

Things We Lost in the Fire

June 30, 2017 will surely go down as an important date in Germany's legal history. After all, it was the day when the parliament voted in favour of legalising same-sex marriage after hopefully one last heated and highly emotional debate, which didn't bring any new arguments to the table, but rather summarised a more than two decades long exchange of the same pros and cons. To many, it was a crucial moment in the fight for equality and acceptance. A turning point, a victory.

To me, at least, it was an ambiguous day. The night before I had been out at an infamous bar in Hamburg with beautifully handmade murals by Tom of Finland in the dark room. And now I was supposed to give the opening speech at British artist Prem Sahib's first exhibition in Germany at the Kunstverein in Hamburg—a show deeply invested in the closing of the Chariots Roman Spa in London Shoreditch, which had recently shut down in 2016 after almost 20 years, in order to make way for a luxury hotel development. Chariots was a meeting place for the local gay scene, a venue for exchange and communication, as well as for seclusion, but also for cruising and sexual desire—a complicated, chaotic, intermediate world in which the private and public collided beyond moral and normative categories. Chariots is just one example out of a massive amount of gay venues that had to close down in London since the beginning of the century.¹ There are numerous reasons for this, increasing

rents surely on top of the list. But the increasing shut down of gay bars, clubs, saunas or cinemas, not only in London but all over Europe, may have been in one way promoted by the gay community itself, in the battle for marriage equality. This battle was not only a fight against the law, heteronormative society, bigoted moral standards, hate and ill-founded fear. It was and still is also a fight against a way of queer living; a way of life that doesn't want to share the same family-friendly values as heteronormative society, but which seem necessary to abide by when same-sex marriage is considered the pinnacle of gay rights.

Looking at the German cities I have lived in, it's not the funny or glamorous venues that got shut down, not the bars where they play endlessly German Schlager, Eurovision anthems and all-time gay hymns, not the clubs you could take your fag hag to for a night out. It's the somewhat shady spaces with very small windows or none at all, often located near a station in the souterrain of a building, that usually not permitted women because they offered dark rooms for cruising, which are now gone and forgotten. It's the spaces that don't fit with the mass media image of the gay man (i.e. the funny quirk Jack McFarland from NBC's *Will & Grace*, the frail and musically talented Kurt Hummel from FOX's *Glee*, or the image of a capable gay dad as promoted in ABC's extremely successful sitcom *Modern Family*,

in which the leading gay couple hardly ever kisses, let alone hint at an actual sexual relationship between the two²) that have been demolished. Gentrification obviously plays a role in this, but more worrisome is the indifference and animosity of the gay community toward those spaces. Venues that often have a long history of offering shelter and refuge are being neglected for a faux greater good: to become considered as normal and therefore accepted.

Most of the time, this hostility is subtle and only vaguely visible or perceptible, but there have been a few incidents that have come to broader public attention. In 2009, the KLuST (Kölner Lesben und Schwulen-Tag), organiser of the Cologne pride, formulated a charter for the annual gay pride parade to secure the general appeal and the power of integration of this happening. Every participant of the parade was obliged to these rules, which included instructions for appearance and behaviour. Participants were called to act “considerately” and “discretely”, to not disturb the other participants and the audience at the roadside.³ Behind this noteworthy move were complaints from the conservative local media as well as members of the pride committee about the display of too much public and explicit affection, fetishes and drug use during former parades. It was not only unwanted because the Cologne pride had become Europe's largest pride event and therefore a considerable economic and promotional factor for the city, but also the Cologne pride since its founding in 1991 had regularly used the claim for marriage equality as their official motto.⁴ Such a claim for legal validation of same-sex relationships seemed only legitimate to the KLuST within a certain moral and normative framework, so assimilation was demanded.

This moment of self-censorship was especially dodgy, as the parade celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots at Christopher Street in New York in 1969, when gay, lesbian and especially trans* people demonstrated spontaneously and sometimes violently against the frequent and often brutal police raids on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. In the aftermath of this uprising various groups within the LGBTQ community felt the urgency to act against the governmental repression of their rights and their status as persons. Today, June 28, 1969 is widely considered as the starting point of the gay liberation movement. Honouring this historical moment while simultaneously shaming its legacy can only be described as a farce—an infuriating testimonial to the perversion of some parts of today's so called gay liberation movement. Somewhere and sometime during the course of the fight, victory became synonymous with assimilation to the system that perpetuates injustice, inequality and oppression.

And even now, after marriage equality is a legal fact in Germany, discrimination against the community from within does not stop. A month after the parliament's vote, the Stuttgart pride parade was controlled by a jury implemented by the organisers to watch over the demonstrators so they did not show too much skin. The official justification of the organisers for this repeated act of self-censorship was to ensure the political character of the parade.⁵

Although I am happy for everybody who is now able to marry the person they love, if they want to, I am also deeply worried and saddened, given all the victims and exclusions that were produced on the way to feigned inclusion. Hard fought ideals like diversity, pluralism and the right to live outside the narrow box called “normal” were sacrificed on the path to our current

cultural moment. When a gay cruising bar closes and nobody cares, it's not merely collateral damage, it's a devastating signal, not only for the so called gay community but also on a broader level. The specific potential of a queer way of life lies exactly within the freedom from morally or otherwise considered normative categories. There is no tree to be planted, no house to be built, no child to be raised, no groom to be found. There is none of whatever we have learned as children a man or a woman must do. American author Garth Greenwell put it like this when asked about the fight for marriage equality:

“[It] came at a really great cost. And that cost was a marketing campaign that took queer lives and translated them into values that could be appreciated by people who are disgusted by queer people. (...) I think it forecloses much of the kind of radical potential in queer life. And that radical potential, I think, inheres in spaces like cruising bathrooms and parks, where the categories by which we organize our lives, like race and class, get scrambled by desire, which is a reason why our culture is so terrified by desire, because it scrambles those things.”⁶

Every bar, club or sauna that isn't there any more, was not just a place for drinks, flirts or random sexual encounters. Within the ritual of cruising, which is so deeply connected to all the prejudices against gay men but also to their history of oppression, lies also the negotiation of community and the question of how we want to live together—a conflicting innocence of interaction and acceptance, which we once fought for.

It will be interesting to see in which direction the gay movement might aim, now that their main goal for so many years—marriage equality—has been achieved. The committee of the Berlin pride already reconsidered their political claims for this year's parade after June 30th. Point four on their agenda now reads: Show diversity. Appreciate diversity. – Also within the community!⁷

“I was the match and you were the rock. Maybe we started this fire. We sat apart and watched all we had burn on the pyre.”⁸

- 1) Here is a still incomplete list of all the venues gone: <https://www.thegayuk.com/gay-bars-that-have-closed-in-london-since-the-turn-of-the-century/> (August 13, 2017)

2) Whereas there seems to be no problem with sexual innuendos between the other two straight couples, at all.

3) See the German original here: <https://www.2mecs.de/wp/2009/02/koeln-csd-charta-2009/> (August 13, 2017)

4) In 1998–2001, 2004, 2001, 2012, 2016

5) http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/nackt-zensur-beim-csd-mehr-perversion-fuer-alle.1005.de.html?dram%3Aarticle_id=392170 (August 11, 2017)
- 6) Quoted after: Thrasher, Steven W: *Out from the Modern Family: why cruising had a cultural moment in 2016*. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/dec/29/cruising-gay-culture-2016> (August 4, 2017)

7) <http://csd-berlin.de/forderungen-csd-2017/> (August 14, 2017)

8) Bastille, *Things we lost in the fire*, 2011/2013, Virgin Records