In the end, we always have to call institutions to account
Interview with Wigbertson Julian Isenia and Naomie Pieter

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Abstract
This year’s pride season marked the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, an event that, while not the beginning of the Gay Rights Movement in the United States, should at least be viewed as one of the first major milestones in the movement’s history. In the Netherlands, too, the history of LGBT activism has been commemorated in the recent exhibition ‘With Pride’, organised by IHLIA LGBT Heritage (see the review by Michiel Odijk in this issue). After its first successful run at the Amsterdam Public Library, the exhibition toured the Netherlands and opened in Utrecht during its annual pride festivities on June 3. While praised for its thorough documentation of 40 years of Dutch queer resistance, there was also critique. A number of activists and scholars pointed to a lack of inclusivity and representation, which they argued compromised the exhibition’s validity.

Wigbertson Julian Isenia and Naomie Pieter, founders of Black Queer and Trans Resistance Netherlands (BQTRNL) and Black Queer Archive, represent two of these critical voices and address the structural exclusion of queers of colour in history writing and archival practices in their work. Julian co-edited the previous issue of Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies (vol. 22(2): ‘Sexual Politics Between the Netherlands and the Caribbean: Imperial Entanglements and Archival Desire’) and, together with Gianmaria Colpani, Julian and Naomie organised the roundtable ‘Archiving Queer of Colour Politics in the Netherlands’ (Colpani, Isenia, & Pieter, 2019). In response to the IHLIA exhibition, they proposed an exhibition under the title Nos Tei (Papiamentu/o for ‘We are here’ or ‘We exist’), which is to serve as an addition to the original ‘With Pride’ exhibition and ran independently from 11 July until 4 September
2019. We were very happy that both agreed to an interview for this thematic issue on ‘narratives of LGBT history in the Netherlands’ to discuss their views on archival practices and the exclusion of queer of colour perspectives from mainstream exhibition and archival spaces.

Keywords: archives, intersectionality, LGBT, queer of colour activism

Hi, Julian and Naomie, thank you for taking the time to answer some of our questions. Let us start by introducing you. Can you tell us something about yourselves and the work you do with BQTRNL?

Wigbertson Julian: I am a PhD candidate working at the University of Amsterdam. My work centres on the concepts of gendered and sexual citizenship beyond their legal conceptualisation in Curaçao and Bonaire through an analysis of cultural articulations and practices such as archival collections, literature, theatre, and cultural performance. I investigate how these cultural practices and articulations grapple with recent developments pertaining to sexual and gender minority rights, tourism, the colonial relationships with the Netherlands, and their historical legacy.

BQTRNL is a collective that started in January 2018 after a gay bashing or physical abuse of a Surinamese gay man in Amsterdam. Often when such a gay bashing happens in the Netherlands, it gets co-opted by the far-right for nationalist and racist agendas. For example, when a gay couple was attacked in 2017 in Arnhem, the PVV representative in the House of Representatives, Gidi Markuszower, declared that the physical abuse was the result of the great intolerance of the Islam. The Islam, he continued, must be dealt with more strictly and the authorities must revoke the Dutch nationality of the perpetrators. So, we knew that if we would organise something, we should prevent this xenophobic rhetoric co-opting our event.

The march that we organised a few weeks later, our first public action, was a march against homophobia and racism, thus connecting different struggles. This march is a yearly event that we organise in January. We also do intergenerational meetups, diasporan dialogues with other Black LGBT communities in Europe, the Caribbean and the United States of America, and collect and archive material. Also, we support the various organisations that fall under our collective such as Pon di Pride, Manish Cave, The Black Queer Archive, and Dance with Pride, amongst others. Members of our collective are part of these groups.
Naomie: I am a queer and anti-racist activist, an organiser, and a performance artist. My work centres on making space for the intersections of those communities. I advocate for pleasure activism within the BIPoC (Black and Indigenous Persons of Colour) LGBTQIA+ community, through our LGBTQIA+ dancehall party, Pon Di Pride. I am a member of the anti-racist group Kick Out Zwart Piet and I study at SNDO – School for New Dance Development – at Amsterdam University of the Arts. Through my artwork, I examine the Black female body, afro-spirituality, and activism.

An important topic that came up during the roundtable was the structural exclusion of queers of colour from formal institutions and archives. Andre Reeder remarks that this is the result of ‘institutional racism, white supremacy, white privilege, which is also part of the LGBT community’ (Colpani, Isenia, & Pieter, 2019, p. 177). Does this statement also inform your organising with Black Queer Archive, and if so, how can we work towards more inclusive archival practices?

Wigbertson Julian: Our organising and activism, at least in the case of the Black Queer Archive, are driven by a gap of knowledge, by us or within our community, and the desire to locate these queer traces and lives. In addition to a physical depository, it is essential for me to share the archival materials that we have (or that we know to exist in other institutional and personal archives) in ways that they become available to a broader audience. Not many people have the time to go through the archive or have access to...
it due to various economic, social, or physical constraints. So, what I am trying to do is to inform and make people curious through an exhibition or an archival meetup. People do not necessarily have to enter the archive to have access to these stories. By reading an article from us or attending a meeting, it will also become accessible to them.

The fact that the stories of people of colour, in particular LGBT people of colour, are not known or visible, perhaps has to do with the processes that Reeder mentions. I like to use the concept of white innocence by Gloria Wekker here. Thus, the vehement dismissal of any racial discrimination and colonial violence alongside structural racism, colour blindness, and exclusion in Dutch society (Wekker, 2016). What kinds of archives do this white innocence then produce? According to Wekker, women, especially migrant and refugee lesbian women, are rendered invisible in, for example, the Dutch LGBT history by scholars and writers or other ways of doing sexuality outside dominant Western conceptualisation of sexuality (Wekker, 2016, pp. 118, 123). However, if we challenge so-called LGBT or queer archives to include other forms of doing sexuality, such as mati in Suriname or kambaara in Curacao, then I propose we also should critically reflect upon how these sexualities get to enter the archive and how they are to be found in the archive (what do we look for in the archive and how do these relationships become visible?). As some scholars have suggested we should abandon fantasies of a transparent recovery (Arondekar, 2009). Thus, if we find traces of same-sex desire and gender-nonconforming people in the archive, it might be impossible to recover an absolute and all-encompassing ‘truth’. Instead, traces in the archive, through archival negligence, omissions, and gaps, show power relationships: who collects, why, and what is considered necessary or important enough to preserve.

The last question about what to do to work towards more inclusive archival practices is a bit more challenging to answer. It seems to suggest that the people who raise a problem or experience subjugation and exclusion are the ones interpellated to find an appropriate solution. As Sarah Ahmed provocatively poses, ‘the responsibility for diversity and equality is unevenly distributed’ (2012, p. 4). In this case, the lack of diversity that we address should be tackled by the people experiencing these inequalities, or that they should think about the ways to combat it. Within this logic, short-term quick fixes are easily suggested. The addition of the theme ‘Nos Tei’ is such a quick fix for IHLIA. It does not remediate a more significant problem. Namely, how can certain processes and ways of thinking be challenged and changed so that these types of interventions are no longer needed? I think it is imperative that we did the exhibition and that the overall presentation
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is now more inclusive. Otherwise, there was nothing else. But, to make it even more confusing, the majority of the material we used for ‘Nos Tei’ came from IHLIA. So, of course, more will and should be collected, but I want us to linger a bit longer on the problem and try to analyse it instead of quickly moving to solutions.

Naomie: What Julian said! This is why we exist.

This resonates with Ajamu’s question in the roundtable. He asks whether an archive can ever be truly representational and if so, who decides what would make it inclusive and diverse.

Wigbertson Julian: As my previous answer shows, a distinction must be made between the IHLIA archive, the materials from that archive that are known to a broader audience (and what has been done to share information about these materials?), and, lastly, what was ultimately exhibited during the ‘With Pride’ exhibition. Andre Reeder also mentions this distinction in the roundtable. He said that IHLIA owns some of the materials from Strange Fruit, including his two films *Glad to be Gay, Right?* and *Cause of Death, Nothing*. He asked: ‘yet I ask myself the question: do they really belong there? If they are dealt with like this, like in this exhibition?’ (Colpani, Isenia, & Pieter, 2019, p. 177). Thus, the archive of IHLIA is not inexhaustible and should undoubtedly be supplemented and critiqued by non-institutional archives such as ours, but at the same time it also has some interesting material. For the ‘With Pride’ exhibition, the curators chose to show a particular and limited part of this archive. The reception of the exhibition, including the review in this issue, shows that the lack of diversity was not widely acknowledged. So, the fact that these activists publicly voiced their concerns is essential. To use the words of Sarah Ahmed again, whiteness seems ‘to be visible to those who do not inhabit it (though not always, and not only)’ (2012, p. 3). The last part of her quote points hopefully towards a near future where more people (including more white people) get these insights and take action.

In addition, there is also another issue, namely access to these materials and histories. So, the panels and TV screens documenting Strange Fruit, for example, showcased the diversity of the Black, migrant, and refugee LGBT movement in general by including the Turkish, Moroccan, and Muslim groups that originated from Strange Fruit (IPOTH and Secret Garden) or key persons of the movement (such as Cem Ariklar and Ali Zaari). However, the exhibition was primarily focused on the histories of LGBT+ Surinamese and Dutch Caribbean people. I was born on Curaçao, my own research
focuses on the Caribbean, and the activists involved with the intervention from Strange Fruit and SUHO are mainly from Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean. So, I have limited access to these stories. In the preparations for ‘Nos Tei’, I reached out to the chairman of Maruf, Dino Suhodic, and I had a very frank conversation with him. He said that it is good that we also want to include other, less represented groups such as queer Muslims in our addition to the exhibition. However, good intention aside, he pointed out the fact that, first, no queer Muslim currently works at IHLIA or formed part of the curatorial team (of the ‘With Pride’ or our addition ‘Nos Tei’). Second, there is an evident lack of materials at IHLIA about these groups and a lack of access to these stories. And, lastly, IHLIA did not invite these queer Muslim groups at all to be part of the original exhibition or the intervention. Therefore, he thought that the Muslim queer groups should not make a substantial part of our intervention. He concluded that much more needs to be done to fill in these blind spots. So, Suhonic also referred to the so-called easy and superficial quick fixes that I mentioned earlier. Going forward, I think in order to have more inclusive archival practices, we need to think about structural power dynamics, gaps, and silences and we should continue to have difficult conversations with institutions and amongst ourselves. But, in the end, we always have to call institutions to account.

During the roundtable, some participants voiced some very harsh criticism on the IHLIA ‘With Pride’ exhibition. The consensus was that the exhibition focused solely on white LGBTQ activism and completely neglected to include the experiences and stories of queer activists of colour. This seems to be a recurring problem in the archiving and historicising of queer history. Think, for example, of the whitewashing and cis-washing of the Stonewall Riots, which were, after all, spearheaded by trans women of colour. What, do you think, needs to happen for mainstream organisers and audiences to recognise and include the contributions and voices of queers of colour? Is there a way to propel this important conversation forward?

Wigbertson Julian: Interestingly, I was in New York this year for the World Pride to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. Mainstream organisers, audiences, and corporations did recognise and include the contributions and voices of queers of colour of the past. But how was this done? I find it more interesting to analyse what happens when these histories become mainstream. I will provide three observations from the Pride in New York to answer your question.
First, the Stonewall Riots are wrongly conflated with the current LGBT rights movement and the Stonewall Riots are narrated as the start of that movement. A good example was during the June 28 rally to commemorate the Stonewall uprising held close to the historic Stonewall Inn. The first three speakers during the rally were one white female senator, one white male representative for New York's 10th congressional district, and the mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio. All three of them in a heterosexual relationship. In the spirit of the Stonewall Riots, I thought it would be more appropriate to start the rally with trans women of colour. The mayor said in his speech:

And we remember one night in our history, when a brave group of individuals said: ‘enough is enough’. And they stood up and rebelled. [...] Everyone today is living a better live because they stood up for all of us. [...] People are free to be themselves. [...] People have been free to be themselves, but now there are some who want to take us backwards, aren’t they? There are some who want to take us backwards. We see people trying to take away the rights of the LGBT community. We see our trans brothers and sisters being excluded from our military even though all they want to do is serve their nation.6

The current LGBT rights movement focuses on legal reforms such as the right to marry, anti-discrimination protections, and military inclusion. Due to its focus, the movement increasingly moves towards more neoliberal agendas, and in this case state violence, and abandons a politic of radical economic redistribution. Therefore, the most vulnerable of the LGBT community, transgender women of colour and sex workers, are also the most precarious (see Spade, 2011). Ironically, it was transgender women of colour (and some engaged in survival sex work) who were on the front lines of the Stonewall Riots (see Rivera, 2013). Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera are not the respectable and poster children that they are now portrayed to be. As Ehn Nothing notes, ‘they were poor, gender-variant women of color, street-based sex workers, with confrontational, revolutionary politics [...] focused on the most oppressed gay populations’ (Nothing, 2013, p. 6). So, actually, quite the opposite of the politics of De Blassio that want to criminalise sex work.

The second example were the large World Pride billboards and posters from Airbnb, amongst others, in the most gentrified and increasingly expensive neighbourhoods of New York. They all referenced the Stonewall Riots. One of the texts on these colourful advertisements was from a non-binary person who says: ‘It is our duty as young queers to make sure the voices
that came before us are heard’. Apart from the fact that there was no space to mention the names of Sylvia Rivera, Stormé DeLarverie, or Marsha P. Johnson on the posters, the Airbnb posters acted as a kind of smokescreen for the gentrification of Airbnb in the neighbourhoods and the consequent expulsion of LGBT people of colour who cannot afford the rising rents.

Figure 2: Ads of Airbnb during the World Pride 2019 in Greenpoint, Brooklyn
Source: Wigbertson Julian Isenia
Finally, there is an incident that happened at the Stonewall on June 29. I was not there myself, but it was posted on social media and eventually picked up by traditional media. A Black trans woman wanted to call out, unannounced and on the stage at Stonewall, the names of the trans women who were murdered that year. She asked the audience: ‘Where’s your rage? One in three Black trans women will contract HIV/AIDS. Where’s your rage? Black trans women are the most marginalised in our community.’ They tried to take the microphone from her, threatened to call the police, and shouted at her. A drag show was planned, and the audience just wanted to have fun. Eventually, she was able to talk for twelve minutes with smirks and laughter from the audience in between.7

It reminds me of a speech that Sylvia Rivera gave four years after the Stonewall Riots during the New York City’s Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally, a precursor to the Gay Pride to commemorate the Stonewall Riots. People booed her while she said: ‘I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation, and you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all? Think about that!’8 So, all these incidents remind me that not the conversations need to be changed (to include these stories in the mainstream) but the realities of these marginalised groups. We need to improve the outcomes and not (only) the conversations.

Naomie: I find this a difficult question. This is not only a problem with archiving and historicising of queer history but a general problem within all our institutions, as well as the archiving and historicising of marginalised voices. There are many reasons to not include more realities than the dominant one. There are racist, misogynistic, ableist, ageist, Islamophobic, xenophobic, classist reasons for actively not wanting to include other voices. I see that people and institutions slowly realise that the dominant story doesn’t represent all seven billion people on this planet. Two genders and one sexuality can never cover the reality of seven billion people.

We need a radical change! Old schoolbooks out and new, inclusive schoolbooks in. We need books and institutions that understand the responsibility and urgency to tell the full story, the good and the bad. Institutions that understand their function to serve and to be there for ‘the people’, to function in the way that it was created for! Like the police, for example. We have enough studies, reports, etcetera, explaining the problem of ethnic profiling and the racism within the police force. How can this institution
serve and protect all citizens, if it’s only targeting those who have an ‘ethnic background’? I guess I can go on with the examples.

We need a radical change!

As addition to the IHLIA ‘With Pride’ exhibition that is now touring the country, you proposed an exhibition with the title ‘Nos Tei’. Can you explain how you got to be involved with the follow up of IHLIA’s exhibition and what was the vision behind your proposed addition?

Wigbertson Julian: There was a big meetup last year on 13 March 2018, as a sort of a preparatory meeting for the exhibition ‘With Pride’. During this meeting – as Andre Reeder indicates in the roundtable discussion – activists brought materials and shared stories ‘about those decades of Black LGBTI movement in the Netherlands’ (Colpani, Isenia, & Pieter, 2019, p. 176). We, as BQTRNL, were also invited. After this meeting, we did not hear much from IHLIA until after the opening of the exhibition of ‘With Pride’. When the exhibition opened, there was a fallout where activists such as Andre Reeder publicly voiced their critique through social media (see Colpani, Isenia, & Pieter, 2019).

After the fallout, IHLIA had two meetings with activists that critiqued the ‘With Pride’ exhibition. These activists then invited us from a ‘younger generation of activists’ to join these meetings. Because we were involved in everything from the start and also because I already did some research on these groups (see Colpani & Isenia, 2018), they eventually asked us to do the intervention. The idea of the exhibition was to show fragments of the rich history of LGBT people of colour. We were aware that we could not show everything but that this was the start of a larger project where we want to work on a large exhibition.

Naomie: To add. It was important for me that we showcased the reason why we did this addition. We also wanted to relate to the reasons these groups came into existence and the kinds of organising that they did. Like ‘With Pride’, because we are excluded, not thought off, also known as, institutional racism.

Eventually, the travelling exhibition included a couple of your proposed additions, but it is clear that this does not necessarily fix the original exhibition’s problems. What would you recommend future curators to do or consider when organising an exhibition on not only the history of queer activism in the Netherlands, but on the diverse histories of Dutch activism in general?
Wigbertson Julian: This is not entirely true. The following is a bit technical, but I think it is good to be precise. We curated five panels on the theme of ‘Nos Tei’. Two of them discussed two LGBT movements from the 1980s and the 1990s, SUHO and Strange Fruit, respectively. One panel discussed various forms of thinking about gender and sexuality in the former Dutch colonies that problematises, decenters, or rethink dominant ‘Western’ (read Euro-USA) dominated ways of thinking about sexuality. Another panel showed the intersectional thinking (Dutch ‘kruispuntdenken’) that emerged from the Black, refugee, and migrant women’s movement from the 1970s. The last panel showcased different artists and cultural articulations of the 1980s until now that discussed HIV/AIDS in the Surinamese and Dutch Caribbean community but also ways of thinking about gender and different cultural practices. These five panels on Black sexuality and politics in the Netherlands we titled ‘Nos Tei’.

Before the opening on 11 July 2019 of ‘Nos Tei’ in Amsterdam, where all of the five panels we curated are exhibited, the recent exhibition ‘With Pride’ ‘travelled’ to Utrecht for the Pride month there. In this exhibition, IHLIA used materials of the previous exhibition of ‘With Pride’ to create five panels (in a different composition). Another panel was created that engages explicitly with the city of Utrecht and, lastly, they took one of our panels (the one about art and culture). It was after the opening in Utrecht and fairly close to the opening on 11 July of the exhibition ‘Nos Tei’ that all of the panels were finished.

For the tour, each city or place will choose the themes they want to exhibit from the six available themes (thus the five themes of the original exhibition and our theme ‘Nos Tei’). They will choose the themes they think are relevant to them and their audience and depending on the physical space they have. Few places will be able to exhibit all of the six themes and we do not expect that either. What we hope is that IHLIA and the cities will keep the exhibition inclusive by including the theme of ‘Nos Tei’ or add new panels. I know that the city to host the exhibition next, Rotterdam, will consist of our panels.

While the critique of the absence of LGBT of colour in the original exhibition is visible in the introductory panel of ‘Nos Tei’, the question then arises if this still will be visible when you merge our theme to the rest of the exhibition. We will have to wait and see, but I believe that IHLIA has no problem with that critique being shown.

Naomie: It is quite easy. We should work from the beginning in an intersectional way. Intersectionality is a verb! Thinking about it is not enough.
have to do the work constantly and actively. It saves us all time, money, and emotional labour!

Notes

3 For the concept of pleasure activism Naomie advises Brown (2019).
5 Personal conversations with Dino Suhonic. Published with permission.
6 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Gn3vH10oQ8, accessed on July 17 2019
7 See https://www.colorlines.com/articles/black-trans-woman-heckled-nearly-arrested-stonewall-inn, accessed on July 17, 2019
8 See https://vimeo.com/234333103, accessed on July 17, 2019
9 In the exhibition ‘With Pride’, the following themes were included: Starting a movement, Claiming rights, Fighting taboos, Celebrating life, and Becoming visible.

Bibliography

Over de auteurs

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