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My Community, My History, My Practice

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## My Community, My History, My Practice

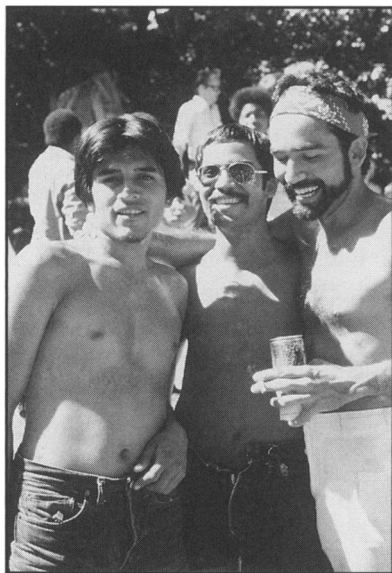
By Horacio N. Roque Ramírez

I was barely beginning to navigate the strange world of UC Berkeley when I had to choose which community testimonies I was to record. It was spring 1995, and I was enrolled in a Comparative Ethnic Studies research seminar. Professor Julia Curry Rodríguez was asking for commitment right from the start for her “Oral History and Immigrant Communities” course: what immigrant community was each one of us going to study? Because I am an immigrant by trade, part of the Salvadoran exodus to the U.S. of the 1980s, I thought my decision would be obvious: Salvadorans in San Francisco. But the choice was really not going to be that easy. A different kind of migration had actually taken me to the San Francisco Bay Area then, one related to my having come out as a gay man three years earlier in Los Angeles. Though I did not admit to it then, graduate work at Berkeley was part of an excuse to be in San Francisco, that queerest of Meccas for the modern gay man. While I navigated Berkeley, I was also negotiating San Francisco: its people, its politics, its excitement, its AIDS epidemic, its racism, and my relation to all of it. I actually, then, had another choice for my oral history project: queer Latina and Latino history in the Bay Area, and the role migrants and immigrants like me have played together in building it.

But I am jumping ahead of my story, for my commitment to oral history as a basis for community history actually began earlier with my first forays into history research. It was then, in 1991 at UCLA while studying Latin American history, that I first

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An immigrant from El Salvador, Horacio N. Roque Ramírez earned his M.A. in History (Latin America) from UCLA in 1994, and his Ph.D. in Comparative Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley (with a Graduate Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality) in 2001. As a UC President’s Postdoctoral Fellow at UCLA, he is conducting research on gay Salvadoran immigrant men in the Los Angeles area. He is completing a book entitled, *Communities of Desire: Memory and History from Queer Latinas and Latinos in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1960s–1990s*.



Gay Latinos at Golden Gate Park meadows following San Francisco's Gay Freedom Day Parade, 1976. Photo courtesy of Archivo Rodrigo Reyes and Luis Alberto de la Garza C.

became disillusioned with the dominant historiography. Even in the field of cultural history, presumably less stuffy than intellectual or political history, most people who actually lived this history were missing from the narratives. Even more unfairly, I thought, their lives rarely provided the interpretive frames shaping those narratives themselves. So I started "to cheat": even when I was in Costa Rica doing preliminary research on Central American's history in the 1930s, my goal was to find folks still alive who could speak to the significance of that period in their lives. This, I was beginning to find, was at the heart of and the

trick to good oral history: getting to the significance of the story people have given their time to tell.

Through my work in the San Francisco Bay Area I soon found out that community oral history is a *project*, not simply a research approach. To embark on the process of engaging people with memories of their lives requires patience and tenacity, a certain naiveté, even about the immense field of stories those memories will open up. The excitement I have felt continuously in the last six years while completing my work on queer Latino San Francisco has been intermittently at odds with the sadness, anger, and fear over the content of those memories.<sup>1</sup> Queer Latino community history in San Francisco in the last four decades has been significantly about loss and disappearance: about AIDS, about gentrification, about cancer,

<sup>1</sup> Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "Communities of Desire: Queer Latina/Latino History and Memory, San Francisco Bay Area, 1960s–1990s" (Ph.D. diss., Comparative Ethnic Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2001).

about poverty. Yes, it has also been about political mobilization, about cultural expression and sexual liberation, about racial empowerment and international solidarity. But it certainly has been a painful history of loss and erasure, a queer history of community destruction. I realized too, in conducting the work, in turning the recorder on hundreds of times, unsure of the content of the memories, that the project in part was late. I know am not wholly responsible for this, a relatively young researcher in my early thirties, wanting to trace queer Latino history as far back as possible. It is not only my fault that a project in this memory work did not begin before, before thousands of deaths. Like mine, many of our projects are late. They are certainly not useless, but often late.

I don't know who, if anyone, is conducting a community oral history project of queer Latinos in Los Angeles, or in New York, or anywhere else for that matter. Because they matter—because that in the least is the most basic assumption we must make when we commit to this difficult work of historicizing life and death, while we talk with the living, and conjure through memory their relations with those gone. Community history matters, for most of the reasons we may not realize when we begin our work.

Ironically, death and loss in community oral history projects allow others to come alive: in the voids left behind by the missing, the living take their place, often with fear, often with pride and determination to speak on their behalf, to re-place in history. And this is when I return to El Salvador, to my country, before coming out as gay man, to nearly four decades before my birth, to the untold stories of my people's massacre of 1932, when roughly 30,000 died in a matter of days, and when the washing away of history, like that of their blood, was most efficacious. So little has been said about *la matanza*, and especially about those disappeared from my country's national memory.<sup>2</sup> That project is also late; I know it. My aging, eighty-four-year-old father tells me and my mother of the conversations he overheard in the countryside, at age 15; his uncle was

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<sup>2</sup>The only extensive oral history-based work that includes a brief discussion of *la matanza* is Roque Dalton, *Miguel Mármod: Los Sucesos de 1932 en El Salvador* (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1993), originally published in Cuba.



GALA's (Gay Latino Alliance) women's percussion group during San Francisco's Gay Freedom Parade, 1977. Photo courtesy of Archivo Rodrigo Reyes and Luis Alberto de la Garza C.

speaking with a man who witnessed the military's tactics for the clean slaughter that took place, mostly of Native Americans. History in modern El Salvador began to die in 1932, indigenous cultural expression suppressed effectively from that moment onward; for the Hernández Martínez dictatorship, indigenous wear, language, and spirituality meant communism, meant a threat to deals between U.S. companies and Salvadoran oligarchy, and of course meant further repression. In the 1990s, in post-Peace Accords El Salvador, I wonder every time I visit who will finally turn the recorders on, and which survivors will be willing to dig deep against that erasure of their living and of their dead—my living and my dead.

Memory work allows us the ability to shift in space and time, and this is why my story meanders, but why it does so naturally. My queer Latino oral history did take shape in the Bay Area, but it had deep roots in pre-queer desires for history and survival, of a Salvadoran immigrant in the U.S. playing in the National Archives of Costa Rica, in my early disillusionment with historical practices disengaged from the memory of the living. Yes, oral histories meander. I have finally begun to appreciate

this beauty and this challenge in oral history, to remain open to that wonderful rambling characteristic of narratives Chicano anthropologist Renato Rosaldo told us about.<sup>3</sup>

I am a postdoctoral fellow in Los Angeles now, with some luxury of time to listen to the oral histories I have collected to give “coherence” to the more than fifty queer Latino community narratives that have traveled around me. But I am still somewhat incoherent today, feeling I carry much weight and responsibility in handling them, especially as I trek back on a monthly basis to my Bay Area queer Latino family to continue the dialogues about community history matters. Narrators have been patient for years, as they know they need to be, because they too realize that I have made an investment in the life of the project. This unspoken community contract we have made around memory seals the relationships in the practice; now my labor must kick in after narrators have done their part, to make this memory come alive.

Because memory is about history and history is about survival—mine, my family’s, my community’s, my peoples’—I know that I will never stray too far from oral history as a method and as a practice, as much as I may want to deny it. Beginning to reach closure for my first community history project compels me to tell my friends to remind me never to do another one again, not because I hate it, but precisely because of the love and the energy it demands. I have aged while conducting it, I have often cried, feeling overwhelmed and incapable, at once proud of the naiveté required to commit to so much so early on, not entirely considering the repercussions, not understanding its potential. I am glad I committed to the memory of life and death in oral history, but I know I am more tired. Just as through other creative practices, to produce in oral history has required emotional energy, it has required a piece of my life, nothing less than what narrators agreed to when the audiotape began to roll.

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<sup>3</sup> Renato Rosaldo, “Doing Oral History,” *Social Analysis* 4 (September 1980), pp. 89–99.