

SCHWULES MUSEUM

Nikolai Serban

Thesis Development

For my thesis I will be creating a graphic novel, consisting of roughly 50 pages, that will illustrate how the Nazi attack on the LGBT community during the Weimar Republic in Germany, backfired by spreading the ideas of a sexual revolution throughout the developing world. Told through the lens of an emotional, personal narrative, using the art style of art Noir, inspired by German Expressionism, the book will be interspersed with character profiles of LGBT individuals that, through their experiences with the Nazis, went on to shape Queer history.

For me this project began when I visited Berlin during the summer of 2018. We had gone there as part of a class, under Professor Brigitte Salami, to attend the 2018 Berlin Biennale, an internationally recognized and attended art exhibition. The class also visited various sites around Berlin, and our professor lectured on the history of the Weimar Republic, the Nazis, and on German history in general.

During my time there, I began to feel very strongly about how important Berlin was in the history of the Queer Community. It became a sort of quest for me, on the side of this class to seek out various gay monuments, and places of interest for the LGBT people's history. So important was this quest for me, that even after I returned to the States, I continued to pursue the topic, reading books, such as *Sex and the Weimar Republic: Homosexual Emanzipation and the Rise of the Nazis* and *The Temple* by Stephen Spender, as well as doing research, such as examining gay art coming out of Germany during that time, and of course, creating art of my own in relation to what I was absorbing, which ultimately led me to this point.

As we move into the 20s of the 21st-century, the gay community is at risk of forgetting, or at least possibly accepting the heteronormative narrative of our

history written by those who, by their own nature, can never understand us. The spirits of our gay ancestors demand that we remember, and in our own voices, record our history. This is my purpose here, to create an accessible and visual history of what I see as a critical time in the journey of the LGBT community. I will be joining other Queer historians and witnesses, pioneers, and adding to that lineage. Works such as *Qu33r*, an anthology of queer experiences at the dawn of the 21st century, and *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, among other works of our people to put down in our own words and visuals, the events of our past judged by their importance to and by US.

Given all of this, I want to be sensitive to the fact that not any single one of us can be an ambassador for the whole. It is for this reason that I will be couching this entire project through the lens of my own experiences. It is important, I think, to speak from one's own point of view. My thesis work is not "the gay experience of history," it is my impression of that history, with me doing my best to report the facts, connect the dots, and make observations, interweaving these with my impressions, emotions, and expression.

Artistically, the graphic novel will be in the style of art noir. The reasons behind this are twofold, reason number one being that the style of art noir will reinforce the timeframe of the history that I will be retelling, connecting my graphic work with the German Expressionism of the 1920s, and entrenching my narrative within the visual language associated with Berlin. The second reason is purely artistic. Using art noir as a style will reiterate that my work as a whole is one of emotion, an emotional interpretation. Mine is not the clinical history book that one is accustomed to, but a personal exploration.

With moments of extreme anti-realism, I will relate at least some of the cultural baggage the LGBT community associates with this history, and so doing, hopefully express its importance. Examples of this include the impact of the creation of the "Pink Triangle" and all associated ideas of homosexuals being an aberration or "third sex", to the notion of "deviants" and the birth of "kink", as well as our struggle with the heteronormative, yet ubiquitously prevalent notions of "Straight" and "Gay".

The work will be done with a hand-written, journal-like typography. This will reinforce the idea of the book being a personal exploration. Elements of this

will be reinforced in the visual language I will use to layout the pages, giving the reader the feeling of going through a journal or field notes from a naturalist's journal, reminiscent of the sort of visual journals one might have found in the possession of a psychologist or artist during that time.

The way in which I will relate this history will begin from the perspective of my own visit to Germany, and some of the experiences and impressions that I had there, specifically, an interaction I had with an elderly Lesbian activist, both in the queer movement in Germany, but also in feminist activism. We spoke while standing in front of the Monument to the Nazi persecution of homosexuals about where our community is now, and how it built on what came before. Another moment will be when I visited the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and reading the comic-like accounts of a gay man there recorded on a roll of toilet paper. After that, I will use character profiles of notable persons, showcasing them, and then explaining through visual narrative how they are important to the LGBT community's history. Some of these individuals include Magnus Hirshfield, Carl Heinrich Ulrichs, Leontine Segan, and Stephen Spender.

These "character profiles" will consist of single "portrait" pages with an accompanying three to four pages of visual bullet points explaining their accomplishments, followed by brief comic narrative moments that will give viewers an idea of the characters personality. These moments will either be extrapolated from records of actual events, or moments of historical fiction. In the latter case, the most sensitive attention to the spirit of history will be maintained.

For me, creating this gay history is incredibly important. Relating what I've learned will feel like giving something to the LGBT youth of the future... something that I didn't have. While it saddens me to think so, I believe that most LGBT young people have a similarly traumatic "coming out" as I had. As good of intentions as some heterosexuals have, most cannot prevent the feeling of isolation, trauma, and abandonment most gay people feel when we come out to our predominantly hetero families. We become aliens, outsiders, an "other". I certainly felt this way when I came out back in 2005, It's because of this cutting off that I experienced, just like so many other gay people, that I embraced my heritage as a gay person. Our queer ancestors embrace us just as our hetero relatives discard us. Pursuing and recording this history then

feels more like family business than anything else. I'm honoring my family, my ancestors, and my heritage.

One of my principal influencers is Allison Bechdel, who notably makes the web comic "lesbians to watch out for" as well as the graphic autobiography "fun home". She is one of the first people that I became aware of who had created a non-fictional graphic novel, and in many ways has inspired me to create this history book. It let me know that history belongs to all of us, and not just to some unseen judge who creates history books for high school classrooms.

Another major influence comes from the illustrator Touko Valio Laaksonen, commonly known as "Tom of Finland", whose erotic illustrations inspired an entire generation to aspire to live a life open and proud of who they were, and to celebrate their sexuality, rather than hide it behind closed closet doors. Certainly, he is one of the "ancestors" that I intend to honor with my own graphic work.

Otto Dix will be visually one of my chief influences, with his extreme, almost barbaric depictions of society. I intend to draw from his lineage of German Expressionism, both in my facial expressions and in my warping of architectural reality to reinforce that I want my readers to focus on the emotional impression, and not on a tangible reality of facts that is so often the case with history books.

SCHWULES MUSEUM will act as a sort of monument in graphic form to commemorate the women and men who died, not just under Nazi tyranny, but heteronormative patriarchal tyranny. It will be a monument to the people who pushed, and moved us forward as a community. It will be an homage to their legacy.

The creation of work by queer people, for queer people is imperative for the growth of our community, not only in scope, but in our ability to heal from the damage that history has brought down on us. It is my hope as a creative and as an illustrator that SCHWULES MUSEUM will be received in this way, because we matter, and our history matters.

Bibliography

Bechdel, Alison. "About." Dykestowatchoutforcom RSS, dykestowatchoutfor.com/about.

"German Expressionism." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 20 Sept. 2019, en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Expressionism.

"Otto Dix." – Leicester's German Expressionist Collection, www.germanexpressionisleicester.org/leicesters-collection/artists-and-artworks/otto-dix/.

Spender, Stephen. *The Temple*. Faber & Faber, 1990.

Marhoefer, Laurie. *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis*. University of Toronto Press, 2015.

Kirby, Robert, and Justin Hall. *Qu33r New Comics from 33 Creators*. Northwest Press, 2014.

Steakley, James D. *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany*. Ayer Co., 1993.

Schwarz, A.B Christa. *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Indiana University Press, 2003.

Cuerda-Galindo, Esther, et al. "Study of Deaths by Suicide of Homosexual Prisoners in Nazi Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp." PLOS ONE, Public Library of Science, journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0176007.