Into the Enclosure: Collective Memory and Queer History in the Icelandic Documentary 'People Like That'

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Abstract

This article criticizes an acclaimed Icelandic documentary film series from 2019, *People Like That* („*Svona fólk*"), which has become the quasi-canonical history of the country's gay and lesbian rights struggle. The series tells the story of the forward march of normalizing progress and change from below, starting in the late 1970s and breaking through with the achievement of registered partnership in 1996. This article views the series as an attempt to create a collective memory corresponding to Iceland's new self-image as a queer utopia and Nordic equality paradise. While avoiding historicist criticism, the article presents new stories and memories from the documentary series' own archive, which has been partly released online, and sources unexplored by the series, such as queer journals and reports by the state and the National Church on homosexuality from the 1990s. From these stories, different narratives of Iceland's recent past emerge, in which homonormativity is imposed by the Icelandic state and National Church in the 1990s and conceded by Iceland's National Queer Organization, resulting in a registered partnership legislation that some homosexual Icelanders saw not as a victory but as a loss of power. The contrast between these stories and those of *People Like That* foregrounds the politics of remembrance and forgetting and exposes the seldom discussed conditions for Icelandic homosexuals' inclusion into the nation in the 1990s.

Keywords: Iceland, queer history, collective memory, homonormativity, neoliberalism

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In 2019, a five-part documentary series was shown on the Icelandic state broadcaster, *RÚV*. It was called *People Like That* (ice. *Svona fólk*) and detailed the history of Iceland's gay and lesbian rights struggle from the 1970s to 2016 (Gunnarsdóttir 2019).[1] The series was a hit. It was estimated to have been watched by 18% of the Icelandic viewing public, the fifth-most watched documentary of the year (KMÍ 2020). It was lauded by critics and awarded at the annual Icelandic Film & TV Awards (Íslenska sjónvarps- og kvikmyndaakademían 2021). Its depiction of the National Church of Iceland's past treatment of homosexuals became a topic of national discussion, prompting its leader, the Bishop of Iceland, to make an official apology on the church's behalf (Ryan 2021, Gestsson 2018, Ragnarsdóttir 2019). Iceland's National Queer Association, *Samtökin '78* (hereafter abbreviated S78), whose history is the main thread running through the series, released a statement after the last episode was shown which characterised the series as having "kept the Icelandic nation glued to the screen and forced it to confront its own past"; it had shown "the development of our society … from suffocating silence to a flood of rainbows". So, the series was "an inestimable contribution to the conservation of the history of S78" (Þorvaldsdóttir & Arnarsson 2019).

In this way, *People Like That* may be said to have become the quasi-canonical history of Iceland's gay and lesbian rights struggle in the eyes of many, if not most, Icelanders, especially given the lack of other works on the topic (among the few available are Ásgeirsdóttir 2008, Ellenberger 2017, Tómasdóttir 2017, Hafsteinsdóttir 2020). It is a documentary of great authority, director Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir's *magnum opus.* She started filming for the project in 1992, interviewing AIDS-stricken Icelanders, and continued to record people, places and events connected with the gay and lesbian rights struggle for 27 years. The series is well edited and narrated, emotionally powerful, and its most celebrated episode, which dealt with the AIDS-crisis, brought events back into the public consciousness that had been nearly forgotten in Icelandic public discourse. Critical accolades gathered from every side.

Yet, a single discordant note could be found in the flood of praise. The previously quoted statement from S78 mentioned almost in passing that its history, which *People Like That* was complimented for preserving so well, had often been checkered, as "members of S78 have often clashed through the years, e.g., about the admittance of bisexual and later trans people into the association". A recent viewer of *People Like That* might take pause here, as these clashes about the place of bisexuals and trans people were not featured, or even mentioned, in the series. So, the statement hints that *People Like That* does not tell the whole story, but this point is couched in the highest praise. So, the series is said to perform four rather contradictory tasks: Forcing the nation to confront its own past; showing the development of Icelandic society from stern silence to a parade of rainbows; conserving the history of S78; yet ignoring or silencing parts of that same history, that same past.

This article aims to understand these contradictions by re-evaluating *People Like That* as a cultural object. The documentary series must be seen in context with the cultural moment from which it springs. It is not only informed and influenced by previously existing discourses, memories, and

[1] This work is part of a research project, supported by RANNÍS, the Icelandic Centre for Research, called „From sexual outlaws to model citizens: The relations between queer sexualities and nationality in Iceland". It includes two PhD-projects. One, of which this article is part, focuses on the conditional inclusion of the model gay cititzen into the Icelandic nation 1990–2010. The other focuses on discourses of AIDS, foreignness, and nation in the 1980s and early 1990s (see Hafsteinsdóttir forthcoming). All translations in this article are mine.

histories, but also internalises, reproduces, and consolidates them in a new form. Indeed, given the series' reach, popularity, and emotional power, it has now become impossible to separate the story the series tells from Icelanders' discourses and memories of its topic. The contradictions found in S78's statement on *People Like That* are the contradictions facing Icelanders' understanding of the history of the country's gay and lesbian rights struggle; a critical look at one must also be a critical look at the other.

This article will view *People Like That* from the point of view of queer history and collective memory studies and see the aforementioned contradictions as springing from the series' attempt to create a new collective memory for Icelanders about the country's recent past. This memory is not formed out of a vacuum but takes its cue from discourses already present in Iceland as regards the country's history and identity. It is built on a large archive of voices and documents, only a part of which, by necessity, is brought into focus, the rest occupying the background. It is narrative in form, constructing a story by its choice of archival data used and unused and discourses represented and unrepresented. These choices are political and subject to critique: The story could have been told differently, influenced by other discourses, using different voices and documents from the archives, using different archives altogether. A critique of the documentary series so entails a critique of discourses, archives, and narratives, and has a much wider application than only on the series itself: It is a reevaluation of the politics of how Icelanders tell stories about themselves. In this article I will examine these discourses, archives, and narratives, and show alternatives: Stories not told in *People Like That,* stories outside of Icelanders' collective memory, and ask: What explains our collective preference for the ones instead of the others?

Discourses and Narratives

Perhaps the most important of the previously existing discourses influencing *People Like That* is a view now ubiquitous in Iceland: that it has become a "queer utopia", a haven for LGBT+ people worldwide, a beacon of human rights, which it is Iceland's duty to export to less fortunate nations (Ellenberger 2017). *People Like That* may be said to tell the story of how Iceland became this beacon in five episodes whose titles aptly show the story's narrative arc: 1) "Silence" (the 1970s), 2) "Out Of Hiding" (the early 1980s), 3) "The Plague" (AIDS in the 1980s and early 1990s), 4) "Second Class" (1990s, culminating in the right to registered partnership in 1996), 5) "Equality Achieved" (2000s and 2010s).

This story has been usefully summed up by the series' director, Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir, in various interviews. As she explains, the "people like that" of the series' title are Icelandic "gays, lesbians and trans people", though mainly the first two (in fact, only one trans person appears in the series). The documentary relates how they "have now become normal people", i.e., not "queer" anymore, a term Hrafnhildur[2] opposes (Björnsdóttir 2018, Hlynsdóttir 2020, Eysteinsson 2019). "People like that"*,* then, are precisely *not* queer people, but normal or normalized gays, lesbians and trans people. Bisexuals and other queer groups fall outside of the series' purview and are barely mentioned.

How did these "people like that" become normal? In Hrafnhildur's words, the series shows how "the Icelandic family" decided to "adopt … these children that were its own" in the 1990s, resulting in Iceland's 1996 registered partnership law, which "changed so much", as "our relationships

[2] A note on Icelandic names. The traditional Icelandic naming system is patronymic, meaning that there are no surnames. Referring to an Icelander solely by patronym is incorrect, as this merely tells us the name of that Icelander's father (or, increasingly, mother). A traditionally-named Icelander is referred to either with both given name(s) and patronymic or, when context allows, with given name(s) only.

were no longer marginalized, but normalized". An "institution of society"—that of marriage—had now "recognized" gay and lesbian Icelanders (trans people are suddenly not mentioned), but it was "a personal institution, not a public one". The documentary series thus details "a family revolution" that stands outside of the realm of politics, a special development that can be traced to the small size of the Icelandic population "and how close we are to one another" (Hlynsdóttir 2020). So, *People Like That* shows a progressive journey of Icelandic gays and lesbians from outsider status into the embrace of nation and family through marriage, thanks to the efforts of S78 activists and their dialogue with the Icelandic family, mostly bypassing politics.

The power and success of this memory may stem from several factors, aside from the sheer quality of the documentary series itself. First, it is both informed by and recreates the neoliberal view of recent Icelandic history that has come to dominate the national discourse, which insists that Iceland was a backwards, closed, prejudiced society in the 1970s and 1980s, but with the advent of neoliberalism in Iceland in the form of its first self-proclaimed neoliberal government in 1991, became progressive, open, and free, both economically and socially (Hall 2020, 134–135; Árnason & Hafsteinsson 2018, 71–72; Kristmundsson 2003). Secondly, it functions as a balm for what has recently been termed Iceland's "post-colonial anxiety", i.e., its inferiority complex towards larger, more powerful first-world countries, in whose shadow the viability and first-world status of the tiny Icelandic state might be called into question (Hall 2020, 134–195). In this context, having an admirable record on equality and human rights becomes a national asset, as large states have no advantage over small ones when it comes to such a record, which is furthermore held to indicate first-world status in itself, even allowing Icelanders to consider themselves part of a model state or a utopia (Loftsdóttir 2015 & 2016; Ellenberger 2017). Thirdly, *People Like That* follows a familiar, beloved narrative pattern of the heroic, progressive struggle of the brave few against the backwards, inert, prejudiced powers that be. The gay and lesbian rights activists interviewed in the film are presented as having been "right all along", bringing the Icelandic people into the light of knowledge, absolving them from historical guilt and redirecting their scorn towards the sluggish authorities of church and state, who were on "the wrong side of history", while the Icelandic nation itself ends up on the right side of the line.

Theory, Archive, Method

How should one critique these discourses and narratives and the collective memory influenced by them and reproducing them? The time-honoured historicist response is to point out the contradictions inevitably found in collective memories to delegitimise them; then, one goes on to reinterpret the data and to construct a new narrative and memory in their place, insisting that the old story is false, the new one true; the first is fickle memory, the second hallowed history.

In this article, I aim to avoid such historicist criticism, being instead influenced by the recent work of collective memory scholars and historians Riika Taavetti and Laura Doan. Taavetti, examining Finnish and Estonian queer constructions through personal and cultural memories, shows a nuanced view of collective memory and its relation to history. For Taavetti, collective memory is formed when "different forms of remembering come together", both those of individuals and communities, which "are formed by one another", as "individual memory is virtually impossible to differentiate from cultural remembering" (2018, 42–45). So, collective memory is born out of a polyphony of disparate personal memories, but still attempts to speak with one voice. In Doan's formulation, it "confirms and consolidates, distils and simplifies"; it creates an "'eternal present' to fulfil political needs and utopic desires". Historicist critique tends to focus on this process, finding fault in simplifications of complex data (Doan 2017, 118, 121–123). However, as Doan and Taavetti point out, the historian (and the documentary filmmaker) may be described as a "creator of the past, not as someone addressing an existing entity", which puts them on an equal level with the people they research and their

remembrances, which similarly "construct the past" (Taavetti 2018, 42; see also Doan 2013, 16). History and collective memory so appear as intimately connected (Doan 2017, 126–128).

This connection, however, does not mean that historians criticizing collective history are merely the pot calling the kettle black. There is an open field of critique: the archive, for "the connection between [collective] memory and the archive is essential" (Taavetti 2018, 44). Doan describes how collective memory "dips into the archive selectively, and so its stories 'may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic—responsive … to every censorship or projection'" (2017, 118). Paying close attention to this process, the historian can interrogate the inclusions and exclusions inherent in collective memory creation. Furthermore, Taavetti urges the historian to keep in mind that the archive is essentially "contradictory" and includes "inevitable absences"; if one works from this fact and foregrounds it, the contradictions and absences themselves may "in their fragmentation underline the endless opportunity to recount yet another story and construct an infinite number of fragmentary and never completely finished puzzles from the same set of pieces" (2018, 44–45).

This way of looking at archive and memory is particularly apt when critiquing *People Like That*. After the series' release, director Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir created a website, *svonafolk.is*, where hours and hours of interviews recorded for the series are available unedited and in full. In a perfect model of the relationship between collective memory and archive, this allows researchers to compare and contrast the uniform collective memory created by the narrative of the series and the unruly polyphony created by the website's non-narrative, non-linear, non-progressivist memory bank. I will refer to the latter as the series' *inner archive,* which this article will mine in order to critique the documentary for which it forms a basis. Furthermore, I will present sources, both primary and secondary, that are unexplored or unmentioned by both series and inner archive, and so in a double blind spot, in what I will call the *outer archive*, most importantly official S78 publications from the 1980s and 1990s and reports on homosexuality issued by the Icelandic state and National Church in the 1990s. So, the collective memory project will be criticized through contrasting three archival layers—the series itself, its inner archive, and the outer archive—in order to create a complex picture of the politics of remembrance and forgetting.

My critique will focus on three narratives which form the core of the documentary series. The first is the depiction of S78 as a heroic, mainstream-political entity unified in its aim of homosexuals becoming "normal people". The second is the non-political, revolution-from-below-model explaining the achievement of registered partnership legislation in 1996. The third is the depiction of normality through registered partnership post-1996 as the fulfilment of gay and lesbian Icelanders' desires. Using the inner and outer archives, I will build up counter-narratives that contradict those appearing in *People Like That.*

In doing this, I am not dismissing the stories told by the documentary or making simple truth claims for the stories I tell in their place. Instead, the counter-narratives show up the constructedness of history and the possibility of endless retellings and rearrangings from the archive. Just like the series I am critiquing, I will "selectively dip" into the archives, but I will try to avoid the creation of an "eternal present" of persecution and heroic pride. Instead, my story—for it is a story—revolves around the contours of power and the dispensation and acquisition of normality and queerness, on shame rather than pride, on conditions and concessions rather than victories and celebrations.

This task may be a problematic one, as the collective memory here critiqued carries an immense value for a marginal group, i.e., gay and lesbian Icelanders, justifying and consolidating their acceptance and their legal rights in modern Icelandic society, creating group solidarity, shedding light

on past injustices, and demanding recognition and respect for the future. Such critique may be especially unwelcome coming from an academic who does not belong to the marginal group in question, as indeed I do not. Yet I believe that the approach opened up by Taavetti and Doan—which acknowledges the contradictions and absences inherent in any archive, admits the equality of memory and history, and makes no claim of superiority over previous approaches—allows my research to be seen not as an arrogant attack on hard-won gains, but as a widening of the discussion of what those gains could mean. Finally, *People Like That*'s collective memory has a wider application than the gay and lesbian rights struggle; with its great success, it has influenced the very stories Icelanders tell about their identity and nationality and their sense of the country's history of sexuality. *People Like That* concerns not only the margins, but the centre as well. And so, we come to the first narrative to be reevaluated.

1) The Changing Character of S78

In *People Like That,* the history of S78 is given pride of place. But as the previously quoted statement on the series from S78 obliquely pointed out, aspects of that history are missing from its narrative. An internal debate within S78 in the 1980s and 1990s goes unmentioned, a debate which led to radical changes in its understanding of the goal of its struggle, of the methods by which it would fight it, and of the character of the group it represented. This is best seen by comparing S78's own publications in the period, which receive scant attention in *People Like That* and its inner archive.

In 1982, S78 started publishing an ambitious, outwards-facing journal called *Úr felum* ("Out of Hiding"). In terms of the Icelandic market, *Úr felum* was ground-breaking. It adopted an in-your-face tone and look, making no secret of its queerness, often featuring provocative photography on its cover. It combined political articles, personal ads, translated and original short stories, often with erotic themes, and erotic photographs. Guðni Baldursson, S78's first chairman and the main editor of the journal, described *Úr felum* as a "sexual-political paper" and argued that no representation of homosexual life could be called true without including the erotic (Baldursson 1983, 1985). Accordingly, despite its provocative content (or perhaps because of it) S78 activists did not shirk from selling the journal in the street to passers-by (Sverrisdóttir 2004, 9; Ásgeirsdóttir 2008, 29). With a similar attitude towards sex and its representation, S78 built up a remarkable grassroots library combining academic texts, queer literature, and gay and (more rarely) lesbian pornography (Tómasdóttir 2017). In this way, S78 made a point of refusing to make distinctions between "polite" and "impolite" queer sexual representation and sexuality, both internally and outwardly.

Furthermore, *Úr felum* shows that despite S78's then self-definition as an organization "of Homosexual People", later "of Lesbians and Gays", it was initially broad-minded when it came to other sexualities. Responding to a 1984 anonymous letter from a bisexual man asking whether he would be allowed to join the organization, the advice column of *Úr felum* said he was welcome, as categorizing people according to sexual preference was a mere "nineteenth-century invention"; the end goal of S78's struggle was a world where such categories and identities would become "incomprehensible" (Svanur 1984). The next year, the journal published a letter from a "transvestite or transsexual" reader describing her semi-hidden life in Reykjavík. The editors commented that "trans people are rarely seen at S78's premises" but assured the sender that the association was "certainly ready to help trans people meet" (Anna 1985).

Finally, *Úr felum* shows that in the 1980s, S78 was mainly concerned with introducing new vocabulary, ending legal discrimination, creating safe spaces and liveable conditions for homosexuals in Iceland, and increasing their representation in media and society ("Samtökin '78", 1982, Magnússon 1982, Blaðhópurinn 1983, Kristinsson 1983, Björnsson 1983, Kristinsson & Björnsson 1983). Gay and

lesbian marriage, however, is never mentioned. Indeed, in 1982, S78 joined with its sister organizations in Denmark and Norway to oppose gay and lesbian marriage on principle as it created distinctions between first- and second-class citizens. Instead, the organizations called for "people living together, regardless of sex and regardless of how many they are [to] be able to organize their private affairs … in any way they choose" (Rydström 2011, 74). Indeed, in *Úr felum*, the idea of conforming to bourgeois, heterosexual society in any way tended to be treated with scorn (Kristinsson 1983, Kristinsson & Björnsson 1984, "Hommar sem neytendur", 1985).

While the authorities took little heed of this tiny, radical organization in the early 1980s, attitudes changed with the rise of AIDS, as *People Like That* shows (Gunnarsdóttir 2019c). Instead, the state came to use S78 to reach out to the gay community. S78 ran a telephone hotline on AIDS-issues and advised the National Health Authorities on prevention messaging. In recognition of its role in Iceland's AIDS-response, the Director of Health and the municipal authorities of Reykjavík supplied S78 with its first secure housing in 1987, granting it much-needed stability (Eddudóttir 2017, 19; Ásgeirsdóttir 2008, 34, 36; on the history of AIDS in Iceland, see Hafsteinsdóttir forthcoming). Concurrently, a series of changes took place in S78's outwards image and inwards dynamics, which comes to the fore in its publications.

Úr felum's fifth and last issue had appeared in 1985. In 1991, S78 again started publishing an outwards-facing journal, initially called *Sjónmál* ("In Sight"), later *Sjónarhorn* ("Viewpoint"). This publication, which ran from 1991 to 1994, reflected a changed outlook. It featured hardly any content that might be called erotic, instead adopting a milder, mainstream tone. While *Úr felum* had never mentioned gay and lesbian marriage, *Sjónmál* had on its first cover a photograph of the first Danish same-sex couple to get civil-married and a leading article calling on the Icelandic parliament to follow Denmark's lead (Kristinsson 1991). At the same time, a debate about S78's stance towards other sexual orientations started simmering on the pages of the journal.

In 1992, bisexual members of S78 proposed to change the subheading of the association's name, which by now was "The National Association of Lesbians and Gays", to "The National Association of Bisexuals and Homosexuals" (Arnarsdóttir & Örlygsson 1992). In response, two lesbian S78 members wrote an article in *Sjónarhorn* warning that this change would open S78 up "not only to bisexuals, but also to other groups who believe themselves sexually discriminated against, such as transvestites, transsexuals, paedophiles, fetishists and flashers" (Ólafsdóttir & Sigurðardóttir 1992). At S78's 1993 general meeting, the matter came to a head. As *Sjónarhorn* relates, some members maintained the proposed name-change was "radical and untimely" and could "weaken the association politically", while one prominent member, Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir, who was one of the authors of the previously quoted anti-bisexual article, pointed out that if one took the association's laws literally, bisexual people should not be allowed to be members (HÖ 1993; Ásgeirsdóttir 2008, 38–39). Nine years earlier, an article in *Úr felum* had renounced this exact notion.

The motion to change S78's name was voted down. Many quit S78 on the spot in protest and formed a new association, *Félagið* ("The Association"), which was open to all. All of this goes unmentioned in *People Like That,* a glaring omission since this splitting over a core issue cannot be described as anything other than a pivotal moment in S78's history. Why did it happen and why does *People Like That* ignore it? An answer may be found in *People Like That*'s own inner archive, which contains a 2017 interview with the chairman of S78 at the time, Lana Kolbrún Eddudóttir. In her opinion, the majority of S78 members were

> so very conscious of not challenging people [and] engaged in so much self-censorship … It was our fear of losing control of the whole thing. Lose control of our agenda. You were so

> conscious of having to avoid stepping on any toes. You were so deathly afraid of the authorities. Afraid of society, of the legislature, everything. So, you took small steps and tried not to provoke too much at once (Eddudóttir 2017, 16).

This was a novel stance, as in the 1980s, as we have seen, S78 very much tried to provoke and step on toes. What had changed? Lana Kolbrún went on, explaining her own stance at the time:

> I think that I was simply afraid that the organization's message would weaken, and someone would stop taking us seriously, and someone might get second thoughts about some financial grant, and you were just so anxious … you didn't want to go too fast forward because the backlash was always at your ear (Eddudóttir 2017, 17).

This was a new concern with proper messaging, being taken seriously, and with access to grant money, obviously connected to S78's newfound dialogue with the state. This trend would grow stronger as the 1990s wore on. Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir, who had been so prominent in the anti-bisexual camp, became chairman of S78 the year after it split, 1994. In interviews in the inner and outer archives, she explained that her goal had been "to make S78 into a professional organization", moving away from the radical grassroots amateurism that had been its hallmark in the 1980s. She was "concerned with [S78's] image and visibility" and felt that the association "lacked recognition and respect … for that human rights factor and equality factor which the association should stand for, and it was this image which I wanted to market, essentially to sell, to make public". By now, S78 was "in talks with institutions, officials, and politicians … and we had to get our things in order". She called this "a kind of normalization", a matter of "roll[ing] up my sleeves and clean[ing] up" (Ásgeirsdóttir 2008, 39–40; Ólafsdóttir 1997, 12). This clean-up included removing all pornography from S78's library and converting a room at its headquarters, which she maintained had been used as "a dark room for men's nights", containing a sex swing, into an office (Ásgeirsdóttir 2008, 39; Guðmundsdóttir 2020, 14).

Here, one may see the influence of neoliberalism as "a normative order of reason developed … into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality" aiming at the "economization" and "financialization" of everything (Brown 2015, 9–10, 28). Margrét Pála characterised human rights and equality in terms of market-value, leading to a call for *homonormativity*, Lisa Duggan's term for "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them", promoting "a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 2003, 50). In Margrét Pála's view, S78 should market itself as a human rights organization through homonormativity, excluding undisciplined sexualities, whether appearing in bisexuality, pornography, or dark-room sex.

In this counter-narrative, then, the heroic journey of S78 from outsider status to normality as depicted in *People Like That* is problematised. In the 1980s, S78's politics were radical "sexual politics", seeking to challenge and provoke the normative majority and refusing to distinguish acceptable and unacceptable representations of sex. Furthermore, the association was open-minded when it came to other queer sexualities, such as bisexuality. In the 1990s, after coming into closer contact with the state, it took the very opposite stance on these issues (see further in Hafsteinsdóttir forthcoming). The history of this development was available for inclusion in *People Like That* through its inner archive, not to mention the outer archive, but was left out. The reasons for this act of forgetting may have much to do with another story told in part in *People Like That,* the story of S78's dealings with the Icelandic authorities in the 1990s.

2. Revolution from Below or Conditions from Above?

In 1989, Denmark became the world's first state to establish a form of limited civil marriage, or registered partnership, for same-sex couples. As so often when one Nordic state makes a legislative innovation, the rest slowly came to follow Denmark's lead, resulting in similar laws being passed in Norway and Sweden in 1993 and 1995, respectively. So, in the 1990s, registered partnership inevitably appeared on the horizon of political possibility in Iceland as well, becoming a reality in 1996 (Rydström 2011, 39–58). In *People Like That* and its inner archive, this development appears as the result of pressure from below, from the general public and activists, some of whom emphasized how clueless and recalcitrant they found state and church representatives to be on homosexual issues (Gísladóttir 2002, 9–10, 2005, 11–12; Eddudóttir 2017, 9–10). However, in the outer archive, one may find intimations of a different story, one in which the state and the National Church—which must be taken into the picture, as Iceland had a state church in this period, inseparable from state authority—took a much more active role than depicted in *People Like That.*

The main sources are two official reports on homosexuality. One was released by a committee created by parliament in 1992 to research the legal and societal status of homosexuals in Iceland. Its report, released in 1994, is often mentioned in the film series and the inner archive, as it was the catalyst of Iceland's 1996 registered partnership law (Grétarsson 1994). The second report, however, goes unmentioned. This was released in 1996 by a National Church committee founded the year before as a kind of theological and ethical counterpart to the parliament committee (Þorsteinsdóttir & Jónsson 1996). Both were cooperative ventures between the authorities and S78. In addition to members from various ministries, the parliament committee had two representatives from the association, former chairmen Guðni Baldursson and Lana Kolbrún Eddudóttir. The church committee had no members from S78 but consulted with it in its work (Þorsteinsdóttir & Jónsson 1996, 68). So, the reports' depiction of the status and goals of Icelandic homosexuals must be seen as a compromise between the views of church, state and S78.

The parliament report deplored "the deeply-rooted idea that being homosexual is incompatible with getting an education, setting up a home, getting an interesting job, gaining a successful career or taking part in social life and social work". In Iceland, "the idea tends to be that if a homosexual man chooses to reveal his homosexuality, he must also reject normal values and goals". This, however, was not the wish of the homosexuals themselves, as "many homosexuals would prefer a stable relationship with a single life partner, but circumstances tend to work against such wishes coming true". If the state should grant an official recognition to such relationships, "which would impose duties on [the homosexual couple] and give them rights analogous with those of [heterosexual] spouses, this would no doubt encourage stability and furnish security for homosexuals and improve their position in society considerably". Registered partnership, then, "would give homosexual people the same opportunities as others to conduct their lives in an approved of manner, it would create a firm basis for their lives, give them security and make them conscious of their rights as citizens" (Grétarsson 1994, 16).

The church report focused on the ethical and theological status of such stable homosexual relationships. It suggested adopting a new sexual ethics which would sanction all sexual acts that were in accordance with a person's "psychosexual inclinations", as the report defined homosexuality. It was careful to distinguish this from "incest, paedophilia, pederasty or bestiality", with which "homosexuals' human rights have nothing in common". If one was dealing with "natural homosexuality and the free choice of two adults", and those adults behaved "responsibly", then "the church must accept homosexual couples' relationships as an option", an acceptance that should "cover that person as whole, both their sexuality and their way of life". Such a sex life fell under the rubric of what the report called "the sexual ethics of love", i.e., "devoting oneself to another person

and showing trust, care and respect in steady relationships", which stood in sharp contrast with "selfish sexual expression, cruelty, impersonal sex and being constantly preoccupied with sex" (Þorsteinsdóttir & Jónsson 1996, 20–21, 35, 66).

Taken together, the two reports build up an image of a new, normalized, accepted, and integrated homosexual, but likewise their opposite. As Michael Warner points out, "the image of the good gay is never invoked without its shadow in mind—the bad queer, the kind who has sex, who talks about it, and who builds with other queers a way of life that ordinary folk do not understand or control" (Warner 1999, 131). State and church were united in their purpose of promoting the former and discouraging the the latter, which shows not an out-of-touch authority reacting to pressure from below, but the active exercise of soft power on the homosexual community, laying conditions and making demands. Through its participation in the committee work, S78 became involved with these demands and conditions, granting them legitimacy (further developed in Hafsteinsdóttir forthcoming). One may put this in context with S78's concurrent exclusion of sexual representations and sexualities that could be connected with the "bad queer": bisexuals, sex rooms, gay pornography.

Barely a trace of this story is to be found in *People Like That* or its inner archive, showing how strongly it goes against the collective memory created not only by the series, but by the activists involved in the gay and lesbian rights struggle at the time. The reasons for that may have much to do with the status of gay and lesbian marriage in this collective memory.

3. Homecoming into the Enclosure

The church and parliament reports were united in their conclusions that Iceland should follow the Nordic countries' lead in establishing registered partnership for same-sex couples. S78's representatives wished to go further towards a single, non-gendered marriage law, but accepted registered partnership as a stepping-stone (Grétarsson 1994, 7, 51–52, 67; Þorsteinsdóttir & Jónsson 1996, 21–22, 68). A law on those lines was duly passed, almost unopposed, in 1996.

In *People Like That*, this is celebrated as the decisive victory of the gay and lesbian rights struggle. The day the law came into effect—Christopher Street Day, 27 June 1996—is treated at length in the fourth episode and forms the narrative climax of the series, focusing on a large celebration at the City Theatre in Reykjavík where the homosexual community was joined by an array of celebrities and politicians—foremost among them the President of Iceland. *People Like That's* interviewees describe this day as pivotal; it "changed everything" (Gunnarsdóttir 2019b, 0:42:50). This view is echoed in the outer archive. In contemporary interviews, the chairman of S78 described it as changing her status from that of a "second-class citizen" ("Embættismenn", 1996). Now, Icelandic homosexuals were "squeezing [their] way into the 20th century" and "returning home from exile, but on parole" (S.dór 1996). The vice-chairman of S78 felt that "Icelanders are saying to us today like the air stewardesses often do when we land at the Keflavík [International] Airport: 'Welcome home'" (Matthíasson 1996). But home from where?

Since the 1980s, S78 had described homosexual Icelanders who had moved out of the country to big cities with gay and lesbian scenes as "sexual-political refugees" (Blaðhópurinn 1983, ÞH 1983). The 1994 parliament report had echoed this, singling out Copenhagen, which "has for centuries been a kind of capital for homosexual Icelanders". This implied that they essentially belonged to another state; what was worse, the state in question was Denmark, independence from which is the cornerstone of modern Icelandic nationality. These unredeemed Copenhageners were, the report said, "in a certain sense refugees" who had "fled from the silence that has reigned here [in Iceland] about homosexual issues and also from their conspicuousness in a small population". This was a form

of exile which registered partnership could bring to an end (Grétarsson 1994, 19). So, the law which took effect on 27 June 1996 was nothing less than a grant of citizenship to stateless refugees—a homecoming, a repatriation.

However, there are voices in the inner and outer archives which tell a different story. One of the leading members of S78, Þorvaldur Kristinsson (chairman 1986–1989, 1991–1993 and 2000–2005), had whole-heartedly campaigned for the creation of the 1992 parliament committee on the status of homosexuals, co-writing the proposal for it behind the scenes (Rydström 2011, 59). However, his emphasis was on anti-discrimination legislation and public visibility, and he was surprised when "the issue of registered partnership [became] a central one in the work of that committee". In his opinion, gay and lesbian marriage was a form of integration into the "traditional heterosexual way", which he firmly opposed. In disappointment, he gave up gay and lesbian rights activism for some years, though seeing that his views were against the tide, he kept them to himself.

Another former chairman remembers vehement opposition to gay and lesbian marriage from lesbian feminists in the 1990s, who did not wish to "join the marriage of patriarchy" and warned against being "pushed into marriage like heterosexuals, like sheep" (Rydström 2011, 59, 77, 84–85). This lesbian feminist opposition to marriage is mentioned second-hand in the inner archive, but the interviewees pointedly do not name any names, with the implication that this losing side of history should be spared the shame of publicity (Gísladóttir 2005, 6; Eddudóttir 2017, 12–13). Only one voice expressing these views can be found there, belonging to a lesbian who warned that

> lesbians and gays need to beware of … joining this normative … hetero way of life … If lesbians and gays want to have exactly the same family life as the [heterosexual] suburban family, to have children and all that, then I ask: Where are you going? I mean, don't you have the courage to face the fact that there is a way of life which is different from that of this artificial western world (Úlfsdóttir 2006, 13)?

Some gay men held similar objections. The inner archive contains a 2005 interview with an Icelander who had lived in a gay commune in Christiania, Copenhagen, for decades. Though he had been "welcomed home" nine years before, he did not consider himself a "sexual-political refugee" in need of repatriation. Instead, he was scornful about the life on offer in Iceland, remarking that "the [Icelandic] gays would be called bourgeois gays here in Christiania", because they were "imitating the whole heterosexual life. They would most like to be hetero gays" (Snædal 2005, 4). Evidently, some gays and lesbians saw same-sex marriage and the consequent "welcome home" not as a grassroots initiative from below but as a state imposition on the homosexual community in order to integrate it into heteronormative, patriarchal norms.

However, these voices are in a clear minority. Most people interviewed in the inner archive celebrate the changes that took place in the 1990s and regard registered partnership as a triumph (see, e.g., Sverrisdóttir 2004, Eddudóttir 2017, Sigurðardóttir 2017). Even Þorvaldur Kristinsson changed his mind after seeing the transformative effect of the law on Icelandic society (Rydström 2011, 84–85). Yet he retained some doubts. His is the lone voice in *People Like That* which expresses any wariness about the meaning of 27 June 1996:

> I am glad that gays and lesbians are able to confirm their love and their right to love before the law. I am glad that we are legal. I also miss something. There is, in fact, such a strange power in being outsiders (ice. *utangarðs*). We were so incredibly unruly (ice. *óstýrilát*) in our love. We are becoming more like you (ice. *ykkur hinum*). We are becoming more and more similar to the society of the heterosexuals (Gunnarsdóttir 2019b, 0:43:10).

The subtleties of this statement almost defy translation. Þorvaldur describes the power of being *utangarðs,* literally "outside of the enclosure" of a church's cemetery, within which criminals or religious minorities could not be buried. This word has generally come to be used of those who are on the margins of society, most often the homeless and the drug addicted (Kvaran 2013). While outside of the enclosure, one's love is *óstýrilát,* literally "defiant of control"; now, after the passing of the registered partnership law, homosexuals have become "like you"—Þorvaldur addresses the presumed heterosexual viewers of the documentary in the generalizing plural, *ykkur,* adding the demonstrative pronoun *hinum,* which has a contrastive force, implying "the others": The normative majority is addressed in the manner usually directed towards the queer minority. We, who were outsiders, Þorvaldur seems to say, are moving into your enclosure, that of normative society; our love is passing under your control; and so, we lose that "strange power" we once had. The presence of this statement in *People Like That* powerfully complicates the collective memory created by the series but is something of a strange bird. The narrative goes on to further legal and societal victories in the 2000s and 2010s: adoption rights, a single marriage law, the world's first openly homosexual Prime Minister. The enclosure is never mentioned again.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to work against the grain of *People Like That*'s collective memory by using archives, both inner and outer, to tell different stories, creating new memories. There, S78 does not appear as heroic, open, single-minded, and right all along; instead, it is an entity in flux which morphs and changes when confronted by the power of the state, adapting itself to its demands and conditions by excluding sexual representations, activities and orientations deemed to be outside the "sexual ethics of love". The state does not appear as a complacent giant prodded into change by popular pressure from below; instead, it, along with the National Church, takes an active role in the introduction of registered partnership in order to promote the "good gay" and suppress the "bad queer". Finally, the homosexual community in Iceland does not appear as united in favour of registered partnership. While most welcomed it, there were others who were filled with doubt about gay and lesbian marriage and its meaning. While some saw it as a homecoming from exile and a reclamation of lost nationality, others saw a loss of power and freedom, a trade-off with high cost.

As previously stated, in presenting these alternative stories from the archives, I do not intend to supplant those told by *People Like That* (which anyway have far more weight and power than this article). Instead, I would ask readers to compare the stories and ask themselves what determines their differences and the current national preference for the ones instead of the others. The stories told by *People Like That* leave out voices, memories, and archival data that complicate the journey of "people like that" towards normality, a state presented as the end goal towards which the path of history must directly lead. In taking the side of the current, homonormative moment, *People Like That'*s collective memory invests itself in the legitimacy of the "sexual ethics of love", in the idea of homosexual exile and homecoming, and in marriage as an entry-ticket into the nation. It finds itself forced to disregard S78's radical past, non-normative voices, and any "strange power" outside of the enclosure of nation and normality. It is that power which is foregrounded in the alternate set of stories, a power which may challenge the nationalistic self-regard of Iceland's current view of itself as a liberal beacon and queer utopia.

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