



# **Becoming Periphery: Israeli LGBT “Peripheralization”**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past decade, the Israeli LGBT community has undergone processes of mainstreaming, institutionalization and assimilation, most of which took place in Tel Aviv, the Israeli center. Simultaneously, the Israeli peripheries were perceived as “empty”, as spaces that have limited or no LGBT visibility and presence. This article focuses on LGBT activists’ experiences in LGBT activist spaces in the peripheries. I argue that rather than reproducing the center-periphery power structure, LGBT activists are subverting the paradigm, while creating practices and imaginaries that engender a mode of becoming periphery. This mode is comprised of three major processes of becoming: the first belies the notion of the peripheries as spaces LGBT individuals can only depart from; the second subverts the discourse of LGBT peripheries as empty spaces; and the third offers a dual consideration of the center-periphery power relationship, both accepting the structure and the peripheries’ place within it but also deviating from the passiveness, static stances, emptiness and restrictive forms of sexuality. LGBT in the peripheries have begun creating a distinct kind of peripheral notion that diverges both from being an LGBT individual in the center and from the framing of Israeli peripheries.

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## Keywords

Periphery-center/core; LGBT space; urban-rural; queer migration; LGBT activism

## Introduction

There are actually no places to go out to around here. There is no one to get to know [...]. Even today, when we have all these apps like Grindr. When I'm in Tel Aviv they [gays connected to Grindr] are all 50 meters away, 20 meters away. Here it's 30 kilometers away, and most of them are from Lebanon. I start writing [in Hebrew] to someone: 'Hey, where from?' and he answers: 'English please' and I write: 'Where from?' and he answers: 'Lebanon'. It's very flattering to get responses from Lebanese gays but .... That's not where I'll find my salvation (Tal).

Tal, IGY (Israeli Gay Youth organization) group facilitator in Kiryat Shmona, locates Kiryat Shmona, a geographical, symbolic and socially peripheral city in Israel, indicating that the space is barren, where the Lebanese “dots” on Grindr<sup>2</sup> are closer to him than gays in Tel Aviv, isolating him in a backwards space where such technology is irrelevant since there are not enough local users. Within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)<sup>3</sup> discourses, the peripheries are commonly considered spaces that have nothing but homophobia to offer to LGBT individuals, who are encouraged to leave for the center where they are thought to belong. This dynamic, of LGBT peripheries, is at the heart of this article.

Over the past decade, the Israeli LGBT community has undergone processes of mainstreaming, institutionalization and assimilation, for the most part in Tel Aviv, the Israeli LGBT center. One of the consequences of these processes, for example, is the foundation of the Gay-Center, a municipally funded space that houses social movements, cultural events, self-help groups and other programs. Tel Aviv's Gay-Center functions as a location-space-mechanism that maintains an LGBT fantasy about being in the center and reinvents hegemonic Israeli LGBT discourses as well as sexual, gendered, national and geographical exclusions (Hartal and Sasson-Levy, forthcoming).

Simultaneously, the peripheries and particularly LGBT individuals' lives in the peripheries are constructed within the center's discourse as disrupted, sad and lonely. Specifically, the Israeli peripheries in the Galilee and in the Negev are

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<sup>2</sup> A mobile location-based app used as a social network for gays.

<sup>3</sup> In order to be consistent with the local activists' terminology I will use the term LGBT. The term queer will be used in accordance with its usage in the literature as a methodological approach to the LGBT subject in the peripheries. Notwithstanding gender as a pivotal category in the analysis of LGBT lives and spaces, this article will include LGBT individuals' experiences in an integrated way in order to highlight a process of becoming peripheries for LGBT activists.

perceived as “empty”, as a space that has limited or no LGBT visibility and presence. Nonetheless, LGBT activists in the peripheries refuse to embrace an understanding of the Israeli center and specifically the Tel Aviv Gay-Center as “their” center. This choice leads to a process of meaning construction, in which peripheral LGBT spaces manifest new temporal, geographical and social meanings for known practices in which backwardness and Otherness are not rejected but rather incorporated in queer ways.

Sociological studies classify Israel as a pro-natal, pro-family and militaristic society (Berkovitch, 1997; Izraeli, 1999; Kahn, 2000; Kimmerling, 1993). Familism serves as the backbone of the Israeli social order in which the normative family is thought to be pivotal and is maintained through religious Orthodox marriage (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999). Also, the militaristic character of society along with its derivative masculinity plays a focal role in the construction of identities that reproduce participation in and belonging to the state (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 2003).

Even though there is no civil marriage institution, and thus LGBT individuals cannot formally and legally marry in Israel, Jewish Israeli LGBT individuals are considered part of the Israeli collective. Moreover, being an LGBT individual does not preclude individuals from military service, which in Israel is compulsory. Thus, most LGBT-identified individuals in Israel serve in the military, and their identification with the state and with the nation goes without saying (Gross, 2000). Since the beginning of the 21st century there have been LGBT voices and grassroots activities resisting the discourses and the practices of the Israeli occupation. These have mostly stemmed from feminist communities and aim at challenging the identification of LGBT individuals with Zionism and the nation as well as to try to affect Israeli policy.

These institutions of family, reproduction and the military are crucial for understanding the cultural context in which this paper is embedded; where heteronormativity is a powerful ethos. While there is a great deal of acceptance of LGBT individuals and culture in Tel Aviv, homophobia and violence towards LGBT individuals has not stopped. Therefore, even though Tel Aviv seems like a space of acceptance, the heteronormative model and its imperatives are highly relevant to LGBT individuals’ lives in Israel, both in the center and in the peripheries.

In this article I focus on power relations and perspectives which are internal to LGBT activist communities in peripheral LGBT spaces in Israel. Therefore, the analysis will mainly concentrate on inner activist politics and not on heteronormative society and its impact on LGBT individuals and activists.

As part of a larger ethnographic qualitative research study into LGBT activist spaces in the Israeli center and peripheries, this article discusses LGBT peripheries “as a political, social and spatial phenomenon” (Tzfadia and Yacobi, 2011, 1) and articulates the ways in which LGBT authenticity manifests itself

differently in distinct spaces, specifically focusing on rural and small-town LGBT activist, social, metaphorical, material and relational spaces. Taylor (2011, 194), in her research on the intersections of class and rural queers, argues that “their accounts disrupt the bifurcated view of ‘the rural’ as a space of non-existence or hostility, against ‘the urban’ as imagined utopia.” The division of the rural-urban binary has been essentially criticized by Andrew Gorman-Murray (2007, 113) who points to the “crucial significance of peripatetic, non-linear paths of migration which have been silenced in rural–urban frameworks of queer migration,” as well as by Larry Knopp (2004, 123) who suggests that not location but movement itself produces “emotional and ontological security” for queer individuals. Moreover, Andrucki and Dickinson (2014, 215) revisit the concept of centrality, illustrating how centers and margins emerge as dynamic spaces of becoming, “as varied, and as various as the bodies that perform them.”

In light of these arguments, that rural and peripheral spaces form contested modes of becoming for LGBT individuals, and not just one rural-urban binary, this article probes how peripheries and LGBT discourses are related, as produced by LGBT activists. More particularly, I explore the production and achievement of LGBT peripheries in Israel, suggesting that a focus on the disciplinary mechanisms that construct the politics of LGBT peripheral space offers a critique of Western rural geographies of sexualities. Concentrating on two Israeli processes which have not been researched together before, peripheralization and LGBT discourses, this article describes LGBT activists’ experiences in the peripheries and how these experiences relate to peripheral spaces showing how they encompass a mode of becoming and potential transformation.

This article opens with a discussion of the core/center-periphery binary and its Israeli manifestations. I proceed with a discussion of the production of LGBT formative mechanisms and their relation to the core/center-periphery binary, specifically the scholarship on LGBT rural-urban binary and queer migrations. Following a description of the research locations and methodology, I outline the movement of returning to the peripheries, exploring the production of power relations between center and peripheries, the creation of forms of subversion, consequently leading to a mode of becoming periphery for LGBT activists.

### **Centralizing centers and marginalizing peripheries**

Periphery is a contested and fragmented term, defined rather differently in various discourses (Kühn and Bernt, 2013). Often it is associated with culture (Shils, 1982), globalization (Wallerstein, 1974), race/ethnicity and class (Iftachel, 1998), gender (Motzafi-Haller, 2002; Rose, 1993) and national (Halabi, 2008) axes. It links a symbolic description of dependency with notions of distance, magnitude, mobility, progress, relativity and intimacy. Commonly, it is conceptualized as a binary logic, a disciplined space, dominated and constructed by a hegemonic center (see for example Even-Zohar, 1979; Heilbrunner, 2007; Horowitz and Lissak, 1989; Shils, 1982; Wallerstein, 1974). Kühn and Bernt (2013, 303) see the

periphery as a “particular socio-spatial configuration of power-relations leading to uneven socio-spatial development.” Such a paradigm, in which the periphery represents a static and fixed space, minimizes agentic possibilities for the periphery.

Sewell (1992, 2) argues that “structure operates in social scientific discourse as a powerful metonymic device, identifying some part of a complex social reality as explaining the whole.” The binary of core/center-periphery highlights the domination capacities of the core/center. Several complementary metaphors come to mind when thinking of the term periphery: marginality (Berland, 2006; Parker, 2008; Shields, 1991), boundaries (Pile and Thrift, 1995; Shields, 1991), edges, frontiers (Hendel, 2011), poverty (Tickamyer, 2009) and backwardness (Kühn and Bernt, 2013; Love, 2007). In the Israeli context, there are additional factors like Development Towns,<sup>4</sup> Mizrachim,<sup>5</sup> immigration and government socio-spatial public policy (Tzfadia and Yacobi, 2011). These modalities coalesce to describe, as well as reproduce, a hegemonic center vs. a subordinate, incapable and inferior periphery.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that the relationship between the center and the margin is not limited to different geographic locations or to distinctions in size, but also include power relations which portray and construct contrasting meanings. Deleuze (2004, 286) refers to the impossibility of deviating from the “demands” of the center: “[it] is not information or communication, but prescription, order, and command. You will be on the margin. It’s the center that makes the margin.” Thus the modality of the core/center-periphery binary portrays an attachment and a positionality, which centralizes the center and marginalizes the periphery. Attempts to subvert this binary power structure have ratifying effects, since they are always already immersed in this formation.

Andrucki and Dickinson (2014, 214) analyze the concepts of center and margin as “performative spatial categories” constituted by a “multiplicity of embodied subjectivities through which space is performed” (215). This multiplicity is constituted by axes such as capital and knowledge accumulation, cultural capital, class, ability, emotions, constructions of home, lifestyle, time, well-being, gender, race and ethnicity, family and more.<sup>6</sup> Such categories allow for individuals to be

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<sup>4</sup> Development towns are 28 state-planned and funded small towns, mostly located in the Negev and the Galilee, and are directly associated with the periphery. The towns later became known for their poverty and deprivation. Most of the residents in the Development Towns were settled there by the government and are Mizrachim (see footnote no. 5); immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia (see Tzfadia and Yacobi, 2011, 8–9).

<sup>5</sup> The classification of Mizrachim (literally translates as ‘Eastern’ in the sense of ‘Oriental’) is an ethnic category invented by the Israeli government referring to Jews originally from Islamic countries (as opposed to ‘Ashkenazim’, who are Jews of European origin, which is similar to whiteness in the Western cultural context) (Shohat, 1988; also see Misgav, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> For elaboration of these axes see also (Kühn and Bernt, 2013, 303).

both central and marginal simultaneously. Building on this relational perspective, the periphery is perceived as a process (peripheralization) rather than a position (Kühn and Bernt, 2013), underscoring “geographies of centers and margins [...] as dynamic, as varied, and as various as the bodies that perform them” (Andrucki and Dickinson, 2014, 215).

As for the differentiation between the periphery and rurality, rurality is framed as a social construct, focused both on the territoriality of rural areas as well as on “the processes through which rurality is produced, reproduced, and contested, and of the places and practices that are associated with ‘rural’ ways of being” (Woods, 2009, 429). Thus, rurality signifies diverse non-urban spatial contexts and their related symbolic imaginaries (Lobao, 1996). The periphery on the other hand, is a relational and political term, focusing on places which were marginalized in the course of development. The grammar of rurality, although it considers the relationality to the urban and the movement between urban and rural, does not discuss at length the politics of this specific gap, dissociating the rural from urban politics and isolating it from ideological, political, economic and social dependency. Thus, in this article I discuss rural LGBT sexualities from the perspective of the power structure of the periphery, rather than within a rural sexualities context.

In Israel, the term periphery is hyper-politicized. Tzfadia and Yacobi (2011, 3) argue that combined approaches to the study of peripheries suggest a broad explanation for its supposed backwardness, as a product of “public policy and spatial planning as ingredients of multi-layered control and domination, which are expressed in cultural (ethnic) geographical and economic peripheralization.” These are de-politicized through the delineation of peripheral spaces as products of the distance from the center, featuring an augmented striving to resemble the center, which camouflage ongoing inequality (Svirsky, 2011).

Thus, in this article the term peripheralization is used in a broad sense, not limited to “spatially structured political and social marginalization and dependency” (Fischer-Tahir and Naumann, 2013, 10). The term peripheries articulates a space that is generally not urban, but includes Development Towns; that is far from the center not just geographically, but mainly culturally; that is not necessarily rural, but is comprised of a social position informed by emptiness, Otherness, backwardness and internalized homophobia.

### **LGBT mechanisms between center and periphery**

LGBT lives and experiences are commonly conceptualized through binary dichotomies such as in/out of the closet, shame/pride, rural/urban and concealment/visibility. Queer theorists critique these binary constructions, calling for a queer understanding of LGBT discourses and corporeality (Ahmed, 2006; Love, 2007), and I would add that the peripheries continue to play a formative and discursive role.

The axis of space and LGBT sexualities has traditionally focused on urban and metropolitan spaces and neglected the periphery. Still, a growing body of knowledge has juxtaposed peripheral space with sexuality, mainly through the urban-rural binary (Bell and Valentine, 1995a; Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Taylor, 2011) sexuality in urban peripheries (Brekus, 2003; Kirkey and Forsyth, 2001; Smith and Holt, 2005; Stella, 2012), rural spaces and sexuality (Annes and Redlin, 2012; Bell, 2001; Bell and Valentine, 1995b; Gorman-Murray, 2009; Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Kramer, 1995) and ordinary cities and sexualities (Brown, 2008; Gray, 2009; Myrdahl, 2013). For instance, Halberstam (2005, 36) argues:

Rural and small-town queer life is generally mythologized by urban queers as sad and lonely, or else rural queers might be thought of as 'stuck' in a place that they would leave if they only could. [...] the rural/urban binary reverberates in really productive ways with other defining binaries like traditional/modern, Western/non-Western, natural/cultural, and modern/postmodern.

Halberstam criticizes the urban-rural binary paradigm for reproducing the power structure, which positions the rural as a repressive space for LGBT individuals. This urban and rural "sexual imaginary" is scrutinized by Weston (1995), describing urban areas as a gay paradise and accordingly, rural space is condemned as a nightmare. Annes and Redlin (2012, 67) show that "the city does not only stand as a liberating space; it is also experienced by young gay men coming from the country as a coercive and disciplinary space," pointing out that the rural/urban binary can cause considerable disappointment among rural gays arriving in urban spaces with high expectations, longing for a space of pride and belonging.

Jon Binnie (2004, 91) argues that "the historical urban basis of modern homosexuality means gay identity is first and foremost an urban identity." Contrary to rurality, which is understood as "a site of gay/lesbian oppression and absence" (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008, 178), urbanity is positioned as a site of sexual freedom and presence (Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Parker, 1999; Weston, 1995; Yue, 2008). The urban-rural binary is considered a formative factor in queer consciousness and the option of queerness is mainly an urban possibility, unimaginable for LGBT individuals in rural and small-town places (Binnie, 2004; Marple, 2005; Nash, 2011).

In contrast, Herring (2010, 1) claims that it is an urban legend that the country is "a queer form of social death," calling for a redeployment of anti-urbanism. Bell (2001) contends that the rural can serve as an ideal place for a getaway from urban patriarchy and heteronormativity for queers, offering an ecological, spiritual and cultural alternative space. Israeli rural spaces in the Negev and in the Galilee are thought to be a resort, as temporary antithesis to urbanity,

offering a “unique” and “authentic” style and experience (Shavit, 2013).<sup>7</sup> Yet, this escape is usually imagined as limited and temporary since the rural is perceived as a peripheral space, always framed as subject to the center’s control and domination (Tzfadia, 2012), its backwardness enhanced and thus minimizing opportunities for producing the rural as a permanent utopic escape for LGBT individuals.

Regarding queer migration, Andrew Gorman-Murray (2007) criticizes the typical generalization that asserts that the major relocation path for queers is from rural to urban (Binnie, 2004; Fortier, 2001; Lewis, 2012), leaving an unsupportive/unsafe rural space in favor of an urban, less restrictive space. Knopp (2004) articulates that these movements and remapping are not limited to LGBT individuals from unsupportive families. In contrast, Gorman-Murray (2007, 106) claims that “the normalization of rural-to-urban movement is also theoretically problematic, intimating a once-and-for-all emergence from the rural ‘closet’, and hence presenting as teleological and ontologically final.” Augmenting discussions and critiques of the rural-urban binary, the perspective of the peripheries within geographies of sexualities enables a different engagement with the way that LGBT power structures are produced. In this way, it develops conceptualisations of how LGBT experiences and discourses are spatially constructed.

The socio-spatial and cultural contours of Israeli peripheries delineate an imagined and blurry line between the Tel Aviv area - ‘the center’, and the peripheries.<sup>8</sup> The Tel Aviv metropolis is considered the Israeli metropolitan center, constituting 42% of the Israeli population (CBS [Central Bureau of Statistics], 2013). It is promoted by the Municipality as a gay friendly space as well as a worldwide destination for gay tourists. Since 1998 Tel Aviv has held grand annual pride parades and in 2008 a municipal Gay-Center was established. The city which was crowned a “gay heaven” in 2012<sup>9</sup> is generally considered by Israelis an appropriate place for LGBT individuals, offering a sense of belonging (Fenster and Manor, 2011) as well as many cultural, economic, consumption, sexual and emotional opportunities. In order to introduce the locations within which this research took place, the next section will offer a contextualization and a short history.

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<sup>7</sup> There is no research reflecting on the meaning of LGBT tourism to rural Israel or on its size and implications to local national, consumerist and commercial constructions.

<sup>8</sup> This line is imaginary since Tel Aviv consists of many peripheral areas in ethnic, national, cultural, and economic senses. Moreover, places far from Tel Aviv also have cultural, ethnic, economic, and other semi-centers. What’s more, from a global viewpoint, Tel Aviv is only a ‘lower-scale’ global city, most certainly not a center in comparison to world cities such as New York, London or Tokyo (Sassen, 2002). For elaboration on this relational approach, and on a-spatial forms of peripherality see Kühn and Bernt (2013, 304).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Oren, Israeli ambassador to the US, speech on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2012 at the Equality Forum in Philadelphia.

## **The research locations: Eshkol Regional Council and Kiryat Shmona LGBT activist spaces**

Since the establishment of the Israeli state, successive governments have claimed to have made an effort to develop the Negev and the Galilee - the country's peripheral areas.<sup>10</sup> These underdeveloped areas with meager resources comprise 75% of Israel's land but only 30% of its population (CBS, 2014).

Israel's nation building ethos was characterized by "conquering the desert", idealizing Jewish settlement in peripheral areas (Tzachor, 2007). After the establishment of the Zionist state, following waves of immigrants who were settled in the peripheries, and with the morphing of collective values into individualistic and materialist ones, Jewish migration to the Israeli center left the peripheries with little political and economic strength. This coupled with ongoing withdrawal of state support beginning in the 1970's (Kirschenbaum, 1992) and with the intensification of market processes, lead to the structural economic weakening of these areas (Hasson, 1993).

Despite the relatively small distances within Israel and improved national transportation platforms, the Negev in the south and the Galilee in the north still suffer from a negative image: a general low socio-economic status, proximity to the border, lack of job opportunities, poor infrastructure including poor public transportation, underwhelming education, low economic growth and considerably less opportunities than in the center. Taken together, these factors incentivize many Jewish residents to leave these peripheral areas if and when they can. Newman (2000, 221) claims "internal migration balances show a long-term outflow of the population from the peripheral regions to the expanding metropolitan center."

In the Israeli context, most of the population in the peripheries is comprised of ex-urban residents. Newman (2000, 215) therefore calls this state of rurality "rurban," meaning communities of an urban nature that are located in non-metropolitan areas. Moreover he claims that "the fact that they continue to live in communities which, by formal definition, are designated as 'rural' no longer reflects the functional realities of their lifestyles" (Newman, 2000, 217).

The Eshkol Regional Council lies in the north eastern corner of the Negev, in the south of Israel. It is the most populated regional council area in the Negev, consisting of 31 settlements scattered over 760,000 acres with only 10,000 residents on 14 kibbutzim,<sup>11</sup> 13 moshavim (cooperative agricultural communities)

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<sup>10</sup> Israel's CBS has defined an index for peripherality by which a peripheral area is defined as an area remote from markets or jobs, with low accessibility to activities (work, education, shopping, and recreation). The index was conceptualized as an average of two components: (1) potential accessibility which is the weighted average of the distance between a specific local authority and all other Israeli local authorities, and the population size; (2) The distance from the Tel Aviv district (CBS, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Plural of kibbutz, a form of Israeli settlement formerly constructed as a utopian socialist-Zionist small collective community mainly agriculture and industry-based. Most of the Kibbutzim have gone through

and four community settlements (*Yishuv Kehilati*). The council shares common borders with Egypt and with the Gaza Strip and is therefore a common target for missiles/tunnels from Gaza.

The *Team to Promote the LGBT Community in the Eshkol Regional Council* was established in 2005, the first proclaimed LGBT activity in the area. The five-member team, whose goal was to establish an active local LGBT community, receives an annual budget from the Eshkol Regional Council. Its activities include an annual seminar for all local residents and LGBT individuals, organizing local shows and movie screenings with LGBT themes and advertising *Tehila* (parents of LGBT individuals organization) and *IGY*'s local groups' activities in the local newspapers. It also promotes *Hoshen's* (an organization working in public schools to fight sexual and gender stereotypes) activities and supports the LGBT political cell at Sapir College (located in the Sha'ar HaNegev Regional Council, northeast of Eshkol).

The Upper Galilee and the Galilee Panhandle are mountainous regions in the north, which stretch over 800 acres near the Lebanese border, with about 50,000 residents. Kiryat Shmona is the northernmost city in Israel, located in the Galilee Panhandle on the Lebanese border, 40 kilometers north of the next closest city, Safed. It is a frequent target of cross-border attacks. The city's population of 23,000 is greater than the population of all of the surrounding kibbutzim, moshavim and moshavot<sup>12</sup> – and is composed mostly of Mizrahi Jews.

Established in 2001 in Kiryat Shmona, *Geim-Bagalil* (Proud in/of the Galilee) is the northern branch of the *Aguda*, the National Association of LGBT in Israel. It is located in a central commercial space and has gone through major changes in the years it has been active. Its major funders were the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco and the *Aguda*. The Center holds different types of activities: cultural events, parties, regular open house nights, an annual swaps market, monthly Friday dinners, a local LGBT film festival and a yearly planting event in the nearby “Pride Forest.” Also, the *Aguda* provides psycho-social services. *IGY*'s weekly meetings also take place there. *Geim-Bagalil* cooperates with the political LGBT cell of Tel-Hai Academic College as well. This cooperation led to the establishment of an annual academic conference at the College in 2010 on the subject of LGBT life and experiences in the Israeli peripheries.

Kiryat Shmona and the Eshkol Regional Council are distinct from each other in many ways: they have different ethnic populations, one is semi-urban and

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privatization processes and nowadays resemble community settlements. In Israel there are approximately 270 kibbutzim (Shapira, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> A form of Israeli rural settlement in which the land is privately owned by its settlers. The first Israeli moshavot were often described as colonies.

the other is rural, one is in the north while the other is in the south,<sup>13</sup> one is moderately populated and the other is one of the most unpopulated areas in Israel and they're different distances from the center of the country. Nevertheless, they also have many commonalities: both are proximate to the border, generally viewed as appealing tourist sites but unattractive spaces for residency, they lack commercial centers, public transportation is sparse, and the populations are increasingly impoverished. Regarding LGBT issues, there are even more commonalities since both places have a small LGBT presence as well as hardly any LGBT commercial spaces.

## Methods

This article aims to investigate LGBT activist spaces in the peripheries in Israel, exploring how peripheries and LGBT discourses and politics are related and produced. It focuses on two LGBT activist spaces: the Team to Promote the LGBT Community in the Eshkol Regional Council and *Geim-Bagalil*, the northern branch of the *Aguda*.

Data collection was conducted through an ethnographic method. This was chosen as it enables the observation of and experiencing of spatial and affective embodiments, and not just emotional and conversational behaviors. It allowed me as the researcher to enter the research field, or more precisely – to enter the space and be openly physically present throughout the research process (Longhurst et al., 2008). This position is based on Browne and Nash's (2010) call to create a dynamic subjective position within the research field as well as Halberstam's (2003) call to blur the opposition between researcher and researched. This resulted in a queer methodology that reflects my commitment to be a part of the research process in a way that is reflexive and sensitive to changes that occurred in both research locations. Participant observations are not presented in this article; they are embedded in the empirical analysis and played an important role in the research process.

The Eshkol Regional Council part of the research included 11 participant observations between January and July 2010 and four open-ended interviews with the local key LGBT activists. The ethnography consisted of all of the activities of the team conducted during the time of the research, for example: an interview for a local newspaper, *IGY's* youth group meetings, *Tehila's* parents meetings, a local LGBT happening, a seminar for the local welfare department regarding LGBT issues, the team's meetings and more.

The Kiryat Shmona part of the research included six participant observations between February and June 2012 and four open-ended interviews with *Geim-Bagalil's* key LGBT activists. The ethnography consisted of all of *Geim-*

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<sup>13</sup> Generally, the south of Israel, as well as southern parts of Tel Aviv, are negatively perceived as spaces of failure, backwardness and Mizrachim.

*Bagalil*'s activities during the research period, including observations during opening hours, the local LGBT swaps market, *IGY*'s facilitators and coordinators meeting, the academic conference at Tel-Hai College and more.

This article presents the findings from these two LGBT activist spaces as one combined section. All interviews lasted from two to four hours, were recorded, transcribed and transcriptions were sent to the participants for approval. Although it is unusual, all participants gave written consent for the use of their real names in the article, because they are all public well-known local figures who wanted credit for their statements. Also, the activist LGBT community in Israel is small and most of the activists are known to each other. Since almost all of the local activists in the spaces where the research took place were interviewed, their statements are recognizable.

The interviews, participant observations, transcriptions and field notes were analyzed through content analysis. Content analysis is a method for locating and determining themes in collected textual data by noting repetitions of ideas and meanings (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Hannam, 2002). As such, content analysis was used to structure the recurring themes concerning LGBT peripheries and their dissimilarity and divergence from the concept of the Israeli periphery as well as the movement to the center and the movement back to the peripheries. The heart of the interpretation process analyzed formations of LGBT activists' experiences in the peripheries and the power structure between the LGBT center and peripheries, underscoring the role of space in LGBT manifestations.

### **Returning to the peripheries**

In this section, I will focus on LGBT spatial migration and the goal of creating a space for LGBT narratives in the peripheries. Because of the Israeli LGBT assumption that there is a gay heaven in Tel Aviv and the links between remaining in the periphery and failure, the choice to leave and move to the center is loaded with symbolic meanings. In the context of LGBT migration, Halberstam (2005, 37) claims:

Since each narrative bears the same structure, it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from closet case to out and proud. [...] In reality, many queers from rural or small towns move to the city of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns; and many recount complicated stories of love, sex and community in their small-town lives that belie the closet model.

The process of coming out for peripheral LGBT individuals is bound to becoming a center, i.e. being proud, out and being related to a modern identity strongly connected to consumerist culture and to certain places in the West (i.e. urban metropolitan centers).

Queer migration was scrutinized by Andrew Gorman-Murray (2007, 210) who argues it should be understood as “an embodied queer identity quest.” Moreover, Nathaniel Lewis (2014, 231) dissociates the link between queer migrations, which he classifies as life events, and coming out of the closet, revealing “complex motivations and considerations for migrations.” Since almost all of the activists in this research left the peripheries at some point (some came back and others, following a period at the center, moved to other peripheries), in this section I would like to focus on the movement of returning - the passage back to the small-town, to the kibbutz or the moshav. Adi, IGY’s coordinator and the *Aguda* psycho-social coordinator in the north said:

I grew up in the periphery so the concept is ingrained in me. Also I’ve been in Tel Aviv for almost seven years. [...] These are things that only people who live here know about and understand. It’s about distances, public transportation, progress [...]. I knew I was a lesbian a long time before I first heard the word lesbian, there was no cable TV where I grew up, there was no internet back then. [...] And the guys in Kiryat Shmona are in the closet and are dealing with the same stuff I dealt with thirteen years ago in the Southern Hebron Mountains when I was their age. I don’t think guys in Tel Aviv deal with this stuff [...] I mean, something is so disconnected... It’s a three hour drive just to find people who are like you and living a full life, and it costs a lot of money. Where do I get the money? What will I tell my mother? There’s a lot of explaining. And there are no role-models.

I spoke with a religious guy from the [IGY’s] group and he asked me if there really were [out gays living with their partners]. He had never been to Tel Aviv. He asked me if two men could actually raise a kid together and I said ‘yes’ and he was shocked that there was another world [...]. There are no models like that in Kiryat Shmona and the north.

The journey to the center is embedded deeply in Adi’s words, not only through the description of her own physical journey, but also through her implication that such a physical and mental journey is imperative. This supports many scholars’ arguments (Annes and Redlin, 2012; Binnie, 2004; Cant, 1997; Lewis, 2012, 2014) that a journey to the city is generally an integral component of being an LGBT individual in non-urban areas. Miki, one of the founding activists of *Geim-Bagalil*, added:

[...] then the hard core activists dispersed, one got married, another left... this is a periphery after all, this is the nature of things here. Only we [my partner and I and another activist] stayed here, the three musketeers, stuck here [emphasis added].

Peripheries have been described as restrictive spaces for LGBT individuals, in which queer sexuality is constrained (Bell and Valentine, 1995b; Binnie, 2004; Brown, 2000). Miki claims that LGBT individuals will probably want to leave for the big city if they can, and implies that staying is unnatural, that for LGBT individuals to stay in the periphery is unusual, at least in the long run; they are ‘stuck’.

The option of leaving is often presented as crucial for self-actualization and self-understanding (Binnie, 2004). Realizing this, Gil stated at a public conference that one of the main reasons for the establishment of LGBT activity in Eshkol was to create possibilities for LGBT individuals to stay in the area:

The question is: Do we, as gays who live here, have to leave Eshkol and ‘run’ to Tel Aviv? Is that the only option for gays in the periphery, for guys from a kibbutz? We want to create an alternative so that you can be gay and live on a kibbutz or moshav.

The Team to Promote the LGBT Community in the Eshkol Regional Council’s activism frames its philosophy thusly: leaving or escaping should only be a step towards coming back again. Miki explained the logic of returning to the periphery:

The younger LGBT individuals, after they serve in the army, they get to Tel Aviv, they go for weekends there, they have friends there, they go to parties etc. They long for Tel Aviv [...] and after a few years they return [to the periphery]. Some with their tail between their legs, some after school, some actually want to come back here and some have no other choice, failures and such...

Miki’s statements reveal two assumptions, the first regarding the LGBT fantasy of a good and out Tel Aviv life, which, like any other fantasy, eventually shatters, and the second concerning the rationale for returning to the periphery. He makes an analogy between discarding the peripheral identity and successfully moving to and staying in the center. As a result, the peripheries are rendered as spaces of LGBT failure, a place to return to if/when LGBT individuals fail to adjust to living in the center.

Heather Love (2007, 7) associates backwardness with failure, impossibility and loss and asserts that “backwardness has been taken up as a key feature of queer culture”. Moreover, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) claims that embracing failure opens up a possibility to subvert the (Western) logics of success, escaping the discipline of normativity. Miki frames the act of returning to the periphery as the wrong way of being an LGBT individual, clinging to a backward space. What Halberstam and Love suggest is that the embodiment of such space offers room for failure by a twofold critique of the LGBT imperatives of normalization: undoing the demand to dispose of the backwardness, as it is embedded in the space itself and cannot be relinquished; and abandoning the call to

leave the peripheries in order to become (out, normative) LGBT individuals. This logic spatializes backwardness and failure and instills the legacy of queerness as an integral part of the periphery.

The geographic, affective or imagined transition to the center, and the movement of returning which Miki associated with failure, have alternate meanings, as I will show in the next section, demonstrating modes of subversion in the activists' framings of the peripheries. The critique will further illustrate the queerness and queer potential of the periphery, constructed as the opposite of the dynamic, Western and progressive center.

### **Subverting the center**

Despite being connected to the center by resource allocation and shared organizations and conflicts, LGBT activists in the Israeli peripheries see themselves as outsiders – apart from the center's politics, jargon and culture. Moreover, periphery activists feel a marked sense of discrimination emanating from their colleagues in the center. Adi criticized the distribution of resources:

There is a feeling of being discriminated against in the periphery [...]. They [activists from Tel Aviv] invest so much in the Center [the Gay-Center], if only they would invest some of the resources to help pay the rent here. Basically, they don't understand the periphery; they don't understand what's going on here.

Rotem added:

Doesn't it seem odd to you that the Tel Aviv Gay-Center offers photography classes but in Kiryat Shmona we're barely able to pay the rent? This seems ridiculous to me and it's [the inequality between center and periphery] very clear, but no one is willing to get up and say it out loud and that's shocking to me.

The lack of resources is ascribed to the peripheral location of the LGBT activities, far from decision makers' eyes and resources. The peripheries' LGBT activities and spaces are vulnerable because of their reliance on a budget decided upon by the LGBT organization's office in the center. The view from the center also ignores the subtleties and sensitivities of being an LGBT activist in the periphery as Adi illustrated:

The Aguda wanted to open joint psycho-social services for Kiryat Shmona and the Jezreel Valley.<sup>14</sup> I told them: 'Did you know that the distance between Kiryat Shmona and the Valley is greater than

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<sup>14</sup> A valley south of the Galilee.

the distance between the Valley and Tel Aviv?’ and they were shocked.

The activists in the peripheries can feel detached from the center, on the one hand because of the prejudices of the LGBT activists in the center, but also because of their different politics. This politics is also comprised of a different jargon as Rotem described: “I went to Tel Aviv [for an organization’s seminar]; I didn’t understand half of the words they were saying.” Miki added: “There [in Tel Aviv] everyone is fighting. [...] Here we favor all sides.” The peripheral LGBT culture is distinct in additional ways as well, as Rotem related:

I go into a meeting [at the Tel Aviv Gay-Center] and half of the people are playing with their smartphones, and I look at the way they are dressed, like all the expressions of consumer culture and capitalism, but exaggerated [...]. Maybe that’s life there, it’s more significant there than here. The rhythm of life is different; the aspirations are different [...]; the Café culture or take away coffee... it’s different.

The differences Rotem mentioned are not related to LGBT culture per se but are more like general cultural distinctions between the center and the periphery (Andrucki and Dickinson, 2014; Heilbrunner, 2007; Marple, 2005; Shils, 1982). The peripheries’ distance from the center, in her view, is what allows for its preservation. Maintaining a critical approach to consumer culture and derivative LGBT practices, framed as unique to the peripheral space, Rotem suggests that the local culture’s ability to resist consumer culture does not produce the LGBT individuals in the peripheries as unprogressive or unmodern. She emphasized the cultural distinctions and their manifestations in the LGBT culture. Outlining the challenges the youth and youth facilitators face, she described:

I think an IGY youth facilitator from the center is different; he has different tasks and needs different personal qualities [...]. Here you need a broad perspective in order to understand the space we’re at, to understand that the youth in the group have difficulties at school and in their settlements, in the kibbutz or in the city. They have more struggles than LGBT youth from the center; they don’t have role-models to identify with. Therefore, the work that needs to be done here is broader and more intensive [emphases added].

Regarding standard materials *IGY* supplies to all facilitators she stated:

When Tal and I [the group’s facilitators] prepare for the group we always need to make changes, cultural adjustments. I remember us looking at the activities and saying: ‘This is unsuitable for Kiryat Shmona.’ Some LGBT concepts are unfamiliar here, some

discourses don't exist here, [and we ask ourselves] should we bring up these subjects? Is this the culture we want to create here? [For example], our youth don't go to night clubs and so we won't talk about club culture. It is different being an LGBT individual here.

Referring to modifications she had to make in order to adjust *IGY's* activity plans to the periphery, she described a particular kind of symbolic boundary construction in which the LGBT periphery does not serve as the Other of the center but as a territory in its own right with its own rules and actors, in which the center fails to reproduce its power position.

Rotem identifies herself, the activities in which she is involved, and the space she and the activists occupy in an alternative and even subversive manner. Similar to Miki's statement of being in favor of all sides of the conflicts in the Center, suggesting it is their politics that she does not agree with or subscribe to. Being critical of the center's culture, Rotem sees LGBT activities and individuals in the periphery as capable of producing local cultural norms. She adopts a perspective of the periphery not as a repressive space, bound to the center, but as an empowering one, which diversifies and enriches the possibilities of LGBT corporeality and discourse in the periphery. Tal revealed a similar take on the situation:

I thought that this [coming to the periphery for college] would be a good reason to leave home, a good reason to change the atmosphere [...] I thought of this as coming out here and getting to know people who are looking for different things than people from the center.

Tal planned to move away from the center in order to be in an alternative space, which differs from the center's cultural norms. Even before he relocated he envisioned the dissimilarity of people and experiences in the periphery. Rotem further reflected:

The fact that I'm from the periphery helped a lot. It facilitated new options proclaiming to the group: 'It's okay for you to stay peripheral. We're not trying to make you into a Tel Aviv LGBT group'.

This fundamental difference between center and periphery, as Rotem describes, is perceived in a twofold manner, both enabling a critique of the center and ratifying its power and politics. The activists in the periphery articulate the dissimilarities of the periphery, accepting the center's perspective of them and criticizing it. They frame their rootedness and locality as the cornerstones of becoming an LGBT periphery, which is affected by the center and deviates from it, constructing a local alternative. Striving for a space of LGBT belonging in the periphery, Adi concluded:

I want them [LGBT individuals originally from the periphery] to come back here later on. [...] They need to have the Tel Aviv experience, they need to know what’s there, in Tel Aviv, that they don’t have here, in the periphery - to live their full life with full power - and then to want to come back here.

Albeit accepting the implication that the periphery doesn’t have the means to offer a full LGBT life, Adi aims to produce and empower an autonomous LGBT periphery. Her call for LGBT individuals from the periphery to go and live a full LGBT life reflects a dual understanding of the periphery. Knopp (2004, 122–123) calls for “quests of identity” by which he refers to “the search for an integrated wholeness as individual humans living in some kind of community.” Adi takes this further by locating this quest as a starting point rather than the end point. The journey she portrays consists of a movement of returning which enables LGBT individuals in the periphery to maintain a subversive point of view.

I suggest that such a viewpoint entails a twofold construction of LGBT peripheries wherein the oppressive construction of LGBT life in the peripheries as afflicted with internalized homophobia and backwardness is simultaneously subverted and accepted as a disciplinary mechanism. The center is embraced as an essential pathway in constructing LGBT spaces and discourses. The periphery is produced as a product of the center, as the space of internalized homophobia and LGBT absence and at the same time it is created as autonomous, as a subversive space generated by its own culture, needs and perspective.

## Conclusion

This analysis highlights how peripheries enrich the understanding of LGBT experiences. The focus has been not merely on movement to/from the center or urban areas and on the framing of the peripheries as non-static spaces which LGBT individuals alternately leave and return to (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Knopp, 2004). Rather, the focus of this article has been on the modes of becoming periphery for LGBT activists in Israel. This process of becoming is produced and achieved through a dual process: a critical as well as subversive discourse, reproducing the local peripheral politics, jargon, culture and activists’ space as deviant, separate and alternative to the center; and at the same time a discourse that accepts the important role the center plays in the construction of LGBT individuals’ lives and spaces.

This critique of the center, and LGBT politics and discourses enacted within it, is not limited to the rural-urban binary, but rather brings forward the politics of non-central spaces. Rather than a rural or a rural-urban politics of migration or dislocation (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Gorman-Murray et al., 2008; Lewis, 2012, 2014; Smith and Holt, 2005), this frame instills a peripheral politics of becoming. This critique of the center focuses on the power structure of LGBT core/center-periphery, creating and augmenting marginality, dissociating rural from urban areas. Thus, even though the rural-urban binary is seen by scholars as a

formative factor in queer consciousness (Annes and Redlin, 2012; Binnie, 2004; Marple, 2005; Nash, 2011; Weston, 1995), as was shown in this article, it has a limited potential in explaining the disciplinary mechanisms of the periphery and specifically LGBT experiences in the peripheries.

Fenster and Manor (2011) claim that LGBT individuals' appropriation of the Tel Aviv city space lead to the displacement of the heterosexual control over the urban space creating LGBT belonging to Tel Aviv. The Israeli LGBT center's perspective and discourse on the peripheries adheres to the binary notion of core/center-periphery. It establishes the peripheries as the backward, empty, Other, inflicted with self-homophobia, and, at the same time, it portrays the center as a space of mainstreaming, institutionalization and assimilation for LGBT individuals (Hartal and Sasson-Levy, forthcoming), delineating Tel Aviv as the (exclusive) space of pride and belonging.

These formations are mutually socially constructed by activists in the center and the periphery. In this socio-cultural discourse, 'coming out of the closet' is narratively bound to being in the space of pride (Weston, 1995; Cant, 1997; Binnie, 2004), in the center. While this power dynamic has its uses, LGBT peripheries in Israel also exhibit subversive qualities, and should be viewed through another perspective – as a space of becoming periphery. The politics of becoming periphery is a politics that deviates from the dichotomy of the center/core-periphery binary and reveals normative imperatives embedded in the discourse of LGBT identity (performative, Western, urban) and its reductionist implications on the discourse of the peripheries.

Three dynamic processes characterize becoming periphery. The first concerns the construction of the peripheries as a space one can only depart from (Cant, 1997; Lewis, 2012), in contrast to the movement of coming back, of returning. This movement is not only prominent, but has multiple meanings. It marks LGBT peripheries as spaces of continuous change, a manifold dynamic space rather than a fixed, static and inactive space of backwardness and internalized homophobia (Halberstam, 2005). Moreover, becoming periphery doesn't just reflect changes in the LGBT peripheries but creeps into the "hegemonic" center's discourse, by critiquing it as a self-centered, consumerist space.

The second process of becoming periphery entails a mode of subverting the discourse of LGBT peripheries as homogenous spaces, where queer sexualities are controlled (Rubin, 1984). Rural spaces are thought to be spaces of absence (Weston, 1995; see also Gorman-Murray, 2007): absent of queer life, of queer potential, trapped in a limited normativity. The findings reveal a rather different picture of an inhabited space that incorporates diverse possibilities of becoming periphery which arise from local experience and strive to distance themselves from consumerist culture and the politics of the LGBT center.

The third process of becoming periphery involves the construction of the center-periphery binary itself. This discourse highlights the dominant capacities of the center and the passive capacities of the periphery (Shils, 1982; Even-Zohar, 1979; Wallerstein, 1974; Kühn and Bernt, 2013). The LGBT activists’ discourse in this study of the periphery reveals a dual consideration of this power relationship: both accepting the structure and the periphery’s place within this structure and erasing its passiveness, static stances, emptiness and absence. This local form of activism integrates a critique of the center regarding consumer culture and a critique of the center’s perspective of the peripheries with local knowledge, a form of “native” LGBT space framed as essentially different from the center in terms of jargon, politics, consumerism and culture. The practices and discourse the activists employ allow LGBT individuals to return to the peripheries, to create new symbolic meanings and subvert common perceptions of the peripheries in central LGBT discourses.

### **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank Merav Amir and Chen Misgav for their invaluable assistance with this article. I am grateful to Orna Sasson-Levy, the Periphery Research Group at Sapir Academic College, Erez Tzfadia, my doctoral working group as well as the Reviewers, Gavin Brown and Eduarda Ferreira, and Kath Browne, the editor, for their insightful comments.

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