The history of queer nightlife in Antwerp : self-interview in a convex mirror

The History of Queer Nightlife in Antwerp: Self-Interview in a Convex Mirror

Q. So, professor, before Covid-19 changed everyone's plans, you were going to give a lecture about the history of queer nightlife in Antwerp as part of the public program for the exhibition?

A. Well, not quite a lecture.

Q. But you were going to entertain our audience with lots of slides and flashy pictures?

A. Not really. As a matter of fact, I was wondering how to turn the presentation into something more than the delivery of an academic text, something that could satisfy an audience that is drowning in audiovisual information. The thing is that I saw myself forced to talk about a topic that is hard to illustrate, and to do so moreover as an amateur historian.

Q. How do you mean?

A. I actually teach English and American literature. But I happen to be the only board member of the Urban Studies Institute at the University of Antwerp who is simultaneously on the board of A*, the network of colleagues who specialize in gender and sexuality studies. There I have a reputation for being into queer studies and for stimulating the collaboration between queer academics and activists, since I consider myself to be both.

Q. And so the organizers came knocking on your door to ask if you could speak to the topic of queer nightlife in Antwerp?

A. Yes. And I accepted to do so because I have coincidentally been acquiring some expertise on the topic. Last year a colleague with whom I love to collaborate at the university, the media scholar Alexander Dhoest, got an invitation to contribute a chapter on Antwerp for an international book on gay neighborhoods in cities around the world – what used to be called "gay ghettoes." We remembered that a PhD student of ours, the musicologist Rob Herreman, had spent a lot of time in archives to find out more about the recent history of LGBTQs in Antwerp in relation to music. Though we were hesitant to venture into terrain that should ideally be explored by skilled historians, we're not aware of any Flemish colleagues doing academic research into recent LGBTQ history, certainly not with a specific focus on Antwerp. In addition, the book for which we were invited was being put together by architects and would thus probably cut us some slack. So we realized that the case of Antwerp would get attention in the collection only if we were willing to undertake the job ourselves.

Accepting to write the chapter has meant that we were forced to immerse ourselves quickly in the materials and sources we had at our disposal so as to develop a critical narrative that would meet the minimum requirements of academic scholarship. We were primarily interested in all the things we might learn from the exercise.

Q. And did you learn a few things?

A. I certainly hope so! One thing we hypothesized from the start is that the Anglo-American way of understanding gay neighborhoods would be only partially applicable to Antwerp, at best. And that is also what we argued at the more theoretical level. If you want to look for queer forms of geographic clustering in a Flemish city such as Antwerp, you should omit a lot of the social functions you find historically in the gay neighborhoods of New York or San Francisco. The "reverse diaspora" of sexual minorities from the countryside to the city that underpinned these metropolitan neighborhoods in the US never took place to the same extent, or in the same manner, in Flanders or Belgium.

In addition, a historic city such as Antwerp is relatively small by international standards. Getting around, even on foot or by bicycle, is easy, so that there's no urgent need to choose particular residential areas if you happen to be queer. For these and several other reasons, the first thing to note about gay neighborhoods in Antwerp is that there was never anything more than some spatially clustered nightlife.

Q. Let's talk for a moment about that nightlife then. How easy was it to go back in time to undertake your investigation?

A. That was one of the difficulties. It's not as if you can simply fall back on standard published histories of queer life in Belgium or Flanders, let alone histories that deal specifically with Antwerp. The larger context isn't so hard to sketch, but the specifics are a bit of a problem. When you research the history of public sex in Antwerp – by which in this case I mean the institutional environment for nondomestic sexual interactions among citizens – it isn't hard to figure out how the first red-light district emerged during the city's historic heyday in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. As this red-light district catered primarily to sailors, it was understandably located close to the river, in the narrow streets just north of the City Hall that came to be known as the *Schipperskwartier* or Skippers Quarter.

This much is standard knowledge. But how did same-sex interactions ever figure into that lusting, lawless, lowlife milieu? What might possibly be the historic sources in which you might find reliable evidence for same-sex intercourse taking place in this environment? There isn't much you can go by. You must hope that somewhere a slight flicker will flare up to evoke a fleeting image of what might have been going on. Let me illustrate this by showing the invisibility of our topic at its most palpable. Here's the picture of a street in the former Skippers Quarter. Do you recognize it?

Q. Not immediately.

A. Don't blame yourself. Though I personally love to roam through all the little streets of Antwerp's historic center, I must confess I had never bothered to walk through this one before my research took me there. It's called the Gorter Street and it's a very short, narrow, one-way street that is about as bland and uninteresting as you can imagine. Do you see the red-brick house in the middle of the image? That wasn't always there, of course. If we can trust the history of house numbers, it stands where previously the Crystal Palace was to be found, a gay bar whose building collapsed, literally, sometime in the 1960s. But before the Crystal Palace was a gay bar, it was a luxury brothel, as far back as the turn of the twentieth century and even earlier. And that's where we were able to locate our first piece of not entirely reliable evidence for same-sex goings-on – not entirely reliable because it requires a detour via the fictive world of novels and a willingness to fill in the blanks. What do you remember about the Flemish writer Georges Eekhoud?

Q. Not much.

A. He was our own Oscar Wilde, if you like – the first famous gay writer in Flanders who, like Wilde, had to defend himself in court. Unfortunately, he wrote in French, which means we've forgotten him even more efficiently than if he'd written in Dutch. Anyway, he published a novel in 1888, *La nouvelle Carthage*, in which he appears to evoke this particular brothel in great detail as a cave full of mirrors in which "all stages of debauchery" took place. Given his own sexual orientation, it's very easy to imagine that these must have included same-sex interactions, but in his description Eekhoud preferred to remain coy about the sexual acts, so that it's really for our own 21st-century imaginations to flesh out the specifics.

Q. So for what period did you find the first evidence of same-sex activities in the Skippers Quarter that didn't take the form of literary fiction but of nonfictional testimony?

A. We had to jump to the first half of the twentieth century for that. Mainly, what we then find is people testifying to drag performances taking place in the Skippers Quarter. Our favorite example is that of Danny's Bar, a notorious bar for sailors where both the owner and his male staff were dressed as women and the sailors were being tempted into maximum binging.

On an online forum for retired sailors, we found some very juicy recollections of the kind of ritual that typically went on in this bar – how young sailors were being lured in as a sort of prank by older sailors, how these youngsters tended to be awestruck by the Hollywood-star prettiness of the women, and how they would be made to drink so much (and sometimes be drugged as well) until they woke up in bed upstairs only to find they had been sleeping with a man. It's fair to speculate that some of the visiting sailors must have known they were going to be able to sleep with a man at Danny's Bar and must have returned to the place to experiment with sexual desires and gender identities that fell outside the mainstream norms of their day and age.

Q. Are there any signs left of Danny's Bar?

A. Not unless you have x-ray vision. The street is now almost entirely residential, though there is a modern-day "brasserie" in the house where the bar used to be. If walls could talk!

Q. These recollections of Danny's Bar take us automatically into the second half of the twentieth century, I guess?

A. Yes they do. On the eve of the Second World War, we know that the Skippers Quarter had acquired a gay connotation to those in the know. Yet it didn't stick to that area. After the war, its gay nightlife started to spread beyond the city's traditional red-light district. A few of these new bars were still nearby, in the area around the Cathedral and the City Hall, but the majority sprang up close to the Central Station. This is also when we're beginning to see some diversification. The Shakespeare, for instance, was a bar in the historic center. On the one hand, it was still occasionally visited by sailors and sex workers. On the other, and more importantly, it had a female bartender and gradually came to attract a female crowd – a niche for which there hadn't been a market yet in the Skippers Quarter.

Meanwhile, in the working-class streets leading toward the Central Station, a number of bars were opening that were all operated by men and served a male clientele – places like Fortunia, Week-End (later known as La Vie en Rose), and La Ronde. These were generally small operations. One of the streets, the Van Schoonhovenstraat, would go on to sport more than twenty such gay bars. In this picture I recently took, you get a sense of what this may have been like when you look at the structure of the street front, for instance the houses in the middle painted in blue and mauve (one of them surviving as a sex shop):

But the Van Schoonhovenstraat wasn't the only street. Even if nearly all of the area's gay bars have in turn disappeared, you might still recognize this iconic place, the one with the greatest staying power and cult status:

Q. Ah yes, Café Strange! It's in the Dambruggestraat, right?

A. Yes, and it still allows you to step into a time machine and take a trip down memory lane. We used it as our prime architectural case study, because its history shows you a lot about such gay bars in the second half of the twentieth century. A few facts and details hopefully help bring this history to life.

Café Strange was started by a gay couple as a gay-friendly "brasserie" back in 1955. The name, "Strange," was meant to be suggestive without being explicit. In those years, the curtains behind the windows were still systematically drawn so that no passerby could look inside. You couldn't just step inside either, but had to knock or ring a bell and wait for someone to let you in. To expedite this process, a small porch was constructed so that you could first step into the anonymous porch, close the door behind you and then open the door to the actual café – all with an eye to being as discrete as possible.

Over the years, the bar became so successful that its interior had to be reorganized and expanded so that it could accommodate not only a buffet at the back but also make some space for a dance floor. The café had a good reputation for many years until one of the owners died in the mid-seventies and his remaining partner got into various kinds of trouble that ended dramatically with his getting killed. It was then that a new gay couple, Armand and Roger, took over – you probably know Armand as the remaining owner. This was in 1980, in the era of early emancipation, and so they decided to be less discrete by painting the building's façade in a sort of pink and adding a drawing of a sexy sailor on the outside. Inside, pictures of semi-naked and naked men were hung on the walls. The buffet was moved to the front of the room and a professional DJ was hired to turn the place into a small part-time disco. For a while, the owners even produced their own little magazine to inform gay patrons about leisure opportunities – remember that this was before the internet made looking up such information a piece of cake.

The first decades under the new owners went well: the place had the reputation of being at the same time modern, unpretentious, and laid back. There were a lot of flamboyant theme parties in which patrons could win grand prizes such as a flight to Athens or a weekend in Amsterdam or Paris. What's interesting to observe also about the history of Café Strange is the shift in demographic over the years: while in the 1980s you could find a mix of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals from a wide range of ages and social classes in the bar, this narrowed down in the 1990s to mostly gay men, and then by the new millennium morphed again into a mix of gay and gay-friendly visitors. Indeed, by the nineties, these smaller gay bars in especially the area close to the station were increasingly being pushed out of business by a new type of venue, such as The Hessenhuis.

A building with a totally different allure, of course. It's originally from 1564 and part of the city's historical patrimony. After undergoing renovation in 1975, it reopened as a temporary exhibition space, and then in 1993 a gay-friendly bar opened that doubled at night as a club for mainly gay youngsters. Soon, the Hessenhuis became one of their two favorite commercial nightlife venues, together with the Red & Blue. This new generation of larger, trendier, more spectacular, and essentially self-contained clubs gradually drove the small gay bars out of the market, and thus also put an end to the sense of a particular neighborhood or area in which many such bars were clustered.

Today, much of the city's history of gay and lesbian nighttime entertainment has evaporated and become materially invisible in the streetscape. There was a time, during the second half of the twentieth century, that Antwerp contained literally dozens of gay and lesbian bars, but almost none of these survive now. Unfortunately, I'm not aware that anyone is actively trying to honor this material history by installing commemorative plaques or making exhibitions about it. It survives mostly in the memory of an aging cohort of participants, hence my insistence at the outset about the relative difficulty of bringing my topic to life to a younger generation raised on a constant stream of immersive images. But perhaps now that Alexander, Rob, and I have made our first archeological efforts and undertaken a basic form of mental mapping, a curious young historian will come along to flesh out our very schematic findings and dig up all the beautiful, funny, and naughty traces of queer nightlife that may still be hiding in public and private archives. Wouldn't that be wonderful?