increasingly visible, even though discriminations were slowly ruled illegal, in 2000 LGBTQ+ Americans did not benefit from “effective rights” yet, their legitimacy as citizens deserving equal rights was contested.

But the struggle continued and gradually, activists pushed for reform with the system of “legal federalism” which consists in obtaining rights at the state level first, and then state by state, reaching a national decision. This is how, in 2003, *Lawrence v. Texas* overruled the precedent *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186 (1986) as the Supreme Court invalidated the existing sodomy laws in the fourteen states that had not invalidated them.⁴⁴ *Obergefell V. Hodges*, 576 U.S., 644 (2015), was another example of legal federalism advancing LGBTQ+ rights, establishing the legality of homosexual marriage and granting full citizenship rights. These legal changes reflect societal changes (not the other way around): same-sex couples were increasingly seen as normal in the mind of the general population even though opposition still existed. As Guillaume Marche emphasizes, resorting to legal process comes second after collective actions to change social representations.⁴⁵ In the last two decades, the institutionalization of LGBTQ+ civil rights had two main corollaries: it was followed by a decline in collective action as well as a form of “pink capitalism”. Increasingly, communities focused on private matters and the associations lost members. The rainbow, once a militant symbol, turned into a mercantile symbol. The Castro, a historically gay neighborhood in San Francisco, was gentrified. The Castro which had been home to many LGBTQ+ people saw its

⁴²The Task Force, www.thetaskforce.org/get-trained/creating-change.html (Accessed 13 April 2020).

⁴³ Marche (2017), chap. 2.

⁴⁴ *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/539/558/ (Accessed 13 April 2020).

⁴⁵ Marche (2017), chap. 3.

rents increase, driving its more modest dwellers out of the neighborhood. The shopping facilities implanted there were turned into more refined and expensive ones. In addition, begging was made illegal in the area. Considering that the LGBTQ+ populations are statistically more precarious from a financial standpoint, the gentrification of the place is an illustration of the pervasive effect of capitalism on LGBTQ+ communities.⁴⁶ Actually, the communities became polarized between the assimilating, “good” gays and those who do not adapt to the capitalist market (whether consciously or at their expense).⁴⁷

In recent times, transgender individuals have replaced homosexual and bisexual Americans as the scapegoats of Conservatives: in 2018, Donald Trump tried to impose a ban on transgenders serving in the military. Although it was only temporary, the lesson to be drawn from these multiple examples is that changes of social representations predate legal changes; if LGBTQ+ communities want to secure their rights, activism should be pursued. What has been done can still be undone or circumvented. This is why knowing history can be inspirational for activist efforts.

2. Situating LGBTQ+ Research in the Historical Field

In the midst of University Press monographs or cowritten published works and with the multiplication of LGBTQ+ online magazines, *OutHistory.org*, an LGBTQ+ history website founded and written by scholars in LGBTQ+ history, has found new ways of distributing LGBTQ+ history using digital tools. Inscribing itself in the lineage of historiographical revisionism, it has operated a shift in the paradigms of LGBTQ+ studies. This methodological renewal has not been specific to LGBTQ+ history; in fact, it has been adopted by the humanities as a whole. Gabrielle M. Spiegel wrote about how this paradigmatic shift affected scholarship and endured several decades:

The principal impact of these cognate developments was felt more intensely in the period after World War II; after 1965, they assumed the name “linguistic turn” [...] and generalized to various disciplines throughout the seventies and after. [...] It is clear that it represented a massive change in our understanding of historical reality, the methods of research we deployed in seeking to recover the past.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Frank Newport, “In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%”, *Gallup*, news.gallup.com/poll/234863/estimate-lgbt-population-rises.aspx, May 22, 2018 (Accessed May 13, 2020).

⁴⁷ Marche (2017), chap. 3.

⁴⁸ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “The Task of the Historian”, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (Feb., 2009), p. 2

In the case of *OutHistory.org*, but also dating back to Jonathan Ned Katz's groundbreaking *Gay American History*, studying LGBTQ+ history could no longer be constrained to the history of ideas and representations, but instead it needed to delve into the lives of the individuals who carried these ideas in the streets.⁴⁹ The historical canon was reassessed and as a result, *OutHistory* research topics are less concerned with historical LGBTQ+ figures and more concerned with ordinary people's expressions of sexuality and gender. To assess this diversity, the website zooms in LGBTQ+ individuals' lives via a multiplication of oral histories, a method incorporated to scholarship following the aforementioned linguistic turn. The resort to oral history testifies to an effort to situate the social actors at the heart of the historic events they participated in. Moreover, this paradigmatic shift was accompanied by a syntagmatic shift: a renewal in the geography and in the chronology of sexual histories. Studies are no longer focused on urban life or key events but instead, the historians investigate the impacts that these more documented and radiant events had on individuals and smaller organizations and communities all around the United States and with regard to rural America as well. The website may not be exhaustive (it cannot, and it certainly would not wish to) but it can point out missing pieces of information or under-researched areas. By encouraging public participation in several forms and thus, a collective and heterogeneous writing of sexual histories, the historians make up both for the disdain of professionals towards amateurs as well as for the lack of historical sources. *OutHistory's* mission is not an isolated enterprise but rather an indicator of the remapping of social history both in goals and methods.

In order to understand the current practices that led to the creation of *OutHistory.org*, it is important to understand the roots of the history of sexualities: its former structures, the pioneers, the different paradigms. Moreover, in accordance with Critical Discourse Analysis, conceptual terms will be defined so as to circumscribe their scope. Stuart Hall's theories on cultural discourses will be helpful in understanding how scholarly knowledge circulates and how power over historical narratives is distributed. These preliminary analyses will guide us towards an assessment of the place of *OutHistory* in the knowledge continuum. The knowledge continuum is defined as such:

The Knowledge Continuum assesses the various elements that contribute to scholarly communication and seeks to provide a continuum of support services whereby the identification, absorption, utilization,

⁴⁹ Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (T.Y. Crowell, 1976).

and manipulation of existing knowledge merge with the organization, creation, and dissemination of new knowledge.⁵⁰

In this thesis, we contend that the knowledge continuum previously defined is not necessarily constrained to “scholarly publication” (understood as being beneficial to the Academy i.e. a limited number of accredited individuals) but is seen as beneficial to the American society as a whole. As such, it will be illuminating to dive into this continuum and extend its scope to the continuum of impact. It is true that *OutHistory* members conduct scholarly research, but it is also true that for the most parts, their works inside academia are intended to serve social interests and, have an impact on society. The continuum of impact, created by *Animating Democracy*, an American organization working towards societal change through the circulation of culture and the arts, takes knowledge as a starting point to reach “change that is lasting”⁵¹ (see diagram in Appendix 1). It may seem beside the point, but actually, the dissemination of LGBTQ+ history can be seen as a dissemination of cultural elements and both *Animating Democracy* and *OutHistory* are aiming at developing access to cultural and historical material in a quest for more democracy. It can be read on *OutHistory*’s homepage that the founders “believe that knowing this history can inspire and excite people, can rouse us to action, and can help us make a different future”. Here we also see that knowledge is the starting point to go all the way up to a lasting change in the form of a different future.

How is the continuum of impact displayed? Starting from KNOWLEDGE (“what people know: awareness, understanding) it goes to DISCOURSE (“how people communicate: dialogue, deliberation, media”) then to ATTITUDES (“what people think and feel: values, motivation, vision”), and through CAPACITY (“know how, resources: leadership, social capital, creative skills, civic engagement”), to foster ACTION (“what people do: participation, motivation”) to create new CONDITIONS (“change that is lasting: systems, access, equity, physical conditions”).⁵² If we applied this continuum of impact to *OutHistory* we would have scholarly knowledge on different areas of LGBTQ+ studies (like for instance Anne Balay who works on labor and working-class history or Jen Manion who is a specialist of Early America and incarceration.) Their knowledge is being communicated on the website which is free of access. Discourse has the ability to shake up some assumptions and

⁵⁰ Vassalo P., “The Knowledge Continuum - Organizing for Research and Scholarly Communication”, *NIST* (online), March 1999, www.nist.gov/publications/knowledge-continuum-organizing-research-and-scholarly-communication (Accessed 23 March 2020).

⁵¹ *Animating Democracy*, www.animatingdemocracy.org/continuum-impact-guide (Accessed 23 March 2020).

⁵² Ibid.

can in turn reshape the readers' attitude towards a given subject. For example, Anne Balay describes her work with blue-collar queer workers in the following words:

These people's stories also matter because they unsettle scholarly and popular assumptions about what it means to be queer. Out there in the mills, queers find routes to pleasure, identity, and meaning that shake up everything I thought I knew about danger and desire. These people's stories also matter because they unsettle scholarly and popular assumptions about what it means to be queer. Out there in the mills, queers find routes to pleasure, identity, and meaning that shake up everything I thought I knew about danger and desire.⁵³

In this statement, we see that first, by acquiring knowledge she shook up her own old assumptions. But also, by sharing her knowledge on *OutHistory* and in a published book, she brought nuance to the scholarship, she was able to tilt the focus of her peers and to raise the public's awareness. She did not forget to leave space for other similar initiatives and appealed to the reader's civic engagement :“If you know of any queers, t-girls, lesbians, or wild women who drive trucks, ask them to shoot me an email” in a hope to change conditions. When she recounts how she proceeded to obtain testimonies of these mill workers, she informs that she had difficulty in first finding volunteers to open up to her because “gay and lesbian steelworkers are hiding – they choose invisibility over harassment and possible dismissal”. If more and more people talked, they could gather their strength to be “out” in their workplace and if more and more people had access to the bits of knowledge Balay wrote and shared, somehow the opinions about LGBTQ+ people could change and the steel mills would no longer be hostile work environment towards queer workers. Thus, lasting change would be attained through the continuum of impact.

This vision of *OutHistory.org* as an instrument for social change is connected to the historiographical trend to which it belongs. The founder of the website, Jonathan Ned Katz, created it with the intent to “reflect the importance of history from below to the civil rights and liberation movements of the 1960s”⁵⁴ By this statement, Katz means that the website is rooted in social change, political action, material living conditions and against the grain of consensual narratives. Indeed, LGBTQ+ history developed with the rise of the bottom-up approach which can be described as follows: “Scholarship that attempts to explain the experiences or perspectives of ordinary people, as opposed to elites or leaders”.⁵⁵ It originated with the emergence of cultural history, a branch based on social history – itself a branch of historical research – which appeared in the 1960s in parallel to social movements

⁵³ Anne Balay, outhistory.org/exhibits/show/balay/intro (Accessed 23 March 2020).

⁵⁴ *OutHistory.org*, “About”, <http://outhistory.org/about-outhistory>, par. 2. (Accessed 23 March 2020).

⁵⁵ Chris Endy, “Bottom-Up Approach”, *Glossary of Historiographic Terms*, Department of History, California State University (Los Angeles, January 2015).

that penetrated American campuses and influenced scholarships. Social history merged the interests of sociology which “forms types-concepts and searches for general rules to explain events” and the interests of history “which deals with the analysis of causes and the evaluation of individual, culturally significant actions, schemes and personalities”.⁵⁶ In order for LGBTQ+ history to emerge, there needed to be a grouping of individuals constituting a type of people in society. This happened on relatively great scale during the 1950s with the creation of homophile organizations. As a corollary, the type thus constituted began sharing a distinctive culture worthy of historical research. Cultural history, or new cultural history (as opposed to classic cultural history as practiced between 1800 and 1950 and interested in the “masterpieces”),⁵⁷ can be defined as

Represent[ing] a more thoroughgoing application of anthropological understandings of cultural life, but it does so in a reflexive manner that problematizes the writing of history itself. Indeed, it calls into question at once the subject and the object of knowledge by asserting how deeply mediated all human life is by signifying systems that vary both from society to society and differ even within societies.⁵⁸

Indeed, cultural history is attached to the study of people’s intimacy and everyday life, relying on sources from everyday life like family photographs, clothes, bar coasters or advertising flyers for community events. These practices of history aim at completing the existing historical narratives with new social actors and new perspectives in order to provide new accounts of the lives of Americans.⁵⁹ They help understanding how they lived, loved, entertained themselves in the economic, social and political contexts while taking into account their position in the different strata of the American society. Cultural history can be considered as an answer to the void left by historical narratives using the top-down approach. Cultural history is accompanied by the study of representations: it is a quest for the meaning of these fragments of lives. What meaning did different people ascribed to them? How were they perceived by society at a given time in history? We align our understanding of the study of representations with Stuart Hall’s:

Representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning. Already, this definition carries the important premise that things – objects, people, events in the world – do not have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning. It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make

⁵⁶ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (University of California Press, 1922).

⁵⁷ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History* (Polity, 2004).

⁵⁸ Christopher E. Forth, “Cultural History and New Cultural History”, *Encyclopedia.com*, www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/cultural-history-and-new-cultural-history (Accessed 24 April 2020).

⁵⁹ “Cultural History”, history.yale.edu/undergraduate/regions-and-pathways/cultural-history (Accessed 24 April 2020).

things mean, who signify. Meanings, consequently, will always change, from one culture or period to another.⁶⁰

Oral history bridges the gap between the historians' interpretations of events and the meaning people ascribed them when they happened or in retrospect. Oral history is at the core of *OutHistory*'s project: this methodological approach consists in conducting interviews of people in order to learn more about their individuality, their relations to society, their feelings on several events that happened in their lives. The interviewees' accounts communicate their views of the events they were part of as well as the meaning they took out of them, but often they also incorporate the meaning they ascribe to the events *a posteriori*. The interviews offer people's reactions to the decisions taken by institutions and thus, by giving them a voice, oral history brings to the fore a richer and a more complex character than the sole history written along a top-down approach (this approach being interested in the events happening within the decisional instances). It is important to bear in mind that oral history is a "movement which began outside the universities and whose most significant contributions continue to be made extra-murally".⁶¹ *OutHistory.org* is also situated both within and outside of the academic world with the intent to circulate knowledge but also to bring forward the idea that knowledge is not circumscribed to books and tuition fees. The historian John D'Emilio highlighted that "given the paucity of any existing historical or sociological writing about the movement, the interviews helped me make sense of the documentary sources to which I did gain access".⁶² Instead, historical scholarship is dependent upon the people who experienced the period. By resorting to oral history to illustrate the various topics they present, *OutHistory* researchers incorporate a more personal dimension to the traditional study of documents and in parallel to their interpretations of the events, they feature the interpretations that the very participants of these events have formulated. John D'Emilio says that they are a precious source of information to understand other historical sources: they enable the LGBTQ+ readers/listeners to relate to the interviewees through a different, more intimate versions of the past. Moreover, they are an opportunity to understand what were the pros and cons in the various ways of organizing, surviving, coming together, celebrating, commemorating,

⁶⁰ Stuart Hall, *Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Sage, 1997), p.62.

⁶¹ "Oral History." *History Workshop*, no. 8, 1979, pp. i-iii. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4288255 (Accessed 14 February 2020).

⁶² John d'Emilio, "Oral Histories", *OutHistory.org*, outhistory.org/exhibits/show/john-d-emilio--oral-histories/intro, par. 1. (Accessed 3 January, 2020).

etc. Oral history and academic scholarship are symbiotic when the scholarship written is rendered to those who lived history: it is a process of co-construction of histories.

Jeffrey Weeks wrote *What is Sexual History?* (2016). His monograph on the subject retraces (although not on purpose) some of the ancestors of *OutHistory.org*, our case study. It is useful in understanding the historical context in which *OutHistory.org* was produced and in situating it within the discipline. Weeks's survey testifies to the changes that happened in the field, thus providing a justification for our thesis. Because *OutHistory* can be regarded as a place where the history of sexualities is presented, it seems relevant to start its analysis back where its members began writing on this subject, thus, to start the analysis in the 70s. It is important to bear in mind that the social movements that happened in favor of LGBTQ+ rights were the starting point of the writing of LGBTQ+ history: the Stonewall riots were the culminating points of years of organizing to have safe places for LGBTQ+ people in the USA, and these major events, in parallel to the Civil Rights Movements for African-Americans, triggered a will to mobilize among historians across American campuses. As Weeks's study reveals, the history of homosexuality emerged through the study of the birth of the homophile movements which served as models for social and political organizing and identity building.⁶³ LGBTQ+ history has always been deeply rooted in political organizing and as such, it must have been carried out by politically sensitive or even motivated historians who had to study the voices of the queer activists. The stated goal was to attain sexual justice through analysis and scientific knowledge.⁶⁴ From the study of political organizing, the field of study turned increasingly to forms of community-based knowledge. Different and closer links began to form between professional historians and archivists especially around the notion of memory. Weeks writes:

La mémoire est un élément critique dans les pratiques de la communauté, elle est créée et nourrie d'une part grâce à l'établissement d'archives sur la sexualité et d'autre part, car elle offre la possibilité de s'exprimer à celles et ceux qui étaient privé.e.s de leur droit de parole dans le passé.⁶⁵

It is in the notion of memory that we find the link with oral history: the study of what was happening in the street and within the organizations was not sufficient anymore. Paving the way for future LGBTQ+ liberation triggered a retrospective recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals' past. Oral history allowed historians to work through

⁶³ Jeffrey Weeks, *What is Sexual History?* (Polity Press, 2016).

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Ibid

the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*), the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*), the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*) and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).⁶⁶

It is important to note that the ambition to fill the voids in the archives is not exempt from bias nor from “bundle of silences” as Michel-Rolph Trouillot puts it.⁶⁷

Furthermore, *OutHistory* is an attempt to conciliate academic research and democratic circulation of LGBTQ+ history. Other works exist with the same objective in mind: Vicki L. Eaklor, Professor of History has written numerous books and articles about the history of LGBTQ+ people in the United States. Particularly, she wrote *Queer America: a GLBT history of the 20th Century*. It was originally published in 2008 and was published again in 2011 by the *New Press* in the People’s History series created by Howard Zinn. The chapters are organized in chronological order. She begins her historical presentation with the medical treatment of homosexuals in the nineteenth century to explore the roots of homophobia before going down the American history road and its typical landmarks: the Jazz Age and the tradition of masquerade balls in New York during the Prohibition era where gay men, lesbian women and other non-normative individuals met, practiced cross-dressing and engaged in homo and bisexual relationships. Then, WWII and the prolonged same-sex contacts due to the division of labor made it possible to build communities and to organize around common grounds: the context was favorable to the creation of homophile movements. Organizations and groups worked towards community building and political organizing. Their growing visibility as well as the paranoia of the U.S. government during the Cold War (called the “Lavender Scare”) triggered persecutions against gay people suspected of complicity with the communist regime. The ‘era of consensus’ was also troubled by the publication of the Kinsey reports which revealed that Americans who engaged in same-sex relationships were not as rare as the general population thought they were.⁶⁸ It became crucial to acknowledge their existence and to take them into consideration. The 1960s were a time of political upheaval in the nation, most notably with the Civil Rights Movement. Lesbians and Gays also engaged in struggles for their rights and their actions culminated in the Stonewall Inn riots in 1969. Eaklor then insists on the academic efforts to integrate studies on homosexuality in universities but also their correlation with feminist research and feminist organizing. In the political sphere, the

⁶⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1997).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948 and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953.

Democratic party began to endorse the cause and legal reforms began to be discussed. Then came the 80s and the communities faced a harsh backlash. In his 1980 campaign trail, Ronald Reagan stated that: “[the gay movement] isn’t just asking for civil rights; it’s asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I”.⁶⁹ The gay population also suffered massively from “The Challenge of AIDS” (p. 74), a word that Reagan himself had reservation uttering⁷⁰. But organizing continued and an LGBTQ+ culture began to spread into the “mainstream” through the media. In the last chapters, Eaklor presents the challenges of the 1990s and the 2000s, characterized by both legal and institutional achievements like the marriage laws but it also brought new political debates within the communities. At the beginning of each chapter, the author presents a public figure that shaped the history of the LGBTQ+ world and at the end of each chapter, the history professor incorporates related debates and presents the discussions that divide scholarship like the opposition to constructivism and essentialism, or the positions for or against the legalization of same-sex marriage. Overall, the book was written to be accessible to the general public but researched enough to be used to teach a class about LGBTQ+ history. Her work was well received by her peers who wrote reviews about it. In addition, “quoting poet Judy Grahn, she promises to write of “people simply living their lives ‘the best they knew how’”⁷¹. This promise echoes *OutHistory*’s approach. When the contributors announce on the website’s homepage that *OutHistory* “uncover[s] histories of same-gender love and of gender crossing in the recent and distant past” what is to be understood is that the histories featured on the website are about ‘common’ people engaging in LGBTQ+ lifestyles (or not in the case of closeted people for example). However, this review of the LGBTQ+ history illustrates the approaches to the field and their differences in terms of authorship and authoritative power over the narrative, in terms of scope, in terms of chronology, in terms of medium and in terms of equality of access.

3. Writing LGBTQ+ History out of the Academic Circuit

⁶⁹ Robert Sheer,

Playing President: My Close Encounters with Nixon, Carter, Bush I, Reagan, and Clinton—and How They Did Not Prepare Me for George W. Bush (Akashic Books, 2006).

⁷⁰ Maria L La Ganga,

“The first lady who looked away: Nancy and the Reagans' troubling Aids legacy”, *The Guardian* (online), 11 May 2016, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/11/nancy-ronald-reagan-aids-crisis-first-lady-legacy (Accessed 23 March 2020).

⁷¹ Michael Boucai, “Vicki Eaklor, A People's GLBT History of the United States.” *Journal of Social History* (2014): n. pag. Print.

OutHistory's ancestor is Jonathan Ned Katz's *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* It is important to note that Katz was an independent scholar: he conducted his research out of a strong need to get an appraisal of the lives of non-heterosexual people in the USA, being a gay man himself. His book was published in 1976 to coincide with the bicentennial of the nation: the symbolical value of the date seeks to bring forward the American character and the sense of belonging of LGBTQ+ individuals. This pioneer book traces some historical events back to the 1500s. His writing is founded around the importance of documentary evidence and is rooted in a constructivist approach. The turn from *Gay American History* to *OutHistory.org* is due to several factors: Jonathan Ned Katz's conception of LGBTQ+ history was broader than a single man's published book. In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, LGBTQ+ historians already felt the need to transmit their knowledge to gay audiences. Allan Bérubé, an American historian and independent scholar, went on a national tour to present slide shows that he had devised and "powerfully drew community audiences to gay history".⁷² After him, other researchers, inspired by Bérubé's work, started their own presentations oriented towards community gatherings in a spirit of sharing pieces of a common history to develop personal histories. It was not rare that people attending the presentations offered their personal histories to the scholars in return for the time they had taken to educate and reassure their community. Some presentations even "helped bringing some older Chicagoans out of the closet".⁷³ As the link between scholars and the communities was established, there still needed cooperation between researchers from different localities across the country with varied research interests in terms of topics, geographic areas and time periods. What facilitated the enterprise was the advancement of digital technology:

When the Internet became part of the everyday life of millions – even billions – of people in the 21st century, Katz understood that the work of archiving, establishing LGBTQ chronologies, and highlighting new discoveries begun in *Gay American History* should continue on a digital platform.⁷⁴

The idea of curating and presenting a wide scope of LGBTQ+ history in a place that would be accessible from anyone, anywhere given that there was an internet connection seemed the most democratic of media.

⁷² Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011).

⁷³ Bérubé, 2011, p.15.

⁷⁴ *OutHistory.org*, "About", outhistory.org/about-outhistory (Accessed 23 March, 2020).

Publishing on the web also presents the advantage of being immediate and of reducing costs for both writers and readers. *OutHistory* presents numerous excerpts of previously published content written by Katz, D’Emilio, Esther Newton and several other historians. By publishing extracts of monographs or essays on the web, their authors allow the circulation of their expertise for free to anyone wishing and able to read them instead of selling off their work to people who have some buying power (John D’Emilio’s historical monographs published by university press can be purchased for around \$50, collective works rather cost around \$100-150.) Publishing for free on the web thus enables the potential readers easier, more democratic access to historical research, but it is also a political stand: it reveals a wish to circumvent the universities’ ‘publish or perish’ orientation. The enterprise can be deemed selfless: the authors agree to renounce any financial gain on their work. But at the same time, since many of the articles published on *OutHistory.org* and written by scholars have previously been published by university presses, it means that they benefit from their status. Their relative financial ease enables their enterprise to exist. At the same time, cooperation and collaboration in LGBTQ+ studies help democratizing this area of research. Just as “unity makes strength”, creating a community of researchers allows more legitimacy at the level of the universities and facilitates the process of having one’s research reviewed by peers. Since publishing in the academic circuit is fundamental for getting a tenure position and that publications are submitted to the process of peer review, cooperation between LGBTQ+ researchers is indeed a way for them to have their LGBTQ+ scholarship recognized as much as it is a way to access positions which grant financial stability. This is a major issue for LGBTQ+ people since data show that they are more prone to precarious living than the overall American population.⁷⁵ But attaining high professional positions on an individual level is not the final objective of *OutHistory* editors. Instead, they tend to think that the quality of their research should be oriented towards the recognition of community work and research and the valorization of such programs within universities. As an independent scholar, Jonathan Ned Katz had to find financing from private organizations and to find historians ready to work for free, which he succeeded in doing. On the older version of the website, which is still accessible to the public, one can even find the letters he wrote to funding companies in order to make his “dream site” a reality.

⁷⁵ *The Williams Institute*, “LGBT Demographic Data Interactive”, *UCLA School of Law*, Los Angeles, CA, January 2019, williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/lgbt-stats/?topic=LGBT#about-the-data (Accessed March 12 2020).

Digital publication using an open-source format like *Wikipedia*'s presents the advantage of having users comment on the work that is posted on the platform. It means that the website was conceived with the interests of users, with the objective of creating bonds with the community as well as creating quality scholarship. It creates a safe space on the web to find support and even though it is not submitted to the process of peer review, it is a medium to engage with the past stories of one's LGBTQ+ peers. In 2010, the *OutHistory* team even organized a contest: "Since Stonewall Local Histories Contest". The objective was to involve people into the life of their community to try and retrieve all materials related to LGBTQ+ lives in their area and to curate an exhibit on the LGBTQ+ history in their localities. This community project which could be led from everywhere in the United States offered a financial prize of \$5.000 for the winner and \$1000 for the second to fifth best exhibits. In addition to featuring them on the website, the exhibits served both to inform and to inspire teachers to use them as support to present their local LGBTQ+ lives. It is important for the *OutHistory* team to remind people that gay history is not limited to the Stonewall riots and also exists out of the well-known "gay areas" such as San Francisco and the Castro or New York gay bars from the 40s. Some of the participants were teachers, professors, historians (members of the Academia) but also directors of community centers, people working in museums or members of professional LGBTQ+ associations. Amidst the winners, the only contestant that was not directly a member of an historical association was Meghan Rohrer, the first openly transgender Lutheran Pastor. She was supported by the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society. What this brief demographic overview of the contestants shows is the cooperation between the different organizations and individuals all working towards improvements of the living conditions of LGBTQ+ people and better cultural and historical representations of the community.

At the same time, it is revealing of a lack of participation from people outside of associative or institutional frameworks. This last point is an illustration of the replication of the offline distribution of power when it comes to knowledge. The implications of this will be discussed in the third part of this thesis as they evoke some of the website's limitations. In any case, the contest allowed LGBTQ+ scholars and the community to connect, it facilitated contact between the different organizations, associations and museums, and in this way it developed the discussion outside the 'ivory tower' that is the academia. By doing so, the website encourages dialogues between the different actors involved in the pursuit of the historical past and offers a nuanced, diversified content but

also new ways of making history. As said in the previous subpart, creating links between the different LGBTQ+ oriented entities helps strengthening the commitment to the political struggles in the streets, the courthouses, and in the minds of Americans, thus being a part of the impact continuum.

As already said, *OutHistory* gives an important place to oral history projects. Oral histories are a form of what can be called personal history. ‘Personal history’ refers to the history of individuals as it is done in autobiographies and memoirs. This approach can be of public interest for a person cannot be separated from the context he or she lived in. Here, the aim of studying the personal histories of the website’s collaborators is to understand the elements that pushed them to engage in a committed writing of history. How did the researchers working for *OutHistory.org* position themselves within the field of LGBTQ+ studies: did it correspond to the general trends? How did it dawn on the *OutHistory* team to write on sexuality? In order to get a better understanding of their motives and the path that led them to the creation of the website, we created a questionnaire that interrogates the relations between their personal history and their practice of academic history. As all the collaborators are part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum, the idea is to understand the links between the LGBTQ+ history as it was lived by the protagonists and how it was written about. Our hypothesis is that, because *OutHistory.org* contributors are directly concerned by the history they study, the approaches they use are more radical in relation to their position within the historiography. By radical, we mean that they aim at sparking outrage in their readers’ minds, effects that could create change in depth (through direct action for example). As Howard Zinn put it when writing about Black Studies, they “do not pretend to just introduce another subject for academic inquiry. They have the specific intention of so affecting the consciousness of black and white people in this country as to diminish for both groups the pervasive American belief in black inferiority.”⁷⁶ We think that the same agenda motivated *OutHistory.org* contributors when they chose to pursue a career in the academy in LGBTQ+ studies and then when they launched the website. Moreover, the questionnaire was also addressed to *OutHistory.org* readers. It was published on the eponymous *Facebook* group but only two individuals returned it completed. Addressing the readers is a way of understanding how the public relates to the history of their peers. As far as the contributors were concerned, they were directly sent the questions in emails but only Professor Marc

⁷⁶ Howard Zinn, “What is Radical History?”, [historyisaweapon.com, www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinnwhatisradicalhistory.html](http://historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinnwhatisradicalhistory.html), (Accessed 23 November 2020).

Stein responded. The questionnaire was originally 54-question long and that may have deterred participation. Marc Stein's version had been reduced to seventeen questions. In his answers, he says that he has always been out in his working environments and that he always sought to pursue a career in LGBTQ+ history writing but that his activism was triggered by "the rise of the New Right and the politics of the Reagan/Bush eras". Some answers regarding the contributors' political stance in history writing could be found in their work, in interviews or in opinion pieces. For example, Elly Bulkin includes a brief presentation of her political stance in her article: "As a Jewish lesbian myself, a radical, a writer of articles on lesbian literature, anti-Semitism, and racism."⁷⁷ What seems to be a common point is that the inclination the writers feel for history seems to stem from what they conceive to be their identity (sexual orientation, origins, etc.) while their activism seems to be secondary, contingent upon political triggers.

Besides, John D'Emilio, in his article "Capitalism and Gay Identity", affirms the need to anchor political positions in LGBTQ+ history, to de-individualize life experiences and to confront them to the experience with society and institutions, especially to the impact of capitalism on gay life and LGBTQ+ movements. At the same time, he offers a new reading of gay identity at odds with many slogans used by the gay community to justify the legitimacy of their demands: he proposes that gay behavior has been existing forever but that a gay identity had to wait until the 1950s and the strong affirmation of "the nuclear family" as a core American value to develop. We see that this de-individualization stance serves political goals rather than scientific ones. Indeed, he himself conducted a great number of individual oral histories. The reflection he follows in his essay corresponds to his specific needs. In the pursuit of different goals, the multiplications of testimonies are instrumental in understanding the variety of experiences and the fact that every experience testifies to a different need for change. For example, minorities have often sought visibility, whether cultural (on TV, in fiction) or political (on the political agenda, in political position), as visibility gradually permeates the mind of the nation and becomes normalized. However, there are intermediate steps that can be harmful for people. For instance, the number of acts of violence committed towards transgender individuals is alarmingly high and sometimes, transparency can be better than visibility. In any case, sharing personal

⁷⁷Elly Bulkin, "Jews, Blacks, and Lesbian Teens in the 1940s: Jo Sinclair's *The Changelings* and "The Long Moment"", *OutHistory.org*, <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/bulkin/part-1> (Accessed 7 December 2019).

history, especially online, can be a way for the interviewee as for the readers to create a common safe ground around the meaning of their identity.

In conclusion, facts, events, but also scholarship are all submitted to interpretation and are always tinged with personal or political bias. History, contrary to what is commonly thought of, cannot escape doubt or bias—it cannot be objective. First, there is a difference between the facts and the interpretation that is drawn from them. Second, as events follow their course, history is the written representation of them and the process of writing involves choice, and choice involves emphasis and exclusion. These choices can be fortuitous or motivated by the personal bias of the historian. This bias is not necessarily a bad thing or a will to distort the facts, it is principally linked to the historians' own inclinations to some subjects over some others: it can never be complete. Radicality is always relative: it is linked to the context in which it appears since it seeks out change. In a piece featured on *OutHistory.org*, Joan Nestle, the creator and curator of the Lesbian Herstory Archives writes that “Radical lesbian feminism is a challenge to do things differently [...] A people must experience their own history in such a way as to change history.” Her statement stresses two characteristics of radicality: it is political, and it must carry a transformational power. It is interesting to note that her statement was a reaction to Jim Monahan's words about what ought and ought not to be done in the realm of LGBTQ+ archives. This stresses the notion of relativity at play in radicality: a position can be radical only if it exists in front of a commonly accepted (or tolerated) stance. If the radical stance becomes the commonly accepted idea it is not radical anymore. This last point will be dealt with more deeply in the third part of this thesis.

This first part has demonstrated the necessity for the LGBTQ+ minority to be heard. By organizing, by protesting, by coming together, US LGBTQ+ individuals obtained political rights through collective action, thanks to acts of resistance and even acts of violence sometimes. LGBTQ+ history was instrumental in carrying their cause beyond the streets, beyond court, beyond police precincts. Researchers in LGBTQ+ history were also part of these political victories and the rehabilitation of LGBTQ+ people in society. The historians' work goes beyond University Presses (when they make it this far) and this is what we deal with in the second part of this thesis: the missions of LGBTQ+ history writers.

II. **OutHistory: Historians with a Mission**

The word “history” is used to refer to past events, their writing, their study and their interpretation. As such, “there may be many histories, (i.e. multiple interpretations of the past), but there is only one past.”¹

The historians’ task consists in retrieving sources about events and in methodically interpreting these sources to write a narrative of those events. The parts of history we are interested in are those which are meant to be publicly disseminated, particularly in written formats. Also, we wish to focus on histories which take the USA and Americans as subject matter, so as to relate the history encoders ((public) historians) and the history decoders (the American people). The dissemination of history can take several forms: University Press books, articles in academic journals, companion books to museum exhibitions, specialized, independent press articles, documentaries made for television, school curricula. They are all written by historians, but their audience, their range and their accessibility differ from the more specialized and specific to the more general and accessible.

Usually, the more accessible an historical narrative is, the more likely to spark controversy it is. It is so because some events have been and still are heavily researched and this abundance of scholarship on the same topic can lead to differing interpretations which stem from different historiographical currents. This is the case for historical scholarship on the Civil War for instance, and the results of these various interpretations added to their dissemination can polarize the American audience. Public sites of history tend to maintain consensus on such issues, as far as possible, so as not to antagonize parts of the audience. Indeed, the more a narrative is disseminated, the more popularly accepted it is. As Bernard Bailyn wrote, “the sense [people] make of the history of their national origins helps to define for us [...] the values, purposes, acceptable characteristics of our political institutions and cultural life”.² On the contrary, counter-narratives encounter more resistance when it comes to being popularly known, and thus they are more likely to spark public debates and controversy, especially when they deal with the American ‘heroes’ and institutions. For

¹ Gelien Matthews, “History- A Worthwhile Academic Discipline”, *History in Action*, Vol. 2 No. 2, (September 2011).

² Bernard Bailyn, “The Central Themes of the American Revolution: an Interpretation”, *Essays on the American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 1973, pp. 3-33).

example, Newt Gingrich, a Republican politician who has been Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, “h[eld] historical revisionism of the last decades as a “calculated effort” to discredit the way Americans had been taught history”. His views are a reflection of a more widespread opposition to other historical narratives and these differences of opinion polarize American society.³ As a result, some events are not as publicly disseminated as others.

Which histories are acceptable for dissemination change according to the place and time in which they are introduced. For example, Turner’s Frontier thesis taking westward expansion as revealing the true nature of the nation endured decade after decade but in the 1970s, it was revised by scholars like Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard Slotkin among others. American exceptionalism woven into Turner’s narrative was replaced by a more nuanced historiography of the same period and termed New Western History. But this historiographic shift failed to permeate American society. Besides, it is usually academic history that provides a basis for public history, scholarship trickling down and being caught and pursued by public, private and independent organisms such as media companies, museum curators or textbooks editors. The American public thus benefit from many sources from which to be impregnated with their nation’s history. The frequency to which they are exposed to a given narrative generates a kind of popular historical narrative comprising a condensed version of the history that has come to them. Thus, for Americans, “the content of the textbook and popular history magazine narratives can be regarded as subordinated to how [they] interpret their content”.⁴

This is why it is important to go back and forth between which elements of a historical event are encoded and which are decoded. Going beyond consensus about what is accepted as belonging to US history broadens the possibilities for varying interpretations but runs the risk of being rejected by the decoders who do not have the same conception of what belongs in “US history”. By expanding the American historical canon, “new” history subject matters carry a transformational power at the scale of society because history influences our perception about ourselves and about others. History goes beyond pure knowledge about

³ Gary Nash, “The History Standards Controversy and Social History”, *Journal of Social History*, 29 (1995), p. 41. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3789065 (Accessed August 30 2020).

⁴ Robert Thorp, “Uses of History in History Education”, *Print and Media* (Umeå University & Dalarna University, 2016).

events (what is termed ‘content knowledge’). In terms of cognitive process, it engages with identity construction and one’s conception of their cultural environment.⁵

The power of history resides beyond mere individual enlightenment. Indeed, the academic field of history is closely linked to politics and social movements. At numerous points in the process of conducting historical research, socio-political concerns intervene. First, the task of historians consists in deriving meaning from documents by focusing on issues like authorship, address, objective. By doing so, they can highlight the power structures at play in those documents. Then, the choice of a subject on which to conduct historical research is not trivial: it carries political weight. Indeed, one question underpins the election of a research subject and frame: “Whose voice am I going to decipher and amplify?” The next step in the process entails authorization and capacity: the possibility to conduct academic research is in part determined by the funding of one’s research project — unless they can fund it themselves. It means that there are several instances in charge of deciding whose voices are to be heard, and for various reasons, not all voices are equal nor equally funded.

This explains why the first historians in sexualities were radical in their enterprise: they undertook projects which could contrast with what was expected from them. It can be taboo to discuss sexuality in history, especially regarding sexual practices which differ from the heteronormative norm. Also, scholars exposed themselves and their sexuality was questioned as well as their respectability. Research on sexual practices in the USA began to be heard on a large scale when the *Kinsey Reports* were published in the 1950s. However, at that time, the studies were not well received by governmental institutions because they presented results that diverged from the moral standards of the era, a period when it was important for the US Government to orient its citizens towards heteronormative family values in the post-WWII context. These studies and the issues they address are polarizing, with some considering them great discoveries while others regard them as deviant and dangerous. There were even some statements that demanded censorship on sexuality studies.⁶ Gradually, the issue of (non-conforming) sexuality became an increasingly discussed topic, which led it to be more and more academically researched but also publicly debated. The controversy associated with discussing sexuality made the subject worth investigating for some people but also worth keeping silent for others. That is to say,

⁵ Thorp, 2016.

⁶ “Kinsey Reports Criticised from Religious and Moral Points of View”, *New York Times*, April 1, 1948, 50:1.

conducting research on sexuality equated working counter-current: taking a radical stance to challenge the institutions and the general public.

Thus, *OutHistory.org*, because it is dedicated to presenting historical material about LGBTQ+ people's history in the USA, carries this transformational power. Knowing this part of American history, which is often marginalized both in historical and sociocultural realms, can comfort or enlighten people and incite them to take action towards recognition of LGBTQ+ people's existences as well as their rights. With the important place granted to oral history on the website, this example of an enterprise merging academic and public history aims at creating a space for the voices of the actors of this history to be heard, in a context where and when the opportunity to speak is often confiscated by American institutions.⁷ LGBTQ+ Americans' personal histories are eclipsed by their more famous peers' narratives. How does this polymorphous project connect the American institutions and the LGBTQ+ community?

1. *OutHistory* and Education

Sexual history became a field of studies in universities in the 70s when in "July 1970, the University of Nebraska approve[d] Prof. Louis Compton's homophile studies course".⁸ The course originated from the social movements in favor of equal rights for non-heterosexual people. After years of secrecy and shame, many queer Americans assembled and organized against discrimination and to obtain equal rights. There is a strong link between LGBTQ+ issues and educational contexts: universities were a place of protest and of liberation. For instance, the massive Free Speech movement was a reaction against a "ban on on-campus political activities"⁹ said to have originated from pressure from right-wing groups on Chancellor Strong.¹⁰ This set a precedent for collective action advocating for civil rights. Students positioned themselves as American citizens, a role which allowed them to

⁷ By institutions, we mean, among others, the fields of government which restrain, voluntarily or not, LGBTQ+ acceptance like the military (DADT, the scarcity of LGBTQ+ material in libraries and archives), even though this is changing.

⁸ Thomas Kraemer, "Corvallis, Oregon State University Gay Activism 1969-2004", *OutHistory.org*, <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/corvallis/timeline> (Accessed 10 July 2020).

⁹ Calisphere, "The Free Speech Movement", *University of California*, 2005.

¹⁰ Free Speech Movement, "The Administration: Bungling Friend or Deliberate Enemy?", *Online Archive of California*, 2009 (1964), oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt1h4n9804/?brand=oac4 (Accessed 10 July 2020).

demand change in a setting prone to discussions, to the confrontation of ideas and where they could find strength and echo in their number.

However, at the time, civil rights for LGBTQ+ were not really on the agenda. Indeed, universities, in addition to being places of learning, are also places of socialization. Typically, university students are at a time in their life when they are forming their identity as young adults. LGBTQ+ students, notably, have found necessary to reach out to their peers. The first gay students' group was created in 1967 at Columbia University. In this group, originally called the Columbia Student Homophile League, students who sought out contacts with people who they could relate to could find meeting places where they would be understood but also where they could find people like them to engage in intimate relations in an environment not necessarily welcoming of LGBTQ+ people. This new promiscuous sociability gave rise to LGBTQ+ communities on American campuses. In turn, the academic setting provided the infrastructure to start research on topics related to sexualities at a crossroads between academic ambitions and answers to identity-related questions.¹¹ The birth of academic research on the history of sexuality thus comes from the concrete social experience of being marginalized for being sexually different and from a will to act on this social position.

This process reflects a bottom-up approach: the academic agenda was renewed by a coalition of students wanting to investigate their place in society through the study of queerness in the United States. The corollary is that by publishing their findings, they had the potential to increase visibility of LGBTQ+-related material and problematics, and thus to cast light on the failing of the system to recognize them as American citizens with equal rights. This is why LGBTQ+ history belongs in the branch of social history which, according to historian Raphael Samuel “touches on, and arguably helps to focus, major issues of public debate”. Besides, Samuel also indicates that “social history does not only reflect public interest, it also prefigures and perhaps helps to create it”, whence one of the missions of historians being to transmit their knowledge to as vast audiences as possible.

Yet, universities are also a place of exclusion. With their high fees, they tend to exclude those who cannot afford them, those who are already marginalized, and tend to be a microcosm of social inequalities. At Oregon State University, ex-gay groups (groups of students who had

¹¹ *Columbia University Archives*, www.columbia.edu/cu/web/archival/collections/ldpd_6228537/ (Accessed 10 July 2020).

been “cured” of their homosexuality) actually predated gay groups on campus.¹² In 1969, the University of Minnesota recognized the F.R.E.E. (Fight Repression of Erotic Expression) student club. In reaction, the Board of Regents modified the club’s recognition policy. There is an ambivalence between the ideals of freedom of speech and of thought purported in these places of knowledge, and the looming repression when freedom is exercised in a way which challenges the dominant frames of thought. John D’Emilio, ex co-director of *OutHistory.org* and professional historian, a scholar and an activist, was part of one of the first university student clubs for queers in the academia. D’Emilio, was one of the founders of the Gay Academic Union and later wrote that at the time, the GAU “served as an invaluable networking and support function at a time when most university faculty, graduate students, and staff were still in the closet and very little non-homophobic research was being done.” The clubs exceeded student organizing, they had members from every strata of the university’s structure. Supported and inspired by the wave of progressivism and social movements across the United States, gay people in universities in the whole nation participated in the academic liberation from violently repressed homophobia. They stated that they chose to “do this collectively because [they] know that no individual, alone, can liberate herself or himself from society’s oppression”.¹³

Progressively and valiantly, LGBTQ+ students and faculty conjointly undertook research on their history, inside and outside the classroom. In parallel, some were conscious that they themselves were making history.¹⁴ Conversely, LGBTQ+ scholarship got interested in writing the history of campuses as places of resistance. A great number of articles published on *OutHistory.org* deal with LGBTQ+-related events in American colleges and universities, thus bringing forth these events as turning points in LGBTQ+ history. Despite the website’s focus on time, these articles are really anchored in the geographical context of the LGBTQ+ history of campuses. Then, a thematic search allows for a comparison of the accounts of the various experiences at the local, state and national scales. Indeed, different researchers from different localities in the United States became interested in these particular spaces which were home to the development of their subject-matter and which served as a platform in the struggle for civil rights. Since many articles on these topics were published on *OutHistory.org*, we could contend that the website, in

¹² Kraemer, “Timeline”.

¹³ Gay Academic Union, “Statement of Purpose”, *The Universities and the Gay Experience* (New York City, 1974).

¹⁴ John, D’Emilio, “The Gay Academic Union: The Proceedings of Its First National Conference, 1973, New York City”, *OutHistory.org*, 22 April 2016, outhistory.org/exhibits/show/gau-conference/intro (Accessed 27 July 2020).

addition to being a converging place for getting informed on sexuality history, is also a springboard for students and researchers to pursue academic works which would fill the remaining void in the field. As such, it serves both the academic readers and the website itself which still aims at furthering its initial purpose, i.e. “to free this history from obscurity”.¹⁵

Parallel to *OutHistory.org*, some members have devised a course called “Queering the Web”. It is an academic course meant to dive into the specificities of queer web content. This is demonstrative of the place of the web in ‘queer culture’ (gender non-conforming aesthetics, idioms, concerns) but also testifies to the need to adapt digital tools so that they can be easily identified. This course, addressed to students at New York University, provides the technological and theoretical means to adapt the digital medium to its content, to reflect the problematics at play in LGBTQ+ people’s lives on websites. Thus, it can lead students to create in turn a digital project on which to bring to the world their contribution on LGBTQ+ matters.

The *OutHistory.org* team is really dedicated to giving keys to the younger generations to pursue the work sparked by their impulse. In addition to featuring content for college students to learn, the website also provides a platform for them to publish their work for free. Indeed, it states its wish to partner with college instructors in inspiring students to conduct research in LGBTQ+ history.¹⁶ Additionally, the website has issued a set of guidelines to indicate the requirements in terms of content and formalities to which articles must comply to get published. The website is not oriented towards content knowledge only but also orients its audience and participants towards procedural knowledge, that is to say the practices underpinning historical work. This concern about historical methods consolidates the more traditional approach to history courses. More often than not, “the history disseminated in historical media and history classrooms presents history in a factual way and disregards the procedural aspects of history”.¹⁷ So, participating in a research project involves both content knowledge which students make the effort to retrieve and gain, and procedural knowledge so as to learn how to exploit documents and how to write historical articles. Furthermore, students are introduced to the process of submitting articles for publication. The website aims at inspiring potential future historians of sexuality by

¹⁵ *OutHistory.org*, Home page, outhistory.org/ (Accessed 27 July 2020).

¹⁶ *OutHistory.org*, Participate, outhistory.org/participate (Accessed 27 July 2020).

¹⁷ Thorp, 2016, p. 11.

giving them information, platforms, advice, guidance towards the production of historical research. Contrary to the workings of the traditional circuit of academic publishing, on *OutHistory*, undergraduate students are given the opportunity to get their work published — on a platform which also presents work written by professionals — in a very horizontal manner. It may be stated that the articles are written by undergraduates, but their contribution is put forth as much as other contributors'. It gives more depth to their college assignments since the work they produce is not only valued by grade but the publication gives their content a new readership composed of people who are truly interested in the subject they discuss. For students, *OutHistory.org* becomes a research laboratory, introducing them to the world of academic research while valuing their contribution to LGBTQ+ history, free of the long process of having one's work published in the academic circuit. Here, the website not only seeks to bridge the gap between the academic world and the American population, it also offers a getaway road from scholarship to publication accessible to broad audiences in a direct circuit, and for free.

This promising enterprise found echo when Professor David Palmer at the University of North Carolina assigned thirty-three of his students to complete an exhibition entitled "LGBT Identities, Communities, and Resistance in North Carolina, 1945-2012". The timespan of the collection of topical articles is quite wide, but it also pertains to recent history, a factor which stimulates students' commitment to their subject but which is also more engaging for readers.¹⁸ Recent history provides the advantage of being more easily understandable and relatable for students since many references already belong to their set of knowledge. Moreover, their research focused around the geographical space they live in, North Carolina, which can also convey a sense of tradition, of belonging and an understanding of the relation of their state and their fellow LGBT citizens while providing core materials onsite to undertake research. There was a real stake in trying to map the recent history of LGBT people in North Carolina: contrary to areas like New York City or San Francisco, North Carolina is a "state underrepresented in this area of scholarship"¹⁹. This project is thus coherent in terms of topic with the will of *OutHistory.org* to uncover histories that have been left out. It also follows the website's insistence on a collaborative writing of LGBT history imagined by Jonathan Ned Katz who envisioned it as "a place of active community participation in the process of

¹⁸ Claire Bond Potter, Renee C. Romano, *Doing Recent History* (University of Georgia Press, 2012), pp. 1-20.

¹⁹ *OutHistory.org*, "LGBT Identities, Communities, and Resistance in North Carolina, 1945-2012", outhistory.org/exhibits/show/nc-lgbt (Accessed 4 August 2020).

discovering and writing LGBTQ histories.”²⁰ The exhibition thus created by David Palmer’s students encompasses eleven different topics that cover articles dealing with health concerns, campus activism, politics and also personal histories. One of the articles, “ASPYN (A Safer Place Youth Network): LGBT Adolescence and the Creation of Safe Spaces” evokes a subject which is not often discussed: organizing queer teenagers and youth.

Given the emphasis on the college experience for LGBTQ+ students and faculty, we could question the place of LGBTQ+ problematics in other educational contexts and for other age groups. For example, in his previously discussed article dealing with the GAU, D’Emilio questioned the K-12 curricula and the place of LGBTQ+ history has in it: “For instance, having LGBT history integrated into middle-school and high-school curricula seems like an important and essential step. But what are the overall values and worldview that those curricula embrace?”²¹ Similarly, in the “Participate” section of *OutHistory.org*, the editors evoke their wish to “put up more material that can be easily adapted for classroom us, especially for high school and middle school.”²² Despite those concerns being repeatedly stated, no real concrete solution is brought about on the website for the enlargement of their public to middle and high school pupils.

The issue of teaching LGBTQ+ history to pupils is a complicated one: there is a reluctance to discuss sexuality in general, it can be judged as unfit for audiences composed of minors. Additionally, the history curriculum is sometimes, and in some places, increasing in term of topics covered but receding in terms of hours devoted to it, and LGBTQ+ history is not a priority. Also, the curriculum is oriented towards giving a representation of the national characters through events that marked the nation. For LGBTQ+ history to find a place in it, it would have to be dealt with through the study of huge events like the Stonewall riots, or landmark court cases like *Lawrence v. Texas*²³, always in relation with the broader national context and the study of American institutions. Since *OutHistory.org* is mainly concerned with personal stories, with feelings and intimacy, designing material targeting K-12 teachers may overstep their original mission. This last point illustrates the importance of

²⁰ *OutHistory.org*, “About”, outhistory.org/about-outhistory (Accessed 4 August 2020).

²¹ John D’Emilio, “The Gay Academic Union: The Proceedings of Its First National Conference, 1973, New York City”, *OutHistory.org*, 22 April, 2016, outhistory.org/exhibits/show/gau-conference/intro (Accessed 4 August 2020).

²² *OutHistory.org*, “Participate”, outhistory.org/participate (Accessed 4 August 2020).

²³ *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/539/558/ (Accessed 13 April 2020).

building a network of teachers, professors, advisors, community centers together so as to gather resources. It also stresses the fact that, according to *OutHistory* co-directors, American schools are a primary space for the dissemination of LGBTQ+ history to the public. Engaging in collaborative work with heterogeneous participants provides hindsight about how different needs are to the diversity of situations and, on these bases, participants can best provide services to the others in their fields of expertise.

2. *OutHistory* and the Communities

OutHistory.org operates thanks to a community of historians. This community pushes the geographical and chronological boundaries of subject matters. Does this expansion caused by the community-gathering of knowledge question the typical timeline of LGBTQ+ history?

The key term to define *OutHistory* is ‘decompartmentalize’. The website exemplifies interdisciplinarity. As Jeffrey Weeks puts it, writing about sexuality transcends the partitions between fields of study.

Écrire des livres sur la sexualité fait partie de l’effort de construction historique, qui nourrit et est en retour fertilisé par un ensemble d’autres disciplines : la sociologie, l’anthropologie sociale, la littérature, la philosophie, la science politique, le droit, la géographie culturelle, jusqu’aux plus récents domaines hybrides que sont les études culturelles, postcoloniales, de genre, LGBT, *queer*, et les *racial studies*.²⁴

What does it reveal? That subject areas communicate and need to communicate. At the same time, academic approaches can reflect approaches which were not used on paper but in reality: when the AIDS epidemics broke out, doctors were sometimes ignorant of how homosexuality was lived. To fill this lack of insight, some homosexuals had to explain their sexual practices, the modes of sociability specific to some LGBTQ+ communities, the sometimes unsafe, hazardous ways of life of queer people relegated to the margins and the hardship that came along (prostitution, drug abuse, lack of knowledge or access about sexual protections). The connections between the different groups of people, (whether in society as we have seen with the relation doctor/patient, or in the academic world with the great discussion that a single topic can trigger across several disciplines) also reach other spheres in ways that are maybe less specific than the previous examples, and more codependent. For instance, the social role of universities and colleges for LGBTQ+ youth is not the primary role of these institutions but as we have seen in the previous subpart, such places were instrumental to the development of students’ movements. As far as LGBTQ+ history is concerned, scholars have increasingly

²⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, *Écrire l’Histoire des Sexualités* (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2019), p. 19.

oriented their work out of the academia whether for sources or to reach out to another target audience. For instance, Allan Bérubé used to travel across the United States to present slideshows on LGBTQ+ history anchored in community-based research to local communities.²⁵ Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey allied their forces to write *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (1989), a book based on a bottom-up approach of the LGBTQ+ past.

Also, due to the interest of scholars in LGBTQ+ communities, recent history has gained ground in the field. When dealing with recent history, it is important to connect with people who can be reached as for example via interviews as it is the case when conducting an oral history project. These people can testify to what happened in their lives and what sense they derive from it. Having grassroots testimonies is valuable for historians of LGBTQ+ communities, all the more so when sources do not abound, which is the case with recent history. Besides, replacing the actors at the heart of the historical events they participated in is what triggers a social recognition of their presence and their legitimacy with the American Institutions.

However, some scholars sometimes overlook this last point despite the fact that it can lead to serious misinterpretations. Indeed, the importance of collecting people's testimony, while creating space for traditionally silenced voices, is what permitted to correct an erroneous interpretation of a series of photographs displayed by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery at the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*.²⁶ One photograph by Nan Goldin, showing Jimmy Paulette and Misty, two performers in their drag outfit at the back of a cab, was featured in the exhibition with a description that did not reflect what had really happened at that moment.²⁷ Since the Critical Discourse Analysis framework has "ability to explore how power is constructed and reproduced in society"²⁸, we propose to analyze the photograph description written by Jonathan David Katz²⁹, the art historian who captioned the photograph for the Smithsonian

²⁵ Allan Bérubé, *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2011).

²⁶ Svetlana Kitto, "The Subject Speaks", *OutHistory.org*, outhistory.org/exhibits/show/jimmy-paul/intro (Accessed 16 November 2019).

²⁷ See Appendix 3.

²⁸ Helena Hoppstadius, "Representations of Women Subjected to Violence: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Study Guides in Social Work", *Journal of Women and Social Work* (2020), Vol. 35(1), p. 97, *Sage* (online), doi.org/10.1177/0886109919872968 (Accessed 6 June, 2020).

²⁹ In order to prevent confusions with Jonathan Ned Katz, we will be referring to Jonathan David Katz as J.D. Katz from this point on.

exhibition, and to compare it to the analysis of the interview by Svetlana Kitto of Jimmy Paul, one of the model who posed in Nan Goldin's photograph.³⁰ The point of view of the art historian, writing with his knowledge of techniques, works of art and symbolism, will be confronted to Jimmy Paul's interview by Svetlana Kitto, (the model who happens to know what was occurring at the moment when the photograph was taken and the professional oral historian who asked the questions, collected and published Paulette's answers). With focused attention on the micro-level of analysis (the level of textual analysis), the meso-level of analysis (analysis of discursive practices — the context of production and reception of the text) and the macro-level of analysis (the study of the underpinning ideologies and societal concerns), we will study how and why language contributes to the endurance of power dynamics in society. Right below is the picture in question.



Misty (left) and Jimmy Paulette (right) in the back seat of a New York cab, in Nan Goldin, *The Other Side*, 1993.

The description reads as follows:

Partygoers or refugees from a war zone? The thousand-yard stares on the faces of two of Nan Goldin's favorite subjects, in a photograph taken in a cab ride home on the morning after a hard

³⁰ Jimmy Paul is a hairdresser who used to perform as Jimmy Paulette, his drag alter ego.

night out, begs the question. In 1883, when John Singer Sargent famously painted Madame X's dress strap slipping down her shoulder, he suggested a nakedness that fractured Gilded Age propriety. Here, Goldin references Sargent, but by showing both of Jimmy Paulette's straps down, she creates a symbol of exhaustion and desperation rather than erotic promise: s/he's come undone. The photograph's immediate sense of glamour is belied when you look closely at the rips and tears of the clothing and faces of the girls, whose eyes look like holes poked through the black snow of their mascara. Goldin gives her subjects a weight and dignity that keeps the picture from either Weegee-like voyeurism or moralistic posturing. Instead, as part of her artistic project documenting the decade after AIDS, Goldin suggests that we are all in the front seat with her, trapped in a cab ride to nowhere.³¹

The introductory question intends to raise the ambivalence of the two drag queens' postures, clothing and facial expressions by opposing two phrases clashing with one another. The first term, "partygoers" evokes light-heartedness and entertainment. Conversely, the second noun phrase "refugees from a war zone" evokes chaos, hazard and a need to be sheltered. This choice of words is hyperbolic in the context: two persons in the back of a cab, styled to perform overly feminine roles, displaying tired faces. From the beginning of the description, we feel that the art historian frames his interpretation around debauchery from which Misty and Jimmy Paulette are survivors and in need of a safer lifestyle. It is their "thousand-yard stares" which "beg the question": here, he interrogates the nature of their gaze which seems removed from the scene. After inserting a small explanatory comment on the relations between the two models and the photographer, "Two of Nan Goldin's favorite subjects", founding his remark on Goldin's book, he proposes an explanation of the context of the photograph: "taken in a cab ride home on the morning after a hard night out" in the form of an assertion. Nothing in the picture indicates that the cab is "rid[ing] home" nor that the shot was taken "after a hard night out". The art historian then adds a comparison drawing on artistic imagery referencing a painting, dating back to 1883, representing an anonymous woman, Madame X, wearing a dress with the left strap "slipping down her shoulder". The painter, he writes, "represented a nakedness that fractured the Gilded Age propriety". By opposing a single-man's work to the moral of an entire era in American history, the art historian highlights notions of progressivism and subversion through the use of the verb "fractured". Madame X is made a symbol of the transgression of the period's belief that eroticism was improper. Such a subversive portrait was also a manner for the painter to break the rules and to dare show something different.

Jonathan David Katz suggests that Goldin inverted the symbolical value of the straps down by playing on the literal and figurative meanings: on both levels, the model is worn

³¹ Jonathan D. Katz, David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2010, Washington DC.

down. In the photograph, Jimmy Paulette becomes “a symbol of exhaustion and desperation”, two nouns which refer to the consequences of debauchery (illustrated by his wearing both his straps down). Debauchery has serious limitations: it ripped off Paulette’s vitality, converting his “erotic promise” into a warning against the downside of nightlife. By writing the pronouns “s/he” in the concluding segment, J.D. Katz conveys the sense that it is Paulette’s activity as a drag performer which is the cause for his fatigue and his pathetic countenance, leading to his destruction: “s/he’s come undone”. Indeed, he does not refer to himself as a “she”, he only plays a part as his feminine alter ego when doing drag. The use of the present perfect really emphasizes the causal link between being a drag performer and losing one’s face. The term “undone” is a reversed image of the verb “do” which is found in expressions like “hairdo” or “do one’s makeup” as in drags’ active transformation. Here, the transformation seems to have reached its paroxysm and for J.D. Katz, the trick does not do anymore. Indeed, the first impression of beholding two performers in all their splendor does not last: “The photograph’s immediate sense of glamour is belied when you look closely at the rips and tears of the clothing and faces of the girls”. Again, their agency is downplayed and the efforts they put into their look render them fake, like objects: “whose eyes look like holes poked through the black snow of their mascara.” Their make-up prevents the audience from connecting with them: J.D. Katz, by equating their eyes with holes, underlines the idea of shallowness, as if there was nothing beneath the mascara. The oxymoron ‘black snow’ also conveys the sense of unnatural artificiality at odds with the connotation of purity generally associated to snow and the color white. However, he insists that the photograph does not dwell on sordid nor transgressive elements: “keeps the picture from either Weegee-like voyeurism or moralistic posturing”. The syntactic structure he uses still introduces the terms he says the photograph avoids, thus still pushing the spectator in this direction. The reference to Weegee again brings up images of death, macabre and murkiness. Instead, he writes, the models are endowed with “weight and dignity” going against the grain of the light-heartedness of the “partygoers” he evoked on line one. But the mere mention of those terms seems to suggest that it was not the case *de facto*. The concluding sentence stays very vague, “the decade after AIDS” does not give much information about what aspects of this period the artist is documenting. The vagueness of the segment gives way to interpretation drawing on the connotations of AIDS. The last part of the sentence is barely understandable: “we are all in the front seat with her”, “trapped in a cab ride to nowhere”, which seems to suggest that the spectator is involuntarily embarked

in the debauchery of the two drag performers, in the best seats to helplessly contemplate the vacuity of their lifestyle.

Jonathan David Katz's description of the photographs poses several problems. The main one is that some of his explanations are counterfactual. In addition, they are also misleading — not only are they untrue, but they also rely on stereotypes. In his position as an art historian, it is true that his function consists in formulating interpretations of works of art drawing on the symbolism at play in the works. His work, like this description, can be accessible to the public as it is the case with the *Hide/Seek* exhibition where his description could be read. Nan Goldin's photograph is not what is said to be "canon", it is, as J.D. Katz's caption specifies, a photograph documenting an era after a worldwide crisis which especially targeted gay men. The shot has a very specific quality, it does not aim at presenting universal truths but rather, it seeks to capture individual conducts in a moment of reconstruction of identity. J.D. Katz's reliance on stereotypes (debauchery, erratic behavior, instability, seeking help) to write his description and the fact that it was displayed to a vast audience — not necessarily familiar with LGBTQ+ issues nor gender performances such as Misty and Jimmy Paulette's — participate in the circulation of those stereotypes. We could contend that the historian is guilty of periodizing the past: in Valerie Staub's terms, he wrote a description relying on period-based history culminating in a universalizing interpretation of the past which failed to remark the uniqueness of the picture.³² As a consequence, power structures ostracizing drag queens (here, but LGBTQ+ at large), are not challenged but reinforced. With J.D. Katz's caption, "there is [...] a risk that hierarchies and inequalities in society are maintained depending on how individuals and their needs are conceptualized".³³ This issue raised by Jordan-Zachery is all the more true since J.D. Katz's occupation as an art historian supports the legitimacy of his words, especially for laypersons. What is surprising is that J.D. Katz is a specialist of LGBTQ+ studies as well as an activist. But what is even worse is that the description he wrote, in addition to being potentially disparaging, is also untrue.

Nan Goldin had her photography book published in 1993, less than forty years ago. Her work has historical value as she intended to document an era. It can be considered as belonging to what is termed 'recent history'. One of the peculiarities of recent history is

³² Valerie Staub, "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography", *The Lesbian Premodern, The New Middle Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p. 25), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117198_2, (Accessed 22 July 2020).

³³ Julia Jordan-Zachery, *Black Women, Cultural Image and Social Policy* (Routledge, 2009).

that, frequently, the people who were involved in this history are “not dead yet” as Renee C. Romano puts it.³⁴ As such, they are likely to see and read what was written about them and consequently, they are able to respond. It is with these considerations in mind that an oral historian, Svetlana Kitto, contrary to Jonathan David Katz, published the factual version of what happened when the photograph was taken in an article rightly entitled “The Subject Speaks”.³⁵ In her article, Kitto begins with an introduction in which she reproduces Nan Goldin’s words about her book. Goldin states that “the pictures in this book are not of people suffering gender dysphoria but rather expressing gender euphoria.... The people in these pictures are truly revolutionary; they are the real winners in the battle of the sexes because they have stepped out of the ring.” She explains that she placed her subjects outside of the suffering which can be experienced by transgender people, she does not want to emphasize this aspect of their lives, she wants to show them as being euphoric about how they are. Just as J.D. Katz did, she uses a comparison with war, but instead of presenting the state of distress that characterizes people involuntarily involved in a conflict, she underlines their agency, their combative character and ultimately, their victory. The article contains an interview of Jimmy Paul, the model, who also happens to be featured on the cover of Goldin’s book, a detail which insists on his importance for the photographer. In this interview, Paul and Kitto retrace the “birth” of the drag queen and towards the end, they dwell more on the counterfactual description which accompanied the picture. Paulette came across it while attending the exhibition which had come to New York. Together with the oral historian, they proceed to decrypt what led J.D. Katz to come to such a conclusion while Paulette tells the reactions he had when he read the piece. Kitto’s interview naturally finds its place on *OutHistory.org*: the website focuses on temporal concerns and so does the interview. Where J.D. Katz periodized his interpretation of the picture, Kitto, on the contrary, illuminates its specificities. Actually, a discussion happens about J.D. Katz’s erroneous interpretation of the photograph given the period at which it was taken. The interview was edited for clarity and our account of the interview will also be elliptic so as to only comprise the segments which echo the caption.

The first time Paul evokes J.D. Katz’s caption, it is in reaction to his father’s behavior when he saw the photograph. He called his son, thinking that he had to resort to prostitution to be financially stable: “I said, ‘Dad, it was Gay Pride day.’ And he said, ‘Ohhh. You were

³⁴ Claire Bond Potter, Renee C. Romano, *Doing Recent History* (University of Georgia Press, 2012), pp. 1-20.

³⁵ Svetlana Kitto, “The Subject Speaks”, *OutHistory.org*, July 2015, <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/jimmy-paul/interview>, (Accessed 12 September 2019).

just showing off.' He got it more than the wall label from the museum!'. In this last sentence, he specifies that according to him, the art historian did not understand the photograph, J.D. Katz did not "g[e]t it". Of course, his father had also been misled by the image, but contrary to the writer of the caption, he was not aware of the context. Indeed, Paulette indicates that J.D. Katz had the information at hand: "But also, it's made clear in the book that these photos were taken before and after the Gay Pride Parade; it's not after a night out." After correcting the setting of the photograph, Kitto questions his appearance: "But you also sort of look like you're sedated or something like that. Which you weren't. But the picture looks like you were, right?". She uses euphemistic structures like "sort of look like", "or something like that": at this moment, she is seeking the truth, not asserting it. By questioning what transpires from Paulette's expression, she leaves space for the model's explanation instead of imposing a simplistic interpretation onto it. However, the symbolical value of the expression is not contested by Jimmy Paulette, rather, he even claims his objective: "But do I look like a junkie whore? Of course I do. Did I want to look like a junkie whore? Yes! Was I a junkie whore? No. I was a tax-paying hairdresser." The phrase "junkie whore", repeated three times in a row is hyperbolic, disparaging and conveys the model's consciousness about his own appearance. It becomes flagrant that he is performing. By the accumulation of rhetorical questions, Jimmy Paul creates a contrast between his position as the model of the photograph and the interpretation of the art historian. He distinguishes "look[ing] like" and being ("Was I") where J.D. Katz equated them. In a second time, Paulette insists on the fact that the art historian needn't invent a "very glamorous" account "like a movie" since he is "alive", "very around", and since "Nan is also alive", he could have easily fact-checked his description with the artist or the model.³⁶ He proposes an analysis of J.D. Katz's extravagant caption: "maybe it's more interesting than the truth. But it's rewriting history. And that's what was so sad and shocking to me to read this". He feels that his history was utilized and twisted in order to make it more appealing, but he was "shock[ed]" by how counterfactual it was. The art historian self-appropriated the history of the two drag queens, both their personal history and the historical context in which the photograph was taken (i.e. before the New York Gay Pride parade), despite information being easily retrievable. Jimmy Paul then evokes the feeling of togetherness that characterized that day, notions of friendship and community which are

³⁶Valerie Staub, "The Present Future of Lesbian Historiography", *The Lesbian Premodern, The New Middle Ages* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011), p. 25, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117198_2, (Accessed 22 July 2020).

nowhere to be found in the wall label description which barely comments on the fact that there are two characters on the photo. In his words, “the reality of the photo is very pro-gay.” The final exchange between Kitto and Jimmy Paul is telling of the connotations that the description carries and displays:

S: Also, the mention of “AIDS” helps with that; it makes it seem like they have AIDS.

JP: Yes! And we're giving people AIDS.

S: But I guess what I'm saying, and I really want to hammer it home, is that I don't think the wall-label version is more interesting.

JP: I don't either. Only because we've heard that story a million times. You know we've heard that version and thought that version.

S: Indeed.

In J.D. Katz's description, the phrase “the decade after AIDS” leads the spectator to conclude that AIDS is a defining feature of the models placed as both pathetic and dangerous. The art historian contributes to the ambivalence attached to drag queens and the LGBTQ+ community who were thought to be living dangerously while at the same time mourning the victims of this lifestyle. It is equated to “a cab ride to nowhere”, a poetic expression to describe the models' empty existence. Incidentally, Jimmy Paul does not fail to remark that the description relies heavily on clichés used again and again, yet not necessarily true.

By equating identity and performance, by forcing stereotypes against (personal) history, J.D. Katz reproduced the structures of power at play in society. He may have done so in an unconscious manner but his choice of words could easily lead the large number of spectators who attended the exhibition in its various locations towards a negative portraying of drag queens as icons of debauchery, as the faces of AIDS, on their way to a certain death. The photograph itself could be read as such but the paratext (i.e. indications from the book that it was taken on the occasion of the first Pride Parade after the AIDS crisis, in a time of remembrance and collective affirmation) illuminates other themes. So as to correct this erroneous interpretation, Svetlana Kitto and Jimmy Paulette published the interview “The Subject Speaks” and presented a thorough explanation of the context in which the photograph was taken. The interview was published exclusively on *OutHistory.org* but the website does not benefit from the same visibility as art shows organized by major museums across the United States. Furthermore, the article is not particularly highlighted on the website, whose design does not instantly give away the fact that it is managed by professional historians. The balance of power between J.D. Katz and Kitto tipped towards the former while the latter, despite having good intentions, cannot really right the wrong

because she does not benefit from a platform powerful enough to compete with the *Hide/Seek* exhibition.

The analysis of the two descriptions of the same photograph using different approaches reveals that disciplines do not compete against each other but rather complete each other: different methodologies and approaches combine to offer more complex interpretations. Indeed, LGBTQ+ history is a recent discipline and the use of oral history and the resort to community knowledge are central features of the work done by the researchers. When the history being researched is recent (when it covers events from the latest fifty years), it generally means that researchers deal with “history that talks back”, that the people involved in the event being researched are still alive. This poses a number of ethical problems in terms of archival material, in terms of what piece of information can be disclosed in a published study. But it also means that the people involved can be reached for additional information to be incorporated in studies via oral histories or interviews: their testimonies are precious since they are direct witnesses of the events researchers in recent history seek to investigate. Furthermore, minority studies owe much to community knowledge, material, and testimonies since their histories have been overlooked by grand narratives. It seems fair to expect scholars to credit the actors of the communities they study, especially when they are likely to receive financial compensation for the work they produce with the communities’ help. While J.D. Katz’s description actually betrayed Jimmy Paulette, Kitto’s initiative seems carried with a willingness to build a relation of trust between scholars and the community.

Kitto’s interview exemplifies the close relations between *OutHistory.org* and the (LGBTQ+) communities, which are also explicitly advertised on the website. In the Contributors Guidelines on *OutHistory.org*, a section made to provide the intellectual framework which the contributions must follow, it is stated that “contributors understand this site to be institutionally based and [...] intended to operate as a long-term community service”. The notion of community service is double-edged: on the one hand, it stresses the idea that history writing is a process that should be oriented to the community that is, to give back interpretations of events to the people who participated in them. On *OutHistory*, it materialized with the *OutHistory* exhibition contest organized in 2008 which was a starting point for grassroots mobilization, for personal and collective research of the LGBTQ+ lives. The website and the contest provided a platform and visibility to time-

consuming projects undertaken by volunteers. By involving LGBTQ+ people or ‘allies’ into the construction of historical narratives, into the process of investigating past events and into the circulation of these histories, a certain consciousness about current issues could arise and foster commitment in the social and political sphere around LGBTQ+ problematics. On the other hand, the important point is that this history is not exclusive to academics, whether in its writing or in its reading but is redistributed to its actors. LGBTQ+ people are thus no longer just a specific population considered as research objects but are considered as a population who is entitled to have access to the expertise acquired on their behalf. The idea underpinning *OutHistory.org* is that history is to be used as a tool for the common good, starting with LGBTQ+ communities.

3. OutHistory and Activism

Charles and Mary Beard declared that “the history of a civilization, if intelligently conceived, may be an instrument of civilization.”³⁷ In other words, knowing the past provides means to build and improve the future. LGBTQ+ history, although concerned with the past, has always been oriented towards achieving social justice for the community, i.e. towards the future. As we have seen, LGBTQ+ history arose from popular mobilization demanding change and its foundations are derived from community knowledge and collaborative work. The study of past events in LGBTQ+ people’s lives aims at several ends, among which are social and political change. In other words, LGBTQ+ history constitutes a ‘usable past’ — it has the potential to be an ‘instrument of civilization’, a weapon for social justice and equal rights for LGBTQ+ people. What is a ‘usable past’? The words of Warren I. Susman will guide our explanation:

History is often used as the basis for a political philosophy which while explaining the past offers also a way to change the future. History thus operates ideologically. But [...] historical interpretation cannot be effectively monopolized for long by any special class or group. Its study is open to all who can reason and to all who participate in the various contractual or associational aspects of the society.³⁸

There are three key ideas at play in Susman’s reasoning. First, history carries in itself a transformational power. Second, it is submitted to ideology: the potential transformations are so affected by the prevalent ideology at the institutional level. Third and last: history is, theoretically, accessible to all and thus no monopoly over ideology should prevail. Thus, collective effort towards other historical interpretations can bring about transformation.

³⁷ Charles Beard, Mary Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York, 1927), p. vii.

³⁸ Warren I. Susman, “History and the American Intellectual: Uses of a Usable Past”, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Part 2: Supplement (Summer, 1964), pp. 243-263.

However, the concept of a “usable past” could be seen as evidence that history consists in biased reasoning and/or teleological conclusions. Also, studies of the past are permeated with present concerns and projects (or even predictions) for the future, which can seem paradoxical. Can scholarship and socio-political actions be reconciled? Which leads us to wonder: what are the porosities between the practice of history and that of activism? To what extent is *OutHistory.org* a committed initiative?

LGBTQ+ studies are inherently challenging ideological monopoly: they were “invented”, “crafted” to suit social and political needs. Because the discipline is recent, it started to be studied with historical material that was easily available, more or less openly LGBTQ+, such as newsletters, magazines, community gatherings and testimonies, but also art, literature (as lesbian pulp novels for example). Laws were also an object of study, as were police records, and any kind of institutional sources that dealt with homosexual relationships. LGBTQ+ history stems from political movements that fought for a “gay liberation” in parallel to the civil rights movements for African Americans. It results that the historical approaches of both LGBTQ+ and African Americans studies bear political and academic resemblance: both communities shared similar experiences. In the end, a lot of subject areas became mobilized like anthropology, sociology, art history, psychoanalysis, literary theory, linguistics, and so on. There had to be a coalition of fields to uncover the structures underpinning LGBTQ+ people’s lives in a comprehensive, nuanced way. It also means that LGBTQ+ studies (among which history) being oriented towards change, entertain a close link to the present. In brief, LGBTQ+ history is tied to activism, whether in its subject matter or in its very practice. To pursue this line of thought, we need first to define what activism is.

The word ‘activism’ has an ambiguous meaning. First, its meaning changed over time to cover different realities: in the early 1900s, it had a philosophical meaning encompassing “the theory or belief that truth is arrived at through action or active striving after the spiritual life”³⁹. Later on, during WW1, for Europeans “activism” was specifically targeting pro-Germany activities or sentiments. During the 1960s, a decade known for its revolutionary atmosphere, the term took on connotations of guerillas and fire attacks. However, the tone softened with time and by the late 20th century, ‘activism’ had come to be used to talk about

³⁹ Rudolf Eucken, *The Fundamentals of a New Philosophy of Life* (1907), quoted in Guobin Yang, “Activism”, *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture* (Princeton, 2016, pp. 1–17), JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvct0023.5 (Accessed 18 August 2020).

“moderate civic action”. Studies have shown that from the 1970s on, ‘activism’ was less frequently coupled with terms associated with revolution and more with protests and institutionalized groups.⁴⁰ The definition we will retain for our study is thus the latter: considering activism as moderate civic action. That means non-violent efforts for the common good. We could wonder whether activism is still needed in terms of LGBTQ+ rights: it seems that the community has gained significant ground in this area as presented in the first part of this thesis. However, struggles remain, particularly with regards to transgender Americans and as we have already mentioned, formal rights do not equate to informal rights.

On the homepage of *OutHistory.org*, the activist dimension of the website and more generally of LGBTQ+ history is firmly claimed: “Recovering sexual and gender past is a form of activism. It inspires people to action in the present. It helps us make a freer future.” The term ‘recovering’ is an action verb, underlining the active process of the historians of sexualities but the true active movement towards common good is said to come from ‘people’, that is, the recipient of the historical narratives. It is a collaborative enterprise, a uniting of strengths, each in their field of competence. This is why, through the conduct of oral histories, *OutHistory.org* contributors can highlight individuals’ experience of LGBTQ+-phobia whether in structural contexts or in the course of interpersonal relationships. By particularizing experiences, the discrepancy between what rights are supposed to be acquired and how those rights are actually exercised is made apparent. About oral histories, Jeffrey Weeks wrote that the approach is not inherently “radical” since the interviewee can as well be people of influence, power and wealth whose testimonies can overshadow others. But when oral histories are conducted with people whose voices are seldom heard, it takes on another dimension. It seeks to undermine the status quo and it is this destabilization of the established order which brings about the need to change, which brings about the elements upon which to act.⁴¹ In addition, oral histories have permitted the field of LGBTQ+ to expand by addressing the lack of printed sources as well as investigating recent history through living actors’ testimonies. Oral history as an approach, however, did not impose itself naturally to historians of sexualities: its use was marginal and marginalized due to the discipline’s heavy reliance on printed sources.⁴² When John

⁴⁰ Yang Guobin, “Activism”, 2016.

⁴¹ Weeks, 2016.

⁴² Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 2008), pp. 177-189.

d'Emilio conducted his numerous oral histories to write his book *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States* published in 1983, his approach was not a commonality within the field. Yet, nowadays, twenty-three of his oral histories are published on *OutHistory.org* as valuable testimonies with historical value. It took scholars who were ready to experiment, who dared to introduce new approaches to scholarship instead of following the ready-made paths. His initiative could be considered as a form of activism applied to the academic microcosm. Michel Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledge (i.e. inaccessible information due to a disregard of some forms of knowledge which leads to the disappearance of those who detained the knowledge) helped other scholars understand the mechanisms behind minority studies:

Susan Stryker's introduction to *The Transgender Studies Reader* (2006) argues that [from] an insurrection of subjugated knowledges can arise [...] new technologies of knowledge production, new methods that take seriously the on-the-ground meanings that are already being produced by the subjugated themselves.⁴³

In LGBTQ+ contexts, oral histories de-subjugated knowledge and at least for the duration of the interviews, proceeded to de-subjugate the subjects who participated in the study. The contribution of oral history was valuable to both its practitioners and their interviewees: in conducting oral history interviews with LGBTQ+ subjects, a part of secrecy and taboo was lifted.

However, it seems that oral history still has not found legitimacy within LGBTQ+ history. Oral Historian Nan Alamilla Boyd, together with other oral historians, produced a book which includes several articles about oral history to bring to the fore the contribution this approach makes to the field, something which had to be demonstrated. She could not find much documentation on the subject, and she came to the conclusion that "it was a wonderful revelation to see all the work being done, often in isolation and without the support of colleagues or peers." Her remark insists on the marginal status of this method. By publishing a great number of oral histories, *OutHistory.org* both serves to legitimate the approach and to reach out an open hand to researchers who would like to engage in similar work. Its location being the internet, the website has this ability to reach far and wide, across the nation to provide support for researchers and to become an actor in the de-subjugation of LGBTQ+ knowledge and of the possessors of this knowledge: members of the LGBTQ+

⁴³ Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Elizabeth Kennedy's Oral History Intervention", *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Winter 2012), pp. 84-91.

community. *OutHistory.org*, in this respect, serves as a sort of foster family for researchers that did not find the support they needed in the academia.

LGBTQ+ studies and histories cannot be separated from the movements they originated from. Historians that chose to engage in this direction were taking risks in terms of career opportunities because the subject has not always been as integrated in university curricula as it can be nowadays. This research path was almost sacrificial, made in defiance of the universities' rules and structures, it could be considered an act of subversion. Publishing on the web the result of research undertaken in universities is also subversive as it takes away a part of profits that could have benefitted to the university and to the scholars themselves. The intent underpinning historical research on LGBTQ+ issues is always connected to the study of the community.

Oral history is one of the methods which creates bonds between scholars belonging to the academia and people outside of this sphere. For some scholars working on ethnic groups, lower social classes, and other non-dominant segments of the American population, their scholarship involves a duty to give back to the communities their research is based on. For instance, for Alvaro Huerto who describes himself as a 'scholar-activist', his privileged position as a member of the academia enables him to provide help to those who are less privileged than he is, "not vice-versa, as is the norm". The privileged position of scholars in society, according to scholar-activists, must be subverted to balance the unequal distribution of power among social actors. However, this posture about their role is subjected to criticism from the two poles they seek to merge: while their peers may be reluctant to accept their community-based work as being part of their academic career, full-time activists tend to disregard their "research-action efforts" from their "ivory tower".⁴⁴

One of the sources of tension around this issue is the meaning people assign to "activist": a scholar-activist does not become an activist by the way of his academic activities nor does he lose his scholarly qualities because his research is oriented towards bringing about social change. Charles R. Hale will provide us with a framework to understand what is involved in activist research:

In my understanding, then, activist research: a) helps us better to understand the root causes of inequalities, oppression, violence and related conditions of human suffering; b) is carried out, at each stage, from conception to dissemination in direct collaboration with an organized collective

⁴⁴ Alvaro Huerto, "Viva the scholar-activist!", *InsideHigherEd.com*, 30 March, 2018, www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/03/30/importance-being-scholar-activist-opinion (Accessed January 2019).

of people who themselves are subject to these conditions; c) is used, together with the people in question, to formulate strategies for transforming these conditions and to achieve the power necessary to make these strategies effective.⁴⁵

As a case in point, Anne Balay, one of *OutHistory.org*'s contributor, dedicated her scholarship to queer workers in the working-class. She has not always been a scholar and a writer: she used to be a car mechanic. She is familiar with working-class concerns and factory work for she has experienced them herself. In the course of her research, she immersed herself among blue-collar queer workers and through many discussions, talks, interviews, she wrote a book on the experience of being a queer blue-collar worker in Indiana and analyzed the ways of organizing the workers had developed. When her book was published, she took it to the Steelworker's Union. Her work, produced in collaboration with the queer steelworkers' communities, succeeded in having their Union taking the resolution to protect its LGBTQ+ workers.⁴⁶ Her book (*Steel Closets: Voices of Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Steelworkers*, University of North Carolina Press, 2014) is the result of her, an academic scholar, conducting oral histories in a collaborative approach. She aimed at identifying how gender identity and sexuality overlap with being a blue-collar worker. When the book was published, the steelworkers with whom she had collaborated encouraged her to use the findings of her research to obtain more rights within the factory — and she succeeded. On *OutHistory.org*, she published the introduction to her book to give a taste of what this collaborative work is like. In addition, in another article celebrating the U.S. Supreme Court decision to ban discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in the workplace, she pays homage to these workers, several of them deceased due to dangerous working conditions.⁴⁷ This homage insists on the vital need for LGBTQ+ steelworkers to be protected on their workplace: this is a question of life and death. Discrimination, the anxiety caused by one's fear of being mistreated add to the financial concerns and to situations of precarity. These factors endanger health and add to the life-threatening working environment.

Anne Balay's work being deeply committed, we could label it as activist-research. Now, *OutHistory.org* does not qualify as activist-research per se: more often than not, the articles featured on the website have the potential to be used but do not offer hand-on

⁴⁵ Charles R. Hale, "What Is Activist Research?", *Global Security Council*, on *Social Science Research Council*, <https://items.ssrc.org/from-our-archives/what-is-activist-research/> 5 December 2017 (Accessed 22 November 2020).

⁴⁶ Anne Balay, "Queer Workers I Have Known", *OutHistory.org*, outhistory.org/exhibits/show/qwihk2/qwihk2, June 16, 2020 (Accessed 20 August 2020).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

solutions or organizing strategies. This is not their primary purpose. It is true that the historical work shared on *OutHistory.org* is often community-oriented and that the project aims at sharing knowledge to foster change in the light of the past. Besides, *OutHistory.org* is a website, which means that it is a medium with its own specificities. It offers spaces for public participation in the history writing of the sexual past, it offers spaces for testimonies, it offers external platforms: a Facebook page and Facebook group on which people can connect with LGBTQ+ past but also with one another, from historians to history amateurs. With this in mind, can we talk about online activism? In the past few years, there have been a growing number of studies about the place of the web in activism. Researcher Matteo Cernison reviewed the literature on the topic to condense what effects online activism produces:

Focusing on the possible kinds of online-related activism, Della Porta and Mosca (2005) investigate the effect of digital technologies at four levels. First, at the instrumental level, online technologies are seen as new resources for resource-poor actors. Second, at the protest level, the authors consider the possibility for protesting directly through ICTS.⁴⁸ Third, the cognitive level refers to the hypothesized increased ability to spread information or to raise new issues. Finally, the symbolic level describes for the authors the use of icts as a means of creating new identities among actors.⁴⁹

The instrumental level mentioned by the two scholars is very pregnant in the case of *OutHistory.org*: as a repository for archival material and historical articles, the website provides a great deal of resources on which individuals and organizations can ground their methods and claims. What is really particular about the website is that it is able to offer quality scholarship excerpts for free: it thus corresponds to “new resources for resource-poor actors”. This aspect is highlighted on the website’s homepage: “Our work frees this history from obscurity. We free this history from paywalls.”⁵⁰ The website’s contributors are not oriented towards profit but towards providing an expertise, towards participating in the building of greater projects that exceed the limits of the website. Scholarship is no longer practiced for its own sake but becomes a means to other ends. Besides, the website acknowledges this role as well as the importance of furthering the collective efforts that have been launched: “History mobilizes people. It is a tool for change.” This statement is preceded by a list of eight concrete examples of how recovering LGBTQ+ history has had effects on American society. For example, historical scholarship was used during the *Lawrence v. Texas* case in the Supreme Court as well as during the *Obergefell v. Hodges*

⁴⁸ ICTS refers to Information and Communication Technologies.

⁴⁹ Matteo Cernison, “Models of Online-Related Activism”, *Social Media Activism* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 32-33.

⁵⁰ *OutHistory.org*, “Homepage”, outhistory.org/ (Accessed 28 August 2020).

case, both having ended with rulings in favor of granting more rights for LGBTQ+ people. Also, it has been discovered that Yale major donor, attorney John William Sterling, had been in a long-lasting relationship with a man. The discovery encouraged LGBTQ+ people to organize in the Shearman Sterling law firm.⁵¹ This transformation of the firm's policy towards inclusiveness was accompanied with new partnerships with LGBTQ+ organizations to work hand in hand for the defense of vulnerable LGBTQ+ people.

However, the 'protest level' that scholars have identified as being an effect of online activism does not seem to be present on the website. Even though the drive for change through LGBTQ+ history is repeatedly mentioned, there is no definition of current issues which would need to be acted upon, there are no identified targets that the historical material featured on the website could aim at. There is no "possibility for protesting directly through [it]" but the website serves rather as an inspiration to resort to protest.

The latter point relates to the "cognitive level" identified by researchers. Indeed, the intent underlying the initiative is the spread of knowledge to the masses, to the greater number of people through the use of the Internet which is viewed as a democratic tool. Moreover, the research process is intrinsically linked to novelty: the researcher's task is to produce new knowledge. Here, in the field of LGBTQ+ history, it appears that most of the knowledge is to be uncovered: it draws from the secrecy and taboo about sexualities and genders, especially when they do not conform to the dominant norm. Also, the paradigms of sexualities have evolved through the course of history, which complicates the task of identifying precisely what corresponds to LGBTQ+ material. *OutHistory.org* takes great pride in proposing exclusive materials that have not been published elsewhere before: they are a valuable resource for researchers, they participate in the circulation of information, for free, and new materials means that new issues arise. For example, the exclusive publication on *OutHistory.org* of police records dating from the Stonewall Riots could lead to foment outrage in the present and apologies or reparations could have been demanded for the prejudice. Additionally, as time passes, legislation changes, new events take place. If we take the example of Anne Balay's article on her celebration of the U.S. Supreme Court banning "discrimination against workers based on their sexual orientation and gender

⁵¹ *OutHistory.org*, "Create Content", outhistory.org/create-content (Accessed 28 August 2020).

identity”⁵², we are feeling compelled to pay attention to the effective enforcement of this ban.

Researchers on online activism identified a fourth effect: the “symbolic level”. The symbolic level entails the formation of new identities through the use of the ICTS. In its own way, *OutHistory.org* participates in this formation of new identities. In the “Before Stonewall contest” organized by the website, people from various backgrounds became curators of their own local exhibitions (see part one). The website places visitors who seek to contribute as actors of LGBTQ+ history as well as writers of this history. The importance of oral histories as approaches to the LGBTQ+ past also shakes the traditional dichotomy distinguishing researchers from the object of their studies by valuing a collaborative process where the object becomes the subject. This brief survey of the effects of *OutHistory.org* indicates that the website has a real potential to foster activism through its online platform but that this potential is not exploited on it. Instead, we could say that *OutHistory.org* serves as a catalyst for developing LGBTQ+ activism. But there remains a difference between its identity and its functions.

We have evoked the website’s functions and its effects on the “outer-world”. Now, we will discuss its identity. A number of the website’s coordinators have been involved in activism. Jonathan Ned Katz, the founder of *OutHistory.org*, joined the Gay Activist Alliance and John D’Emilio was part of the Gay Academic Union. Emma Kaywin, a recent addition to *OutHistory.org* staff, intervenes as a health consultant among nightlife communities to advise people on matters regarding sexual health.⁵³ Emma Gyorgy, also new on the board of *OutHistory.org*, has been in charge of organizing conferences like “Teaching Social Activism”⁵⁴ and Sidney Wegener, one of the two social media interns, participates in an online publication with the Women’s History Program at Sarah Lawrence College. The collective project that is *OutHistory.org* is driven by individuals who dedicate their lives to improving American society and the rights of its citizens. This is reflected in the very structure of the website: it operates under the status of non-profit project, part of the Fund for the City of New York programs. The objective of the FCNY is to allocate funds to initiatives designed to improve the living conditions of the citizens, in New York or

⁵² *Bostock v. Clayton County*, 590 U. S., June 15, 2020.

⁵³ emmakaywin.com/ (Accessed 12 August 2020).

⁵⁴ Ellen Noonan, “Emma Gyorgy’s Internship at the Museum of the City of New York”, *Archives and Public History at NYU*, wp.nyu.edu/archivesandpublichistory/2019/09/23/emma-gyorgys-internship-at-the-museum-of-the-city-of-new-york/, 23 September, 2019 (Accessed 12 August 2020).

elsewhere. Its private funding makes the website one step further from the “ivory tower” that the academia is while underscoring its public utility. However, for it to reach its goal, the knowledge it contains must be distributed in understandable ways. Indeed, academic language can be out of reach for people who are not familiar with it. In an article about the correspondence between Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, Jonathan Ned Katz wrote the following paragraphs as an introduction to the article:

The erotics of same-sex intimacy are certainly at issue in these letters, as Hamilton bemoans the lack of "intercourse" with John Laurens, and tells his friend, jokingly, to remind Hamilton's female marriage prospects about the size of his nose (Hamilton's penis). This joke was actually cut out of Hamilton's letters by an early Hamilton family member who was editing them for publication.

In trying to understand and interpret this intimacy and these letters it is well to recall that Hamilton and Laurens inhabited a world not divided between “heterosexual” and “homosexual,” a world in which same-sex love, intimacy, and a touch of the erotic did not make one a “pervert” or “deviant”.

We see that the scholar aims at clarity when exposing the issues at play in these documents, the audience is communicated the topic of the article (“erotics of same-sex intimacy”), the original puns are explained to clarify any ambiguity carried by the connotations of the vocabulary used. Codes of propriety of the context from which the documents come are outlined so the reader has an idea of where they are situated on the moral compass of the time. In addition, Katz cared to remind the audience of how desires and identities were perceived in the historical context of the documents, highlighting at the same time the contingency between time and ideas, without neglecting academic concerns (with for example the use of the words “erotics”, referring to the systems of eroticisms at play, constructed like “the politics of...”). But this willingness to offer the audience accessible, quality content comes with downsides. Indeed, funds from the FCNY are supposed to be only a temporary, bridge solution: the website seeks funding through grants and donations. Visitors are invited to donate money to the website, a reminder of the precarious adventure that *OutHistory.org* constitutes. A reminder of the fact that freeing themselves from the constraints of the institutions and the academia also means that the *OutHistory.org* editors are no longer protected and do not have long-time financial guarantees.

Finally, the initiative, which is primarily designed to give back to the community, needs to work with its support and in close collaboration: it needs symbiosis between all the partners involved. We have seen that *OutHistory.org* serves educational purposes and offers opportunity for publications to undergraduate and graduate students. In addition to this scholarly vocation, the website reaches an open hand to the LGBT+ community, giving knowledge about LGBTQ+ history for free and welcoming many forms of contribution to the everlasting work of reconstructing the past of the community. These aspects of

OutHistory.org are in themselves an effort to change society by providing information and resources. Raising awareness and putting light on social issues and marginalized people verges on activist activities. Besides, the blurring of frontiers between the historians' scholarly orientation and their involvement in LGBTQ+ protests and organizations reinforces the assumption that *OutHistory.org*'s mission goes beyond the sole dissemination of LGBTQ+ history on a digital platform. And because several articles deal with liberation movements and grassroots organizations, we can think that the website also pays an homage to all the activists who contributed to the making of LGBTQ+ history.

But *OutHistory.org* remains a precarious initiative. It relies partly on voluntary work, on grants, on visitors' donations, and people's contributions. Will the website be seen as valuable enough to receive grants enabling the continuation of its activities? In the last part of this thesis, we will see whether *OutHistory.org* reaches its goals: yoking all the different missions of LGBTQ+ history writers on one single website and sustaining visitors' interests as well as funding.

III. Mission Accomplished?

ICTS have increasingly found their place in the habits of Americans, whether for common uses or to professional ends. One of the advantages of new technologies is the fact that many services can be accessed from a single device, from everywhere with an internet connection. With the development of ICTS, whole parts of life have been relocated or replicated on electronic devices and on the world wide web. Print has been digitized, money can be exchanged in a click, one can play cards with relatives in Malaysia from one's couch and take online museum tours without leaving home. The internet has become a staple service in the lives of Americans and it has changed the way in which people communicate with each other.

Following the trend, LGBTQ+ communities have also found their place on the Internet. Indeed, thanks to large-scale communications, the relative anonymity, and the feeling of being physically out of reach that the internet provides, communities have been re-mapped. At the same time, distance between individuals has been circumvented, and the process of "search bars", which allows for targeted research, permits the economy of tedious conversations. Just as the previous generations found hidden meeting places out of fear of repression as well as covert channels for publications, so do LGBTQ+ Americans in the 21st century, only on a different medium. Thanks to dedicated "URLs" (the online versions of postal addresses), online dating applications specifically designed for gay encounters (like *Grindr* for gay men), and the possibility to create online communities on social media with whom to share similar interests and concerns, LGBTQ+ Americans have been able to pursue their lives, connected via interposed screens. Additionally, LGBTQ+ individuals (and communities) have been increasingly incorporated and assimilated into American society, and historically LGBTQ+ physical places have been less needed for living and have acquired a more symbolical dimension. These places of living and loving have become places for commemorating, remembrance, and preservation of what is now "history" as if they were real-size museums of things of the past.¹ This is the case in San Francisco "gayborhood"² the Castro where the Twin Peak Tavern, for instance, has been granted the

¹ Here, the term 'history' is used as a contrary of currentness.

² Portemanteau word composed of "gay" and "neighborhood" referring to districts where a high proportion of LGBTQ+ individuals reside or go to for leisure or consumption.

status of historical landmark.³ Similarly, as the American law and institutions have granted more rights to LGBTQ+ citizens, individuals could devote more time to the history of their communities, of those “like them”, since fighting for civil rights became a smaller part of the community’s activities.⁴ Also, while migrating was a common experience for LGBTQ+ youths in search of company, friendliness and acceptance, the internet made it easier to communicate with other LGBTQ+ people, reducing the feelings of isolation, alienation, and abnormality some of them experience as well as reducing the need to move away to LGBTQ+-friendly places.⁵ As far as LGBTQ+ historians are concerned, research methods rooted in communities and “bottom-up” approaches to history are compatible with the Internet. It seems obvious that they too embrace this medium as a platform for their scholarly work: they need to reach out to their audiences but also to circulate the results of their research on places where they are needed and where they are likely to be read.

In the academic world, the Internet served as an accessible showcase for universities, facilitated contacts between (prospecting) students and faculty. The digital turn allowed a transformation of the research publication process. Printed academic journals became digital. But this incredible tool that could allow people from different hemispheres to get in touch within seconds also resulted in dividing people. Indeed, IRL processes were replicated and the academia did not leave its ivory tower with the advent of the Internet in everyday life.⁶ A new business model around academic publications was created. The access to knowledge was facilitated since it still circumvents physical barriers, but the financial aspect and the exclusivity of membership still thrive.

At first, the Internet in the academia only reinforced the existing gap between those who can access knowledge and those who cannot. How does this gap materialize in the United States? For example, when looking for information on a given topic, one may find results they cannot access without paying a fee (usually, the cost to access a single scientific article revolves around 19 to 30 USD). The answer lies within reach but not within range of a small budget. Thankfully, the issue of the circulation of knowledge came to be addressed and the

³ San Francisco Planning Department, “Article 10 Landmark Historic Preservation Commission Case Report Initiation of Designation”, Case Number 2011.1123L, 19 September 2012, Web, <https://commissions.sfplanning.org/hpcpackets/2011.1123L.pdf> (Accessed 19 September, 2020).

⁴ Guillaume, Marche, *La Militance LGBT aux États-Unis* (Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2017), chap. 1.

⁵ Andrew Quinn, and Bruce Reeves. “Chapter 9: The Use of the Internet to Promote Social Justice With LGBT Individuals.” *Counterpoints*, vol. 358 (2009), p. 139. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42980369 (Accessed 26 Sept. 2020).

⁶ The initialism IRL refers to In Real Life.

debates about IRL access to knowledge were followed by discussions and actions about the access to digital knowledge.⁷ Other formats developed with the aim of offering access to content or to software to everybody. These initiatives are often labeled “open”: ‘open-source’, ‘open-format’, ‘open-access’. This terminology connotes the divisions which are prolonged on ICTS by insisting on the willingness of some to push the boundaries that separate individuals from knowledge content and knowledge production. The underpinning idea is to present all users with the same opportunities, independently of financial capacity. This issue is multifaceted. Indeed, for many researchers, it seems logical that the people they analyze, write about and thanks to whom they make a living should be able to read their papers.⁸ In the first decade of the 21st century, a tenfold increase of open-access publications was observed but comparatively, in 2012 in the academic landscape, open-access scholarship only represented one-fifth of what is otherwise published.⁹ Yet, access to knowledge is one of the three factors taken into account in the Index of Human Development measured by the American Human Development Project, placing it on the same level as health and standard of living.¹⁰ Access to knowledge then is crucial whether at the individual scale or at the scale of society. Data show that there are wide gaps in access to knowledge: broadening this access means reducing the gap between individuals.¹¹

Situating the website in the continuation of IRL LGBTQ+ studies and organizations, the founders of *OutHistory.org* have sought to bridge this existing gap between the American public and the LGBTQ+ past, working beyond the academic circuit. While we have witnessed a diversification of the topics taught and researched since the start of LGBTQ+ history curricula in schools, alongside new research methodologies and a grounding of the discipline within communities, the 21st century and the advent of the digital age brought

⁷ James A. Secord, “Knowledge in Transit”, *Isis*, vol. 95, no. 4 (2004), pp. 654–672, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/430657. Accessed 22 Sept. 2020.

⁸ Claire Gupta, Alice B. Kelly, “The Social Relations of Fieldwork: Giving Back in a Research Setting”, *Journal of Research Practice*, Volume 10, Issue 2, Article E2, (2014). <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/423/352>

⁹ Fred Hersch, et al., “Open Access: Everyone has the Right to Knowledge”, *The Conversation*, 26 October 2012. <https://theconversation.com/open-access-everyone-has-the-right-to-knowledge-10342>, (Accessed 13 September 2020).

¹⁰ American Human Development Project, “Access to Knowledge in America”, measureofamerica.org, 2011, <https://mk0moaorgidkh7gsb4pe.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/AHDP-EDUCATION-FACT-SHEET-11.08.10.pdf> (Accessed 13 September 2020).

¹¹ MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy, “Bridging the World’s Knowledge Divide”, November 2 2015, <http://ide.mit.edu/news-blog/blog/bridging-world%E2%80%99s-knowledge-divide>.

about new paradigms and issues.¹² What did LGBTQ+ history gain with the digital turn? Using *OutHistory.org* as a basis, this part asks the following question: how does digital public history articulate its debt to tradition, its focus on the past with the present concerns and ever-evolving uses of digital technologies? The *OutHistory.org* initiative intends to circumvent the difficulties that can prevent American citizens from accessing knowledge, but conversely, some elements prevent American citizen from accessing *OutHistory.org*. How is history presented on *OutHistory.org* and is the whole of the website greater than the sum of its parts? In this part, we will analyze whether its founders managed to yoke together the different missions of the historians on a single website. Then, we will wonder whose voices this digital and collaborative project effectively amplify, and lastly, we will analyze the reception of the website by studying how the audience interacts with it. Indeed, *OutHistory.org* is an independent project which has been managed by members of the academia but in the end, it has no institutional credentials in itself. It spreads across institutions and grassroots organizations but exists in none of these spaces. It features a large amount of LGBTQ+ content in various formats inspired by more traditional ones but oddly and insufficiently adapted to the digital medium. Community building online may require specific mechanisms that do not exist in the real world.

OutHistory.org was conceived as a “forum to learn, contribute, publish, and share [...] research with others”.¹³ It is a polymorphous project which works similarly to a micro-university, a museum, an archive repository and a meeting center. Yet, this multiplication of projects can be confusing, let apart the fact that amateurs and professional historians share the same platform, which adds to the ambiguity of the status of the website in visitors’ minds. First, we will turn to the website’s structure and formats and see how its different functions are displayed compared to the other sites of LGBTQ+ history existing in the American academic and cultural landscape.¹⁴

1. *OutHistory.org*: Patchworking History

¹² Marc Stein, “The Future of LGBT Civil Rights History: New and Forthcoming Books in the Field.” *Journal of Civil and Human Rights*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2015), pp. 201–211. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jcivihumarigh.1.2.0201 (Accessed 26 Oct. 2020).

¹³ *OutHistory.org*, “About”, <http://outhistory.org/about-outhistory> (Accessed 17 October 2020).

¹⁴ Here, “sites” is a synonym for “place”. Not to be confused with “website”.

To Jonathan Ned Katz, migrating excerpts of sexual history scholarship from paper to a digital platform was a way to align with the habits of Americans who increasingly turned to the web for plethora uses among which research, information, and networking. It means that it is first presented as a new medium for existing sexual history scholarship designed to correspond to a demand from audiences. But the major difference between the old and the new medium is that of accessibility: indeed, journals, monographs, study guides, biographies need to be borrowed or purchased. It means that a single document cannot be accessed by two persons simultaneously. Also, these documents are stored in specific locations: there is at least a physical distance between the document and the individual and fees may apply to access the document or the institution (like libraries, bookstores, archives centers or universities). Furthermore, documents do not necessarily have inherent value: if they are not consulted, read, interpreted, their meaning and their importance remains questionable. In this respect, the need for their preservation is to be demonstrated. This is the question which is at the heart of the work of archivists and defenders of archival material. In the case of LGBTQ+ history, documents are all the more valuable because since “deviant” sexuality and gender were met with repression, individuals tended to live covertly. In any case, if more and more individuals change their habits in media consumption, maybe structures, organizations, content creators should change their habits in both media production and storage.

In 2008, *OutHistory.org* emerged with the intent to curate and preserve this history by creating a website on which to publish scholarship and documents collections about LGBTQ+ history. The accessibility of resources on LGBTQ+ issues is particularly needed and sought for by LGBTQ+ youth in the USA: when information is not available in their physical space, they turn to the internet to find support and information.¹⁵ However, the academia is reluctant to publish its research output for free and for everyone. This is also true for public colleges despite being directly (or indirectly) financed with taxpayers’ money.¹⁶ It means that American taxpayers finance a service which they cannot access without paying additional fees. The philosophy of *OutHistory.org* is at odds with this practice: on the contrary, the website aims at “free[ing] this history from paywalls” while keeping standards that compete with academic requirements (notably through the

¹⁵ Andy Marra, “Out Online: the Experiences of LGBT Youth on the Internet”, *GLSEN*, July 10, 2013, <https://www.glsen.org/news/out-online-experiences-lgbt-youth-internet> (Accessed 13 September 2020).

¹⁶ Kalev Leetaru, “The Future of Open Access: Why has Academia not Embraced the Internet Revolution?”, *Forbes*, Web, April 29, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2016/04/29/the-future-of-open-access-why-has-academia-not-embraced-the-internet-revolution/#ac1387c45ebf> (Accessed 13 September 2020).

compliance to a set of publishing guidelines).¹⁷ *OutHistory.org* seeks independence from institutions or organizations, it seeks freedom from physical limitations (geographic distance), financial limitations (costly membership, subscription, tuition fees) and political limitations (censorship, administrative slowness). It is designed to be as publicly available as possible. It is presented as literal public history: the history of the people for the people in all its diversity.

How does the website reflect this orientation? The main content found on the website is a collection of “exhibits”. For a website specialized in history, it can be surprising to find so many “exhibits” since the word is primarily used in the art field, referring to art galleries which expose works of art for the public to see. Also, the word “exhibit” is a legal term, used during trials when attorneys present pieces of evidence on which they ground their argumentation. At first, the website’s visitors may be intrigued by what these exhibits are when dealing with LGBTQ+ history. In the end, it makes sense to call these articles “exhibits”: they show, and they argue. All the exhibits on the website are centered around pictures, paintings, engravings, news clippings, and other documents which are accompanied by research-based text illuminating their context by providing information. The importance of text is balanced with the power of images: readers have the possibility to visualize historical excerpts while benefitting from research explanation on the topic. This format presents the advantage of yoking together the research work beneath scientific articles with the visual representation of museum collections. Except in the case of guided tours or film projections, museums only accompany their collection with short descriptions, providing dates, sources but leaving out deeper explanations. On the contrary, scholarly articles rarely provide illustrations of the things they argue about, leaving the reader with the only power of words.

Thus, the fact that *OutHistory.org* is an online platform allows it to have a multimedia format: it provides an appeal to the senses (sight in this case) which gives concreteness to the conceptual level of words. Visitors can visualize the past and understand its complexities. At the same time, it operates as a window on the world of researchers by presenting the types of documents on which researchers base their studies, something maybe more telling than long bibliographies. By illustrating these articles and naming them “exhibits”, the website’s contributors appeal to the readers, increasing their attention-span.

¹⁷ *OutHistory.org*, “Homepage”, www.outhistory.org/.

Indeed, research has shown that the attention-span has reduced and that people tend to avoid reading.¹⁸ This polymorphism provided through the multimedia format is a way to adapt scholarship to the habits of the American public, to present them with formats that appeal to them and that they are already familiar with in terms of semantics. The website manages to bring knowledge content in an intelligible form for its audience, while keeping grounded in scholarship and unveiling the research process behind the written text to demystify the activities of researchers. In addition, the fact that the visual material often comes from daily life (newspaper clippings, yearbook photographs, flyers) conveys the importance that the worldly existence has for research. The process is democratic and circular: the exhibits deal with social and cultural history research using bottom-up approaches and are publicly disseminated in formats designed to correspond to the readers' habits of media and information consumption.

Apart from the numerous exhibits, *OutHistory.org* also serves as an archive repository. Indeed, a number of documents have been digitized to be accessible online. The collection of *OutHistory.org* includes the issues of the magazine *Come Out!* from 1966 to 1972 as well as police records dating back to the Stonewall riots (1969). The fact that they preserve those documents has political implications: in this specific case, they regard moments when people resisted, when people searched and found a place where they could express themselves, claim their identities, their values, their inclinations. The preservation of these documents is a tribute paid to those individuals whose lives were turned towards collective well-being and individual affirmation. Constituting an archive center of LGBTQ+ material and making it accessible from everywhere insists on the value of the people who struggled, illustrates the repercussions they had at the time, amplifies their voices across times and allows them not to be forgotten. In the present, accessing those materials informs on the risks that were taken at time, illustrates the modes of communication LGBTQ+ used and allows for a diachronic view of LGBTQ+ communities and the modes of organization of resistance and existence.

Michel de Certeau wrote that historians are dependent on the technological means of archives and their modes of consultations. Thus, for historians, the digital revolution, by enlarging the modes of access to the archives thanks to enhanced technicity, permitted a

¹⁸ Digital Information World, "The Human Attention Span", <https://www.digitalinformationworld.com/2018/09/the-human-attention-span-infographic.html> (Accessed 19 September 2020).

multiplication of the possibilities of analysis.¹⁹ The online repository then is a tool for researchers who are given the potential to widen the studies on LGBTQ+ history thanks to the easy access to the collection and the exploitation of the documents. Similarly, more interpretations can arise from the scholar community, and a multiplication of interpretations enriches the historiography with a renewal and revisions of existing histories. Furthermore, such an initiative leads to the recovery of segments of history that had remained hidden so far, deemed unworthy of preservation by mainstream institutions (studies had shown in the 1990s that most libraries lacked quality resources on LGBTQ+ topics in, but the situation has positively evolved since despite fewer efforts made for transgender issues).²⁰¹ In addition, the project materializes the different ways in which LGBTQ+ history is practiced and stored, the different actors who are involved in the process and the places where and the reasons why it is done.

Beyond presenting its own archival collection, *OutHistory.org* also introduces various LGBTQ+ archive centers from the United States among which the Lesbian Herstory Archives founded by Joan Nestle. The website, in partnership with the archive center, photographed and published a collection of buttons bearing lesbian slogans and symbols for visitors to see without having to go to the Lesbian Herstory Archives location. This collaborative approach aims at creating links between the different initiatives around the LGBTQ+ past, multiplying the points of access to the LGBTQ+ history of resistance and resilience and to build bridges between identities and community projects by enriching one another and providing support and visibility. Especially, it maintains the conversation between and about LGBTQ+ people ongoing. Besides, not only does *OutHistory.org* introduce the Lesbian Herstory Archives but it also reproduces a conversation that took place in 1978 between Jim Monahan and Joan Nestle in the pages of *The Gay Insurgent*. Their conversation almost takes the form of a dissertation about how the LGBTQ+ past should be preserved. The major point that opposes the two arguers is that of the relation of archives with institutions. Because one of the objectives of archival centers is the preservation of documents across time, Monahan contends that institutional support is required for the perennity and the security of the collections. In addition, according to him,

¹⁹ François Dosse, “17. Faire de l’histoire : l’opération historiographique”, Michel de Certeau, *Le Marcheur Blessé*, edited by François Dosse (La Découverte, 2007).

²⁰ Patricia Loverich and Darrah Degnan, “Out on the Shelves? Not Really,” *Library Journal* 124, n°11 (15 June 1995). ; Angie Beiriger, Rose M. Jackson, “An Assessment of the Information Needs of Transgender Communities in Portland, Oregon”, *Public Library Quarterly*, Vol. 26, (2007), p. 42.

keeping LGBTQ+ historical records separate from other collections prevents them from intersecting with other academic fields and leads to an impoverishment of scholarship. He also advocates for restricted access to the collections, proposing to grant access for “serious research” only. To Jim Monahan’s concerns, Joan Nestle has produced an answer which opposes almost all of his arguments. The source of their opposition, she writes, is grounded in their political views. Indeed, she claims being a radical lesbian feminist, that is being suspicious of institutions, among which the academic world, for it has preserved the status quo for centuries and perpetuated the same power dynamics oppressing those who differed from the male WASP standard.²² *OutHistory.org*, in including the conversation, provides its readership with the debates around the issue of LGBTQ+ archives, allowing readers to form an opinion. At the same time, Joan Nestle’s opinion and action in favor of open, free LGBTQ+ archives tie in with the independent status of *OutHistory.org* although the latter does overlap with academic institutions. The rupture with institutions that she presents and represents is both a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic one. She advocates for archive repositories created by the LGBTQ+ community independently from any agenda, which means that the documents archived at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (just as those on *OutHistory.org*) are as varied as there are donors.

In addition to presenting exhibits or archival collections, the website also presents a vast array of oral histories, some of them conducted by *OutHistory.org* editors and some of them from outside sources but published on *OutHistory.org*. These oral histories are not all presented in the same format. For example, only the transcripts of Marc Stein’s collection are reproduced on the website, the audio files are not included in the collection. However, they are illustrated with documents that contextualize the period discussed like scanned posters or photographs of places. The documents do not always come from the website’s archives, some of them were found in other repositories but are reproduced to illustrate the articles. This choice may be the result of a willingness to render some vividness to the otherwise bland transcript. Indeed, in oral histories, the audio is quite an important part of the process. In addition to what is being said, silences, tones, pauses, laughter also bear meaning. Transcripts are rather devoid of the emotions present in recorded conversations. Oral histories on *OutHistory.org* are either transcripts or are accessible via hyperlinks which lead to the website where they were originally located. In those cases, *OutHistory.org* only

²² WASP means White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, a category of the US population who has been seen as the dominant ethnic group over the others, not just based on whiteness but because of their culture ((upper)middle-class habits, family values, private ownership).

serves as an introductory step to the material but the audio files are not hosted on the website. Besides, no audio files nor videos are stored on the website at all: this is where the use of the multimedia format reaches its limits. The technology available in the digital age is not being fully put to use. In this case, it impoverishes the interest of sharing oral history by depriving the testimonies of their substance. In these conditions, are they still oral histories? This point is rather disappointing considering the emphasis the website put on this aspect of the historians' work in retrieving the LGBTQ+ past.

However, the website does comprise interactive content. Indeed, the website seeks to construct timelines of different topics. Timelines, as the name suggests, focus on time which is the editorial line of *OutHistory.org* (whose slogan is "It's about time!"). Here, time is represented in a chronological form. However, the chronology is not represented in the form of a text along which the reader advances in time as s/he progresses in the narrative. Nor is the chronological order presented in the bullet points format, typical of the synthetic presentation of diachronic topics. Instead, the timelines are horizontal lines on which time progresses from left to right. Events are pinpointed at the date on which they occurred. The choice of the timeline presents the advantage of showing, with a scale of events, when some event happened. It brings about relativity and permits visualization: it shows what events overlapped, what events happened at a distance from each other, highlighting features that written texts could miss or fail to emphasize. However, although timelines insist on dates and punctual facts, they do not reflect the processes underlying events and the articulation between them. Still, even though causal links between events are not expressed, each event is clickable and additional information is provided along with illustrations, making it interactive, appealing, and easy to read and browse. Thus, the visitors can explore topical timelines of, for example, transgender history or an "Activism and Organizing" timeline.

In conclusion, *OutHistory.org* attempts to take advantage of the different forms under which history is presented and results in a website combining functions and formats to offer a vast array of historical material, whether primary or secondary sources, about LGBTQ+ people. As such, it consists in a polymorphic cultural and scientific object, an experiment, an attempt at converting physical documents and experiences like museums and interviews into digital formats for LGBTQ+ people to learn about the history of other LGBTQ+ individuals. Indeed, LGBTQ+ history still tends to remain on the margins of American history. Considering the fact that the retrieval of LGBTQ history is time-consuming as documents are scattered in many different places and are not often contextualized or

explicated, having a significant amount of resources at hand can be relieving and more time efficient. What is more, varying the forms of presentation and building them around familiar, standardized structures (“exhibits”, transcripts, photographs...) enhances the willingness to regroup LGBTQ+ history in a single place, and to decompartmentalize it at the same time. In the end, the website builds digital bridges between the various institutions, organizations and individuals involved in the process of making and writing LGBTQ+ history. The polyvalence of *OutHistory.org* is possible because it is a collaborative project: it transcends individuality or rather, it creates a sort of historical beehive, a fabric made of a variety of singular threads woven together.

2. A History with Multiple Voices

OutHistory.org is a project that came to life under the initial idea and thanks to the impulsion of a single man: Jonathan Ned Katz. When the website was founded in 2008 it was under another URL corresponding to another version of the website than that which is used today. However, the old version is still accessible. On it, Katz’s original vision is explained:

In the 1980s, while working as secretary to the contract director of a major educational publisher, Jonathan Ned Katz first learned to use a computer, and fantasized that this huge, multi-floor office was actually a "gay history factory," and that the hundreds of people working busily in cubicles were actually researchers, paid to dig up forgotten bits of the LGBTQ past. The present LGBTQ history website is the realization of Katz's history factory dream.

In this statement, we see the three main concerns that led to the creation of *OutHistory.org*: writing LGBTQ+ history, using technology for research, and working in collaboration in a dedicated space. He wanted to build a team of like-minded people but who would keep their individuality (through the cubicles). The strength of each participant would add up to form the whole project. At the heart of the project: LGBTQ+ people’s voices to be deciphered, amplified and preserved. So far, LGBTQ+ history had been led by a small number of individuals, most of them working on their own or in small groups and keeping attached to their geographical space. With the internet, as we have said, the geographical areas can be transcended. The independent researcher (like Jonathan Ned Katz) can get in touch with an academic researcher sharing his concerns but working in a different framework. Research on marginal topics could become something else than a solitary work: the internet facilitated

collaborative work. Emulation is crucial in the development of ideas and for creative processes. Besides, disciplines complete each other (as we have seen) and the meeting of scholars from different areas, backgrounds and fields can only enrich scholarship. Providing a platform from a variety of researchers also participates in representing all the spaces in which LGBTQ+ people evolve from fashion to housing, from art to economics. Such a complete representation is instrumental in arousing vocations among the website's readership because it justifies and testifies to the importance of knowledge on LGBTQ+ issues for the whole society. Indeed, "LGBTQ+ topics" are often related to larger societal issues like AIDS, freedom of speech, police brutality, capitalism.

The back and forth movement between LGBTQ+ specificities and American generalities fosters a sense of belonging that LGBTQ+ people may lack, including within academic contexts. Indeed, a number of researchers from *OutHistory.org* have shared the difficulties they encountered when they started to conduct research on LGBTQ+ topics. Besides, most of them first entered their academic career by another door than that of LGBTQ+ studies. For example, Jonathan Ned Katz has a diploma in music and art, his first publications dealt with racial issues and the place of African Americans in the USA. Claire Bond Potter initially graduated in English before getting interested in history for its importance in civic life, which was the entry point to her studying LGBTQ+ history among other subjects like digital humanities and American politics, choosing not to put all her eggs in the LGBTQ+ history basket.²³

At the same time, *OutHistory.org* co-directors decided not to confine LGBTQ+ history to those working in the academia or to people with PhDs. Indeed, they encourage every visitor to contribute to the uncovering of LGBTQ+ history. People can give their voice to the project by sharing memories of LGBTQ+-related events they participated in, they can write pieces of history from LGBTQ+ landmark from their areas, they can give testimonies, objects, archives, for the website to showcase or to exploit for their historical values. Furthermore, as we have seen, *OutHistory.org* can serve as a platform for students in history to present their work. With the conception of guidelines to which publications must comply, the website initiates all kinds of visitors into the practice of history. On the

²³ *Schlesinger Library Newsletter*, "A Feminist Historian Promoting Digital Humanities", Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, Harvard University (online), 2015, <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news/schlesinger-newsletter/claire-bond-potter> (Accessed 26 October 2020).

website, everyone's voice is heard on an equal footing. Hierarchies are defied and deconstructed to value content instead.

The fact that the platform is digital facilitates contacts, reduces the cost of publication as well as the timespan between submission and publication. Of course, using the website does not involve exchange of money: it is free for reading and the contributions are voluntary. People engaging with the project are thus not driven by financial concerns but by historical ones only. The historians writing for the website do not further their academic career by doing so, nor are they influenced by any research department's focus or editorial line. The initiative aims less at convincing than at providing information and occasionally it presents points of view that are open to criticism and revision. The contributors do not advocate nor seek to present unshakable truth but rather open discussions about sources and their interpretations, or at least, such was the original intent.

Indeed, the first version of *OutHistory.org* was inspired by the collaborative online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* on the principle of open-source format and especially, open to revision and criticism via exchanges between the co-creators/users. So, visitors of *OutHistory.org* could formulate comments about articles on dedicated sections usually below the articles. However, on the current version of the website, this feature no longer appears. In a way, the removal of this feature erodes the collaborative process and reinforces the authoritative status of the authors, recreating the hierarchical structures the website sought to depart from. Also, by removing this space, the website moves further away from the principle of peer-review that is central to academic publishing. Thus, the principle underpinning the publishing process becomes unclear and the status of the articles published is ambiguous. This confused status may be a deterrent for participants who may question their role on the website. The diversity among the *OutHistory.org* staff and public can prove both a strength and a weakness in fostering commitment.

OutHistory.org is a choir of voices singing the LGBTQ+ experience, disseminated on a public platform to be heard by anyone with an interest in them. In order for all these voices to be heard, *OutHistory.org* founders needed to build a project that would speak to the audience. It needed to be intelligible to people, to speak their language. The Internet is such a vast ocean of websites that a website needs to be easily identifiable. Thus, in order to be able to communicate LGBTQ+ history on the internet, Jonathan Ned Katz and his team first had to learn the language of the web. Indeed, the Internet has its own semantics. Since the web abounds with an almost infinite number of websites, the choice of the name

as well as the choice of the design are crucial details to appeal to audiences. A website's paratext is instrumental in indicating the nature, the purpose of a website as well as the public it targets. We are going to analyze how these adjustments, which required expertise outside of the field of history, were made with the interests of developing the link between different entities in the pursuit of the LGBTQ+ past.

For *OutHistory.org*, which was in part created to open the possibilities of access to LGBTQ+ history, it meant designing the website so as to be openly, visibly, LGBTQ+-friendly. We will see how the design conveys this message. The choice of the medium is both the result of the technological evolutions and of the existence of cultural movements linked to sexualities (like online dating programs, forums dedicated to exchanging questions about identity and sexuality or online LGBTQ+ news outlets). Among the decisions that needed to be taken was the choice of the website's name. On the older version of the website, a brief history of how the website turned from an idea to a reality reveals that the name '*OutHistory.org*' was suggested by Carl Pritzkat, the founder of *Mediapolis*, the website development company that first worked pro-bono to create the website.²⁴ This openness and trust in a man who is a specialist of websites rather than history is evidence of a truly collaborative approach between all parties involved in the *OutHistory.org* project. Pritzkat, despite being a businessman, agreed to put his profit aside and to share his expertise for the greater good, seeing all the potential in Katz's project. Katz admittedly could benefit from some intelligence in marketing. But the founders did not only turn towards experts to make a contribution in the building stage of the project. The website also offered visitors the possibility to submit their idea for the slogan. Getting people involved in *OutHistory.org* from its inception echoes the notion that the website was not supposed to belong to anyone but rather was a place to share between all the actors using it. The stakes of calling for participation for the slogan may not be high but the reliance on public and private collaborations, with a vast array of specialists and website visitors, testifies to the will to decompartmentalize the standard hierarchical categories. In its structure, *OutHistory.org* seeks to circumvent the pyramidal model and to level it instead. Admittedly, there is a division of labor but the contribution from each party is valued and put forward on the website.

Aside from managing a website, the founders created pages on social media: @OutHistory on *Twitter* (January 2009) and a *Facebook* page and a *Facebook* group both

²⁴ "Website Design", *OutHistory.org*, outhistory.org/oldwiki/About#Website_Design (Accessed 4 May, 2020).

called @OutHistory.org. Here again, the need to come together, to build a community transpires. Community building has come to be a defining feature of the lives of LGBTQ+ people. As the ways to do so evolved, the social function of the internet was put to use by the staff. Besides, social media really are platforms on which sharing is easy. In addition, they are free: it costs only the device and the internet connection to use them. More than two thousand people are connected on the *Facebook* page and around one thousand and two hundred people are part of the group. While the *Facebook* page is like a window for the website, advertising its content by sharing links to the articles with engaging introductions, the *Facebook* group is rather a space for community participation where members share LGBTQ+ related events like marches, articles from other media sources, discuss news topics and sometimes share their collections or recollections with the other members. On this group, *OutHistory.org* is rather secondary, it is not really the centerpiece around which the community is based. The group collects more participation than the website does. It may prove less daunting for members to share on the group of heterogeneous members precisely because social media are rather designed to talk about personal issues which can be perceived by the public as unfit for scholarly research, as not having historical value. Besides, on the group, all voices are equal: the platform does not differentiate between scholars, amateurs or casual visitors. Rather, it values engagement and contributions from a quantitative perspective and does not take into account the qualities or qualifications participants have. Again, this medium decompartmentalizes and levels its members, once again bridging research and lofty ideals with worldly conversations and day-to-day concerns and events. It creates a link between past and present, between history and memory, between community and individuality. This medium, operating in parallel to the history website, unites LGBTQ+ voices in a dedicated space on the web. This group, designed by the *OutHistory.org* founders, illustrates their desire for inclusiveness in the writing of LGBTQ+ history.

Being inclusive means building bridges between different identities, it means overcoming the barriers that separate people into different categories to unite them around common concerns. This particularly transpires in the emphasis on oral history: indeed, as Staughton Lynd indicates in his preface : “Participants in making history should be regarded not only as sources of facts but as colleagues in interpreting what happened.”²⁵ For example,

²⁵ Staughton Lynd, *Doing History from the Bottom Up: On E.P. Thompson, Howard Zinn, and Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* (Haymarket Books, 2014).

in an interview conducted by Marc Stein in 1993 (the transcript of which is available on *OutHistory.org*), we see the dynamics of historical reconstruction and interpretation between the scholar and his interviewee “Mark Kendall” ²⁶ :

MS: Can you talk about why, what you think was going on?

MK: I think it was just the ordinary type of xenophobia. There was lack of familiarity, lack of contact. Like many of the race problems that still exist are, I think, largely because there isn't enough social contact. And there wasn't social contact between gay men and lesbians.

Here, the historian tries to investigate the reasons why gay men and lesbians did not unite in places of sociability and the interviewee provides his personal interpretation of the phenomena he witnessed at the time with his personal frame of thought and the observations he made at the time, which the historian could not do or learn about. Together, they are able to reconstruct a facet of the past as it was lived at the time. The interviewee finds his place in the process of making history. The interviewer's voice conducts the interview, but the participant's voice resonates both as an historical actor and history creator. The divisions between the two “worlds” collapse and the borders of expertise are reconfigured. On the website, there is a section entitled “Tell us your Story” where visitor can submit their recollections. The editors specifically target Pride parades and marches like the 1987 march in Washington. They provide some guiding questions on which the testimonies can be based to articulate these moments when the individual meets the collective movement. To this day, there are less than ten testimonies and among them are recollections by the editors themselves. What is more, the link intended to lead visitor to the interface on which they can submit their personal story is not working anymore. ²⁷ The intent to replicate online the process of conducting oral history is rather a failure but it is not far from being successful: the approach is enticing but the website is not sufficiently updated so visitor do not have the opportunity to participate at all in this part of the project. It may not be intentional, but it is somehow ironic. Reconfiguration (both digital and paradigmatic) is essential for a dialogue to start. From this perspective, scholars need to adapt to their audience if they want to work conjointly towards change.

Since *OutHistory.org* tries to yoke together rigid academic requirements with an openness to non-specialist audiences, the language used needs to be adapted to be both precise, concise and clear. It can be complicated for people having been trained and having

²⁶ Marc Stein, ““Mark Kendall” oral history interview”, *OutHistory.org*, <http://outhistory.org/items/show/15> (Accessed 30 September 2020).

²⁷ I tried to access it on the 15th November 2020.

evolved in an intellectual culture to move outside of this sphere to convey their message in a different form so that it can be understood, but it is crucial that they do so, otherwise the whole initiative would be vain. Indeed, history relates very much to experience, as is especially flagrant in oral history. “Intellectualizing experience” creates a hierarchical gap between the researcher and the interviewee or the scholar and the non-specialist reader. Also, the intellectualization of experience and the theory that comes from it can result in abstractions that overlook the humans underpinning.²⁸ Yet, LGBTQ+ history deals with human beings and *OutHistory.org* deals with specifically with human individuals (as opposed to queer theory which deals with concepts). Indeed, an important number of articles on the website are centered around individuals and delve into their lives to investigate the particularities of their experience rather than dealing with collectives or deriving globalizing statements that apply to the whole “group” of LGBTQ+ Americans. This is the reflection of the bottom-up approach (oral history, social history, cultural history) adopted by the contributors to *OutHistory.org*, and the result of this approach is to find nuance and multiplicity against stigma and categorization. In political struggles, individuals tend to unite, to form collective actions and to speak for the group. Here, it is all the various voices that are amplified to present the complexities at the heart of the LGBTQ+ political communities.

However, scholars need to circumscribe what exactly is being studied and for that, they have to raise epistemological questions. There are several articles on the website written by both John D’Emilio and Jonathan Ned Katz dealing with epistemological problems linked to the study of LGBTQ+ people. In some of these articles, discussions of the epistemological position of other LGBTQ+ scholars are included, which allows one to form a personal opinion but also, to form one’s political point of view on the questions of sexualities. It is crucial to understand the epistemology of the website: in this case, *OutHistory.org* seeks to avoid an ahistorical comprehension of ‘gays’ of the past as being the ‘ancestors’ of gays in present times (an argument used in the essentialist tradition). Instead, Katz wrote a “manifesto” in which he shares how he conceives his approach to LGBTQ+ history: in his own terms, his work is rooted in a “social-historical construction” of sexualities. In this manifesto, he discusses different arguments for this approach to sexualities as well as other, differing conceptions of the field. This particular essay is

²⁸ Gerald Graff, “The Academic Language Gap.” *The Clearing House*, vol. 72, no. 3(1999), p. 142, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30189430 (Accessed 28 September 2020).

grounded in theory and the language is academic.²⁹ Scholars cannot omit to discuss the roots of their work for they transpire through their writings and signal to others their place on the academic spectrum. By positioning themselves, they can attract other scholars to join the project. Here again, the conception of sexuality differ from what can be found in political activism where for example, essentialists arguments can be used like the slogan “Born this way”. The same fact (that not all people experience sexuality equally) can have different justifications as well as different aims. Here, the aim is to open LGBTQ+ history to the public realm as much in creation as in circulation.

Thus, *OutHistory.org* is conceived as a platform dedicated to entertaining a dialogue between the various participants in LGBTQ+ history. After having dealt with its conception and its operation, we should now turn to the study of its reception. Indeed, if *OutHistory.org* transmits a message, how is it decoded by its receivers?

We have seen how *OutHistory.org* communicates but how is *OutHistory.org* received? The website does not have a wide reach for it is still “niche”. Not everyone has an interest in diving into a repository. Mostly, when searching for secondary sources about the website, we found results on personal blogs, one academic publication (from a former *OutHistory.org* contributing editor), several mentioning from universities or research centers (institutions) because the editors worked in these places or in collaboration with them. In other words, the website is not heavily publicized in traditional media outlets, they do not make it to the news. The result is that they do not benefit from a real visibility (despite being publicly present). The website amplifies the multiplicity of voices of LGBTQ+ Americans but their own voice is not shared in its turn.

The motivations that led to the creation of *OutHistory.org* may have been related to lofty designs, but do they concretize to the extent that was intended? Does this plurality of voices and forms end up being heard or does it fail to captivate the audience because of their information overload?

3. *OutHistory*: a Cacophonous Project?

²⁹ Jonathan Ned Katz, “Envisioning the World We Make, Social-Historical Construction, a Model, a Manifesto”, *OutHistory.org*, February 2016, <http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/katz-writing-work/katz-my-vision> (Accessed 26 October 2020).

The purpose of *OutHistory.org* in terms of circulation is to move LGBTQ+ history out of the academic circuits. But the lack of academic credentials and the fact that it is an online platform erodes the website's credibility. To bypass those doubts, the editors have written a set of guidelines to which publications must comply to. The guidelines are not unattainable, they mainly regard diversity of content and of contributors and serve as a reminder of the website's focus on time and understudied research areas. The only elements regarding history writing deal with accuracy: a high level of accuracy is required and for that, sources and evidence are expected to be shared. It is quite the only requirement in terms of the scientific quality of the contributions. This does not match academic requirements that demand a methodology to be presented, writings to be problematized, and submissions for publication to be reviewed by peers (i.e. to be approved by members of the profession that can attest the quality and relevance of the work submitted). Hence the dilemma: how to avoid the constraints of academic research while preserving the quality of the works?

On *OutHistory.org*, people can submit papers for publication and their work is reviewed before being published but this is not an "objective" process since the reviewers are the website's editors. The publication of articles on the website does not mean that they meet academic standards, it rather means that they add content to LGBTQ+ historiography. For example, Pr. David Palmer's students' papers are not really problematized nor is their methodology exposed. However, their contribution is valued because they belong to an area that is under-researched, and thus it is aligned with the willingness of *OutHistory.org* to expand the state of LGBTQ+ history. In practice, it is difficult to conciliate historical narratives created by 'anybody' and those written by professors and scholars. Indeed, it leads to a reproduction of the authoritative schemes that are found in the academy. However, when I questioned Marc Stein, one of *OutHistory.org*'s contributing editors, he did express regret that the website could not integrate peer-review processes: "The main difference has been the absence of peer review, and thus the absence of critical and constructive comments, when writing for a website."³⁰ In the end, *OutHistory.org* fails to be entirely "democratic" and open (for the sake of accuracy) but also fails to assert its quality on the same level as academically based history writing. For the visitors, it leads to confusion as to the status of the website and their own legitimacy in contributing to the project. It is not engaging enough while at the same time it can be seen as too open to be trusted. As said in the previous part,

³⁰ See Appendix 4, answer to question 15.

putting on the same level contributions from scholars and contributions from non-professionals is double-edged and it seems difficult to conciliate these two aspects while keeping quality history writing.

Moreover, scientific requirements are essential to counterbalance all the fake news and the dangers of misinformation that characterize the post-truth era, especially considering that they use the same channels of circulation: the Internet and social media. Due to its structure, concerns can be raised about the reliability of the website. First, because it is a website: content on the web is often more dubious than content in print because there is less control on information published on the web than there is on paper formats.³¹ On *OutHistory*, information about the authors, the modes of hosting, of funding and the parent institution are not directly mentioned but need to be looked for. The fact that no clear institution affiliation appears raises doubts about the legitimacy of the website. In the online landscape, institutional sponsoring both bolsters referencing on the *Google* algorithm and other search engines' and adds a credibility caution. On *OutHistory.org*, there is an effort towards transparency, but it requires a time that visitors may not have, especially researchers who need to be (time-) efficient. *OutHistory.org* may not be considered as reliable enough. The result is that when one comes across the homepage of the website, it seems created by non-specialist writers (due to the open-source format) and it conveys passion more than expertise. At the same time, this cautious attitude towards the website's legitimacy is symptomatic of its approach: it seeks to transcend the dichotomy and the power relations between community and academy. But a problem remains. Indeed, although *OutHistory.org* deals with a variety of topics and collaborates with a number of organizations, not many sources deal with *OutHistory.org*. Whether on news outlets, on university pages, on other digital history projects, *OutHistory.org* is rarely mentioned. Moreover, the board members and editors do not seem to be willing to invest in a "marketing" campaign to remedy this situation. It results in an interesting, collaborative website whose aim is to share its content but that fails to reach its objective because it is rather unknown. In this context, we may wonder whether LGBTQ+ people's voices, supposed to be amplified, find a resonance on *OutHistory.org*.

The website's founders seem to be aware that the purpose of *OutHistory.org* is unclear to visitors and that its structure is hard to navigate. Indeed, there is a page dedicated to

³¹ Phil Poole, "English", *Primary ICT handbook* (Nelson Thornes Ltd., 2001), p. 24.

clarifying all the different features the website offers. What is most surprising about this page is that it is not directly accessible from the homepage, so that users are not aware of its existence unless they have prior knowledge it exists. Also, the blog section, the most interactive feature between editors and contributors, has not been updated since 2017. It has been three years since the last post was published. This apparent loss of interest and the very academy-oriented posts may have contributed to the lack of public participation. Again, the website seems to fall short of its promises. But the most striking is the clear lack of participation. People do not engage with the website and individual visitors do not leave traces of their visit. In 2018, we looked for *OutHistory.org*'s traffic using SimilarWeb, a company specialized in analyzing websites' traffic and audience demographics.



Fig. 2: Overview of *OutHistory.org* audience metrics, SimilarWeb.com, <http://similarweb/website/outhistory.org> (2018).

The number of visits is quite high but the average time spent on the website (57 seconds) is very low. It illustrates the difficulty for the audience to navigate the website, to grasp its mechanisms and functions. The number of pages by visit reinforces this impression that the audience does not adhere to the concept. To this day (2020), the website does not provide enough data to consider an evolution despite having recently changed elements of design among which the colors and the logo, but overall, the website designers have not yet addressed the navigation problems, at least not enough. The great potential of *OutHistory.org* is not exploited enough, whether by the founders or the users. The fact that it remains an independent enterprise that thrives on donations and grants may make it hard for the staff to commit because of the lack of funding. Besides, supplying the website with articles takes a lot of times that the contributing editors and other scholars may not have in sufficient quantity to offer new content on a regular basis for they already have time-consuming jobs.

As of now, *OutHistory.org* still stands out from the digital history landscape. It manages to feature articles on historical LGBTQ+ figures and events (i.e. those who are well-known and circulated) as well as articles on lesser-known parts of the LGBTQ+ past, focusing on everyday life and common people. Its vast array of visual material competes with museum websites. To this day, it remains a “one-of-a-kind” project. But it materializes in a “jack of all trades, master of none” situation. Indeed, the website does not have the ability to foster change if it cannot attract audiences that would pass its messages on. In this respect, the *Facebook* group is the example of what the website has failed to implement: a grounding in current events and in existing and active communities.

This is so because even though the Internet and ICTS present outstanding advantages that are hard to replicate in real life, the contrary is also true. By cutting itself from physical locations, *OutHistory.org* has suppressed the potentialities for community to gather around common interests. Some *Facebook* users who are active on the *Facebook* group occasionally share news and anniversaries, past and present events, in order for the community to share time together. The importance of physical contact remains key to action. It is possible that technological advances have, in some respects, prevented this social link from acting as a political ferment as it had done at the time of student movements and with the bar culture for example. The Internet, by providing a 24/7 access to its content, does not necessarily fuel a need for people to meet in person or to synchronize with one another. Conversations between people are delayed because individuals connect at their

own pace, contrary to what happens at a conference for example, where people gather at the same time to discuss topics that are common to all participants. If the website does not aim at separating people, it does not necessarily present a platform for getting together nor does it create space for a real exchange. Jonathan Ned Katz's initial plan was that of a "factory" where people would work in "cubicles", side by side. Here, space is shared not between individuals but between their work only, as two books on the same bookshelves but whose authors have not necessarily met. The founders have not yet managed to replicate the momentum the 'Before Stonewall' contest had created. It seems to have lost its initial dynamism.

Similarly, *OutHistory.org* remains quite isolated in the digital history realm. Yet, the website is not an exception. LGBTQ+ history projects, (especially digital ones), as Claire Bond Potter has asserted, should communicate more in order to gather strength and have a more complete view of LGBTQ history in the USA.³² At the moment, *OutHistory* does communicate with some other organizations for the spread of LGBTQ+ history like for example the Lesbian Herstory Archives. The LHA proposes a physical place for the storage and consultation of the collection, but also a digital access to some photographs, audio and video files. *OutHistory.org* offers a digital access to a collection of buttons that were not available on the web before that. The digital sphere offers initiatives like the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and the New Media (RRCHNM), an organization which provides help for the creation of digital history projects. The RRCHNM displays a portfolio of all the projects the organization guided, it offers online forums for the participants to exchange, to help each other and to create bonds. Besides, when the website launched the "Before Stonewall" contest, Meghan Rohrer, a transgender Lutheran pastor, despite having clues and insight regarding MTF transitions (meaning someone transitioning from their male gender assigned at birth to female gender) needed the help of the GLBT society to be able to curate an exhibit consistent with the requirements of the discipline of history. There is a real symbiosis between individuals and organizations, as there can be symbiotic exchanges between organizations.

However, *OutHistory.org* is not a part of the RRCHNM and seems to remain isolated in the digital history landscape. This contrasts with the idea of community building and public participation. *OutHistory.org* would benefit from affiliation with other projects especially

³² Claire Bond Potter, "What LGBT Digital Public History Requires", *OutHistory.org*, par. 6, <http://outhistory.org/blog/what-digital-public-history-requires/> (Accessed 26 October 2020).

those that already have a basis of visitors. The Internet uses the world wide web system where websites are “hyperlinked” to one another. The problem of *OutHistory.org* is that it is not hyperlinked sufficiently to benefit from the system of navigation used on the Internet. The website is a repository for LGBTQ+ material and it does highlight other digital or physical history projects, but the contrary is not true. As a result, when looking for information on LGBTQ+ history in the USA, *OutHistory.org* is hard to find through a general search on *Google*. For example, it does not appear within the first ten pages of results when typing “LGBTQ+ history USA” whereas many other digital history projects (or history projects’ websites) are referenced. *OutHistory.org* remains marginal within the wider realm of LGBTQ+ history websites, it is the victim of a trap of its own making: that of independence.

However, this situation is not necessarily irremediable. One of the advantages of web projects is that they can more easily evolve, change, transform than print projects. Just like print publications can have revised editions, websites can change design, content be regularly updated. *OutHistory.org* took advantage of the malleability that digital content offers. In the course of the years, it has been gradually transformed. The project that was set up in 2008 is very different from the version of *OutHistory.org* that is visible now (2020) and it will certainly continue to evolve as needs change. The old version of the website is still accessible. This willingness to keep this version alive despite having created another version indicates that *OutHistory.org* itself is historical. In doing so, the creators insist on the evolutive character of the project. The old version, which is no longer updated, stands as an artefact from the past, as an object worthy of historical study, useful to grasp the steps it took to develop an online collaborative project. *OutHistory.org* founder, Jonathan Ned Katz, chose to preserve the most he could, knowing how the LGBTQ+ past is hard to retrieve. In doing so, he also sought to facilitate this task to future historians. His work bears witness of the structural transformations of the field of LGBTQ+ history. From his book *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* to the current version of *OutHistory.org*, he exemplifies the shift of the field from a one-man project to a collaborative process in retrieving the LGBTQ+ past of ordinary Americans to see how they lived their gender and sexuality in their own time. Keeping the old version of the website alive alongside the more recent version is also a way to preserve his contribution to LGBTQ+ historiography in terms of topics and approaches. His lifelong commitment to LGBTQ+ spokespersons but more especially to LGBTQ+ laypersons permeates his

projects. He intended to give jobs to LGBTQ+ scholars as well as amateurs to investigate this past which in turn would be redistributed to the community. The “old wiki” is different in design as well as in approach from the current version of *OutHistory.org*, illustrating the challenges that the *OutHistory.org* staff was confronted to: the importance of the design in improving the user’s experience, the need to restrict the collaborative process to maintain high quality information for the readers, or else the importance of visual material in bringing sensitivity to the study of the past. When we look at Stuart Hall’s diagram on encoding and decoding cultural discourses, it is implied that the encoders and the decoders possess different structures of knowledge and different infrastructures when it comes to encoding and decoding.³³ There are several implications to this: first, encoders and decoders are necessarily different and can hardly switch positions. Second, a similar set of codes must be shared between the two parties and the more codes are shared, the better the message can be transmitted. Here, the main infrastructure is the website, accessible through the URL and the use of an electronic device, which, as we have said, is largely spread in the USA. However, the website is still obscure for users, which means that the infrastructure, despite being identical to all parties involved, may not have been used as is commonly expected.

Besides, the evolution of the website is not completed yet (and it certainly does not aim at finitude). Indeed, in 2014, *OutHistory.org* extended its presence to the social media specialized in visual material, *Instagram* (under the handle @out_history). It used the media as a window to *OutHistory.org* but the centrality of photographs and visual presentation really immersed the visitor into the collection presented by the website. At the same time, the short format provided by *Instagram* was also an opportunity to share more militant or uplifting messages, stepping away from historical work to further engage with the visitors’ present concerns (like elections and date-related events like celebration of the “Juneteenth”, an date during Pride Month (in June) dedicated to the LGBTQ+ youth). However, on the 28th September 2020, a new post was published which did not consist in a photograph but in a short text, “Everything you need to know as an LGBTQIA+ person, advocate and ally about Amy Coney Barrett” and accompanied by a long description. In this description, we could learn that once again, the website is going to undergo a change or so it says. The description reads:

³³ see Appendix 2.

In the next coming months, *OutHistory* will be changing our content. We will be featuring important news and information leading up to the Presidential Election for 2020. We will do our best to keep ourselves and the community informed on everything happening in the world.

The description went on to mention the fact that Judge Amy Coney Barrett was considered as a replacement for late Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg who died in September 2020. In addition, the description contained a direction for visitors to go read a *New York Times*' article about Barrett's (Conservative) record. Then, the *OutHistory.org Instagram* account changed its editorial line to post news-related content to inform on 'LGBTQIA+' rights. In a second post about Judge Barrett's potential nomination from the 20th of October, the black text on a grey background that replaces the usual LGBTQ+ people portraits reads: "While this news is heavy and heartbreaking, let it ignite the fire within you to fight for your rights as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, as an ally, or as an activist."

This message is quite clear in itself: it is a call to action. It is a message encouraging people to join in the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights. The phrase "let it ignite the fire within you" reminds the reader of the 1960s understanding of activism, when it was synonymous with revolutionary claims and actions. Indeed, the issue at stake is the taking away of hardly won rights like marriage equality and abortion rights (*Obergefell v. Hodges* and *Roe v. Wade* could be overturned). In a wider perspective, the already precarious state of social security and access to medical care could be further threatened, a concern that especially touches LGBTQ+ people who have a history of having difficult access to quality healthcare.³⁴

OutHistory.org has thus chosen to make its *Instagram* account a platform on which to share urgent news on LGBTQ+ issues in order to spark a feeling of urgency in visitors and for them to take action to protect and further LGBTQ+ rights. While it had the same intent with the website as a whole, the original focus was the focus on history which, by definition, focuses on the past. Here, the light is cast on contemporaneous events and while they are historically contextualized, they regard current or even future events. It seems as if every platform had its own role. They all gravitate around the history website *OutHistory.org* but the *Facebook* group is only a window to the site, advertising content like anniversaries, birthday, events that happened that day in LGBTQ+ history. Thus, it entertains public memory and remembrance. The *Facebook* group is fueled with people who share IRL LGBTQ+-related events as well as current LGBTQ+ news (mostly death of LGBTQ+ people or nominations of LGBTQ+ people to important positions): its function is to foster

³⁴ *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, March 2018 (Accessed 25 October 2020).

feelings of community. As for the *Instagram* account, it used to be another window to the website, but it has turned into a place of activism. By centering its content around current issues and supplying it with information to raise awareness about LGBTQ+ rights, it provides a starting point for political action. Using the past as a weapon to legitimate LGBTQ+ rights, the *Instagram* account highlights present threats to the LGBTQ+ community in order for the community and its allies to fight for their future. This account insists on the fact that time does not stop and that it is up to the actors living in this time to make it count and to use it to make history themselves. In the end, the account is also about time.

The shift of focus from the past to the present and future is reflected by the changes in the editorial board. Indeed, the staff has recently been renewed. New positions have been created like ‘social media interns’. These additions to the staff happened at a time when John D’Emilio and Claire Bond Potter left the staff and gained the position of ‘emeritus’. Their contributions are valued and recognized but they chose to leave the boat to embark on other projects, leaving space for “fresh blood” within the staff. Just as times evolve, so does *OutHistory.org*. These new additions to the staff are mainly graduate female students who are also involved in other community-based and digital initiatives and the fact that they joined *OutHistory.org* testifies to the website’s relevance in the present. It still manages to foster commitment in 2020 despite having lost momentum around 2017. The renewal of interest on the part of young scholars from the generation of millennials, these young adults who have grown up as ICTS have developed at a rocketing pace, could benefit *OutHistory.org*. With new members onboard, the platform already reinvents itself to correspond more to the habits of Americans in terms of media consumption. The addition of the *Instagram* account and its shift of focus reveals this willingness to respond to the demand of the audience.

While we could think that this is a breaking point and a departing from the original project, we contend that this is inscribed in its continuity. Indeed, it took young scholars and graduate students to spark interest in LGBTQ+ history in the academia just as student movements have been a huge part of the liberation movements. The website has always been oriented towards students (and other researchers) as David Palmer’s students’ project illustrates. The academic course ‘Queering the Web’ destined to students and taking *OutHistory.org* as a basis for its curricula worked in that vein: the website, in addition to being a space for LGBTQ+ history, is also a space for the transmission of knowledge and

by extension, of power. Of creative power notably, but also the power to continue this historical project. At the moment, we are witnessing this transfer of power from one generation of scholars to the other. This form of collaboration is rich and double-sided: the new recruits benefit from the experience, the insights and hindsight of the original team. They also benefit from an already existing platform and from the legitimacy of scholars like Jonathan Ned Katz, John D’Emilio and Claire Bond Potter. In turn, they bring new perspectives to the project, more time and energy to devote to the project since they do not have a full-time position yet. The result is that, despite what it looked like when we started studying *OutHistory.org*, the project is not abandoned, it continues to evolve as it is meant to, and we can hope that with these adjustments, others will come. Maybe one day the website will manage to stimulate public collaborations by reaching out to a wider, more diverse audience. Maybe one day, the website will be more publicized and less marginalized so that it can be the starting point of political and societal change as it aims to be. In any case, “It’s about time!”.

OutHistory.org is the perfect example of the state of independent research in digital public history. Its approach, placing the community at the heart of their project, resonates with a generation of historians who have worked in close cooperation with LGBTQ+ communities and who have thought that their project should benefit from a digital platform with the intent to remove the distance between LGBTQ+ people and their history. Every contributor has brought a special touch to the website, some in the digital realm, some in given subject areas among all those present in the different exhibits featured on the website.

Making space for every voice that had a story to tell about the LGBTQ+ past was possible through hard, often voluntary work, and involved stepping outside of one’s boundaries. This resulted in a singular initiative meant to foster social and political change. Because LGBTQ+ civil rights have been the core around which communities were built, mobilizing Americans, LGBTQ+ or allies is still necessary to retain a strong base ready to fight to preserve these rights and to fight for those who still do not benefit from equality.

However, conceiving a structure that would build bridges between disciplines, connect organizations together, unite the academy and individuals, requires an architect’s work and historians are not necessarily equipped to handle these challenges. Social media can be complicated to animate as we have seen, and a website’s structure is crucial in terms of user experience. For the collaborative process to take off, the first step was to engage the public to participate but this part has proven more easily said than done: there is a lack of

interactivity. But instead of giving up on the project when the audience did not turn up as expected, the staff came back with a rejuvenated team and launched new initiatives to reach out to people as an illustration of the resilience of LGBTQ+ communities.

The result is a website and its related social media, continually crafted to massively circulate LGBTQ+ history for free and to build an online community of researchers, K-12 teachers, students and LGBTQ+ people, all animated by the same interest in the LGBTQ+ past. By raising awareness on LGBTQ+ issues, by telling the lives of all those who experienced their gender and their sexuality in non-conforming ways across time and across the country, *OutHistory.org* has the potential to exponentially expand the possibilities for making history, whether online or offline. Its future is in the image of its genesis and development: promising.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have analyzed the role of the historians of LGBTQ+ history in society in the digital era. Is LGBTQ+ history still a radical enterprise? In order to answer that question, we focused on an LGBTQ+ history website founded by Jonathan Ned Katz, an independent scholar in LGBTQ+ history, *OutHistory.org*. At the intersection of public history, oral history, and digital history, serving as an archive repository and founded on a collaborative approach, the website offers close looks at the LGBTQ+ past, to all and for free. The founding objective was to mobilize a community of LGBTQ+ scholars and layperson to gather around their common past and to achieve work together to change society on LGBTQ+ issues. All things considered, this initiative seems to have expanded what can be comprised as the role of historians: here, community is placed at the heart of the project and academic concerns are downplayed to leave space for other voices to emerge, for voices that could not always be heard.

LGBTQ+ Americans had to organize and protest to be able to live free and these struggles continue to preserve the rights hardly acquired. For at least three centuries before that, they had faced imprisonment for homosexual conducts, they were shamed for their inclinations, they were regarded as suffering from a mental disease that needed to be treated. Lesbian and gay couples were not recognized by institutions and transgender individuals were denied humanity and even their right to live. Arrests, brutality, deportations, evictions were common to LGBTQ+ Americans. But gradually, through protests, through the circulation of their history and through the increasing number of people who “came out of the closet”, they have been assimilated into the American society as citizens like others and are no longer considered as deviant by institutions. However, even nowadays, the rights they have acquired protest after protest remain at risk of being revoked. Especially, “effective rights”, stemming from a change in collective consciousness, are hard to monitor. LGBTQ+ people still face discrimination and harassment in the workplace or at schools. American LGBTQ+’s lives and rights are a political issue and their situation is ever evolving: it certainly has evolved alongside progressive politics but it remains precarious. In recent years, many transgender individuals have been targets of hate crimes and the risk of being murdered has increased for POC transgenders.

In this study, we insisted on the role of LGBTQ+ history in the fight against LGBTQ+-phobia in American society. Indeed, we saw that awareness is a step towards

social change and that the work of historians was used, for instance, in landmark Supreme Court decisions like *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) which overturned *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) that criminalized sodomy between consenting adults. Considering the difficulty in dealing with LGBTQ+ issues within the academia (in a way that is not harmful to the individuals), the first scholars to undertake such studies did so by their own means, outside of academic settings. As the first LGBTQ+ communities were created, campuses also witnessed the gathering of LGBTQ+ students and faculty and became a place of activism. This political ferment in educational contexts contributed to the porosity between the two worlds. Scholars and students developed the first academic studies on LGBTQ+ history starting with the history of their oppression and the constitution of the LGBTQ+ minority. They especially wrote about the liberation movements against marginalization. They were obviously politically motivated.

LGBTQ+ history was crafted from other existing disciplines and fields of research. Scholars had to find methodologies adapted to their object of study and they notably needed to find sources. Indeed, LGBTQ+-related sources were scarce due to the taboo around sexuality and its criminalization. They needed to adopt radical methods, to look for the roots of the LGBTQ+ experience and oral history permitted to fill this void in archival material. Resorting to this method meant stepping one foot outside of the institutions to enter the world of communities. The historians of sexualities already constituted bridges between the LGBTQ+ minority and the academia. Knowledge followed a different path than the normative one. History circulated in the public space. It was instrumental in having counter-narratives emerge and these counter-narratives were one of the tools used to challenge the status quo. However, the result of their research could not remain confined to the academia but needed to be circulated to the LGBTQ+ communities across the USA.

OutHistory.org is indebted to these bottom-up methods and to the reconfiguration of the power dynamics between researchers and communities. Enriched by this more horizontal method for writing history, it offers a platform for students to publish their own historical research just as accredited scholars do. The website also challenges power dynamics by valuing the public's contribution to LGBTQ+ history, because grassroots projects offer different versions of this history than what is to be found in other public sites of history, like museums. The website operates a de-subjugation of knowledge by highlighting the knowledge produced by the subjugated people. In return for asking contribution, the website's founders considered it their duty to give back this history,

placing themselves in the ambivalent status of scholar-activist, a subversive role. Language is an important parameter in this circulation of history: vocabulary and syntax are adapted on the website because the target audience is not necessarily familiar with academic terminology. In terms of content, the point of view adopted in writings dealing with LGBTQ+ individual matters has consequences on the readership and American society at large. LGBTQ+ history cannot limit itself to the victim narrative of an oppressed minority: agency, resistance, and pride should also be put forward, and so should the articulations between the self and the collective.

Choosing a digital platform for the circulation of LGBTQ+ history was only a way to adapt to the changing times and to benefit from technological progress to offer historical narratives free of physical and financial limitations. Thus, history could leave its academic ivory tower and costly fees to find a more democratic form. *OutHistory.org* is conceived as a microcosm of all the spaces where history is done in the country: universities, museums, archives, and the streets. The website also offers a platform for collaborative writing and for connecting people who would not have necessarily reached out to each other in a physical context. But despite the good intent, the website does not federate a community of visitors. That said, the project is in the image of its subjects: resilient. Some members of the staff have had to leave the team, new collaborators joined in and the website keeps evolving. Its difficulties are revealing of the pitfalls of independence and dematerialization. Also, the fact that the website is only digital and does not benefit from a physical space to which it can be linked is detrimental: people do not know of its existence. On the World Wide Web, it is still an isolated droplet in the ocean of existing websites and it does not weigh enough to compete with institutionally-based websites.

But the *OutHistory.org* team is aware of these limitations. Actually, current political events triggered a reaction from the editorial team who declared that they would change their paradigm. Indeed, when Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in September 2020, President Donald Trump had to appoint a replacement to fill in the vacant position. He nominated Amy Coney Barrett, a judge known for her conservatism and her opposition to LGBTQ+ rights. In reaction, *OutHistory.org* decided to change its editorial line to focus on LGBTQ+ news. Taking the present as a starting point, they announced they would analyze current events in the light of past events with the objective of sparking collective political mobilization. Unfortunately for them, their efforts were not sufficient to

prevent the appointment of Coney Barrett but their publication attracted more visitors with this change of emphasis.

In the final analysis LGBTQ+ history has found its place in American society and its circulation keeps on expanding. Teaching and researching LGBTQ+ history is no longer a radical enterprise per se. Only its uses can be radical and in this respect, those who know history can stand as gatekeepers against political and societal backlashes affecting members of the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, in this study, we have demonstrated that history is always a tool to reach for in times of political hardships. Historians of minorities in particular are crucial links between people from the past and the present, and they are guardians who seek to prevent past events from happening again. Because politics are in constant evolution, so are the living conditions of LGBTQ+ people and collecting their testimonies, their claims, and their struggles participates in identifying their needs and their contributions to their community and society. Collective action can only stem from collaborative work towards common goals and for that, the circulation of knowledge and information must be as free as possible

For this to happen, it is necessary to remove the barriers that compartmentalize society and to bridge the knowledge gap between individuals. However, on the Internet, and on social media, because of the massive influx of “fake news”, people remain wary of sources. Independent media can be distrusted for their lack of connections with certified sources. But certified sources may withhold information or can remain superficial on some matters. In any case, even when it seems that the fight is over, the course of history can still change and when this happens, it is crucial to be prepared, informed and aware of the situation. “Freeing history from obscurity” casts a light on the future that lies in front of us. In times of pandemics and quarantine, having this history accessible on digital platforms, and collective and social channels to discuss past and current issues is especially needed since street protests and gatherings present more risks than benefits. *OutHistory.org* came out so users could stay in.

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LGBTQ+ Community and Activism

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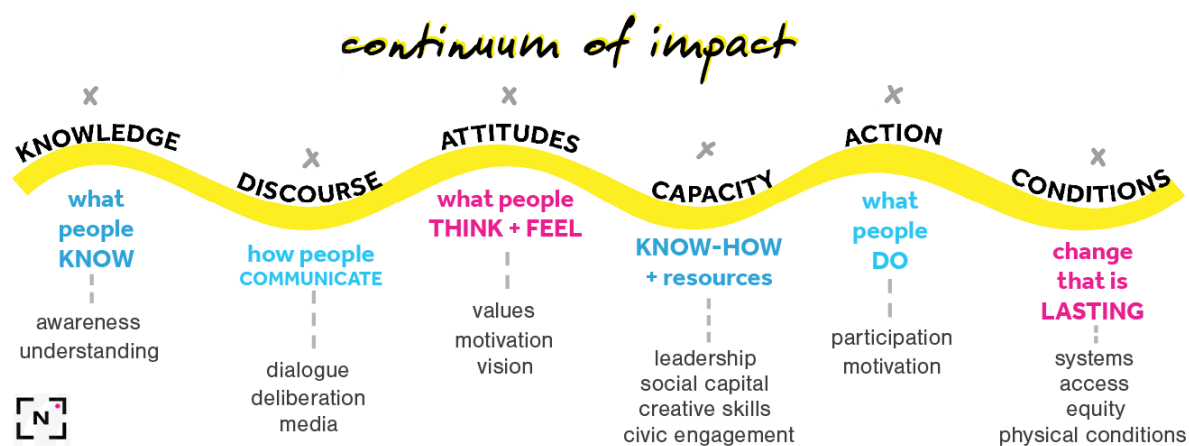
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Critical Discourse Analysis

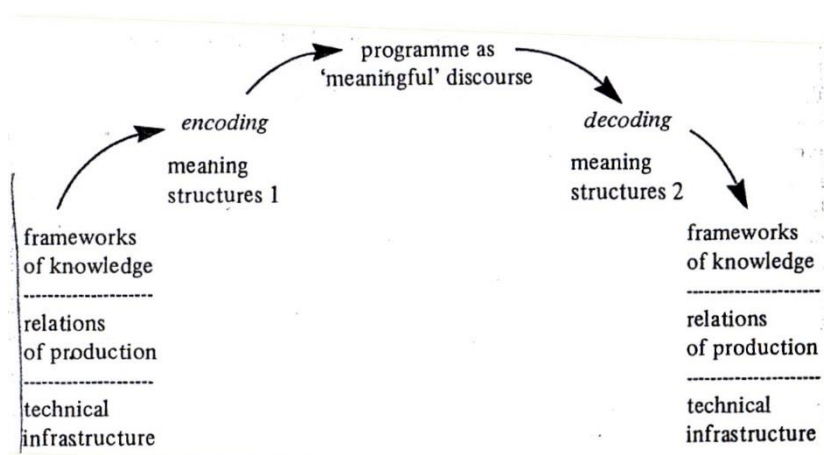
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APPENDICES



Appendix 1. *Continuum of Impact*, “How do Arts and Culture Make a Difference?”
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Appendix 2. Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding model”, *Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse* (University of Birmingham, Centre for Cultural Studies, 1973).



Appendix 3: Misty (left) and Jimmy Paulette (right) in the back seat of a New York cab, in Nan Goldin (*The Other Side*, 1993).

"Questionnaire: *OutHistory* and American culture

Preliminary remarks: In the course of my English studies, I came across the website www.OutHistory.org which made a strong impression on me. I am currently writing my master's thesis on *OutHistory* as case study of the writing sexual histories in the 21st Century. I am mainly interested in the role and status of *OutHistory* within the academic discipline of history, and in the related subjects of LGBT+ activism, digital history (more specifically knowledge on the internet), but also the website's ties to American society. I am trying to understand the links that people who have become acquainted with *OutHistory* entertain with the website. I would like to know what the starting point of this enterprise was, what objective the website sought to fulfill, who the target audience is, as I would like to grasp how people's relation to the site intersects with their other activities. In parallel, I am trying to locate the place of the *OutHistory* project in American society and culture. As far as history writing is concerned, I would like to have insights into people's views on history as an academic discipline, as well as into the contributors' methods, especially in their selection of topics, analytical framework, etc.

Research Method: I have devised a questionnaire addressed to website's contributors, and to people who have joined the *OutHistory Facebook* page and the *OutHistory Facebook* group. Subsequently, the questions are divided into four groups: some are addressed to contributors only, some are addressed to visitors only, some were devised to question scholar respondents and some are addressed to all the respondents. This questionnaire could have been an oral history project, but my research is limited in

time and as I live, study and work in France, it was more practical to engage in a written study instead. The questions deal with biographical elements as well as opinions and point of views on different topics related to social history and activism. The method is qualitative: you can focus your answers on your inner thoughts, beliefs and personal experience.

By way of disclaimer, I want to stress that English is not my mother tongue, I am indeed a French student and a native English speaker may find the wording of the questions troubling. Also, I may not be aware of all the formal rules applying to this type of questionnaire. If you had any doubt on the meaning of a question, feel free to email me to this address: henaux.charlene1@gmail.com. If certain questions make you uncomfortable, feel free not to answer them.

Thank you for taking some of your personal time to allow me to conduct my study. I am very grateful.

MARC STEIN

Preliminary question:

Do you agree to be quoted in my master's thesis? (Please underline your answer) YES/NO

Please let me know if you agree to be quoted but want to remain anonymous.

QUESTIONS:

General, biographical questions: (these questions are addressed to all the respondents)

1. Do you identify as a LGBTQ+ person? Yes, I identify as gay and queer
2. (When) did you come out in your professional environment? I came out as gay in the 1980s, when I was in my late teens and twenties. In the late 1980s I worked as the editor of Gay Community News in Boston; I was out in that professional environment. I began graduate school in 1989 and was openly gay in my application (and indicated that I wanted to study gay history). I was not always out as gay when I worked as a teaching assistant from 1989 to 1994, but I have almost always been out as gay since beginning to teach my own college and university classes in the early 1990s.
3. Do you consider yourself as politically conscious? Yes.
4. If yes, what were your first political triggers? I became politically active while I was an undergraduate student from 1981 to 1985, working primarily for student financial aid, reproductive rights, women's rights, antiracism, and peace and disarmament. I became more active on gay and AIDS issues in the mid and late 1980s. The rise of the New Right and the politics of the Reagan/Bush eras were among the most significant political triggers.

About activism: (these questions are addressed to all the respondents)

5. What are the links you entertain with the political life of the country? I actively follow political news, occasionally participate in marches and protests, and provide various kinds of support for movements focusing on LGBT equality, feminism, antiracism, and peace.
6. When did you first hear about LGBT+ activism? In my years as an undergraduate student (1981-1985).
7. (How) has your activism changed over time? At first, I was a "straight" supporter of the LGBT movement. After I came out as gay, I worked in various grassroots LGBT and AIDS groups in Boston and Philadelphia (including Mass Act Out in Boston, ACT UP Philadelphia, and Queer

Action Philadelphia) and edited Gay Community News in Boston. Since the 1990s my activism has focused more on college/university/disciplinary politics and on historical research that can support LGBT movements.

8. Do you have an opinion on LGBT+ activism in the recent years? **I'm generally critical of more mainstream and moderate political agendas and am concerned that many parts of the LGBT movement do not support radical social change.**
9. If you consider yourself an activist, has being one been a strength? A liability? A source of fear for your life, for your career? **It's definitely been a strength.**
10. What are your views on the academic teaching of LGBT+ history? **This is so general a question that it's difficult to answer, but I think we need more LGBT+ content in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education.**
11. In your opinion, can anybody teach LGBT+ history? Why or why not? **Yes, as long as the teacher acquires the necessary knowledge and supports gender and sexual equality. Why not?**

About your work with *Outhistory*: (these questions are addressed to *OutHistory* contributors)

12. What sources do you privilege? What analytical frame? Any specific theoretical frame? Any key principles? Any key concepts? **Most of my work with *Outhistory* has privileged oral histories, media sources, and legal sources. The analytic and theoretical frames have drawn from social, cultural, political, and legal history; social constructionism; Foucault; feminism; intersectional critical race theory; postcolonialism; and queer theory. In general, I have shared work on *Outhistory* as a way of encouraging future students and researchers to develop their own interpretations rather than imposing my own.**
13. How do you think your work in the project was perceived by your colleagues/hierarchy? **I think the discipline of history, the history departments where I have worked, and the colleges and universities that have employed me have increasingly recognized public history (including websites such as *Outhistory*) as important, though they continue to privilege academic publications in the form of scholarly monographs and peer-reviewed journal articles. My colleagues, chairs, deans, and provosts have been generally supportive of my work on LGBT history, including my work on *Outhistory*.**

Summary: (these questions are addressed to *OutHistory* contributors)

14. What are your views on the traditional publication circuits in the academic world? **How do you imagine the academic publication of the future, based on the state in which it is at the moment? I continue to believe that scholarly books and articles are important and valuable, though I also value newer ways of sharing historical scholarship. I think peer-review is an important part of the process for scholarly history and hope that we can find ways in the future to place greater emphasis on peer review in the realm of public history.**
15. How do you compare writing for a website and writing for an academic journal? **The main difference has been the absence of peer review, and thus the absence of critical and constructive comments, when writing for a website.**
16. What did you learn from this experience? **I don't understand.**

This question is addressed to all the respondents:

17. Do you have any particular anecdote that could be illuminating?

Please feel free to add any other comment.

Thank you for your contribution."

Appendix 4. Questionnaire and Responses by Professor and *OutHistory.org*
Contributor Marc Stein.