



Subtle Shifts, Sapphic Silences: Queer Approaches to Female Same-Sex Desire in the Netherlands (1912-1940)

Subtiele verschuivingen, sapphische stiltes: een queer benadering van vrouwelijke verlangens in Nederland (1912-1940)

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Abstract: Following a brief survey of some of the most recent analytical developments in the field of queer historiography, this article will attempt to shift the historical lens from a re-location of Dutch lesbian women ‘in the past’ to the discourses that attempted to bridge the gap between sexual ‘normals’ and ‘non-normals’ in the Netherlands between the years 1912-1940. Drawing on a selection of materials, including Jacob Schorer’s *Wat iedereen behoort te weten omtrent Uranisme* (1912) and Benno Stokvis’ *De homosexueelen* (1939), that functioned as a way of ‘educating’ heterosexuals about the subject of homosexuality while simultaneously seeking to emancipate and engage with isolated homosexual people, this analysis will explore the extent to which the omissions and ‘silences’ that have become characteristic of Dutch lesbian history might suggest the existence of historic sexual arrangements between women in the Netherlands that are now ‘unheard of’.

Keywords: Queer, lesbian history, gay history, Magnus Hirschfeld, Jacob Schorer / queer, lesbische geschiedenis, homogeschiedenis, Magnus Hirschfeld, Jacob Schorer

A Silent Conspiracy

In 1994, historian and activist Judith Schuyf described the existence of lesbian desire in Dutch society in the interwar era as a ‘silent conspiracy’.¹ Her four hundred and fifty page monograph on the subject outlines the development of Dutch lesbian experience from the clandestine encounters of the early twentieth century to the politicised bar culture of the late sixties. Building on the only other study to deal exclusively with the topic of historic Dutch female homosexuality, Anja van Kooten Niekerk and Sacha Wijmer’s *Verkeerde vriendschap* (1985), Schuyf’s analysis was the first academic study of its magnitude to document the history of lesbian women in the Netherlands. Reflecting the discourses that structured homosexual history writing at the time of its publication, Schuyf’s contribution can be read primarily as an attempt to ‘recover’ the erotic experiences of Dutch women that had been elided from mainstream historical narratives. In what she believed to be simply ‘an initial impulse’, Schuyf gave voice to the muted desires of historic Dutch women and produced an document with which ‘the silence surrounding half a century of lesbianism was broken forever’.²

In the twenty years since the publication of Schuyf’s *Een stilzwijgende samenzwering*, however, approaches to the historiography of homosexuality have undergone some radical reformations, catalysed primarily by the critical interventions of queer theory. The Foucauldian proposal of the ‘historicity of sexuality’ strongly influenced later developments in the field such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s call for a ‘denaturalization of the present’, signalling a shift in historical analysis that irreversibly changed the landscape of enquiry into the sexual past. Yet, despite the developments that have been made in the ways in which sexuality can be historicised, historic lesbian experience has remained untouched as the subject of comprehensive queer research within contemporary Dutch studies. By revisiting some of the earliest Dutch sources on the subject of homosexuality, this article will explore, therefore, the extent to which recent queer analytical practices might further our understandings of the complex articulations of female same-sex desire that were taking place the Netherlands during the first half of the twentieth century.

Following a brief survey of some of the most recent analytical developments in the field of queer historiography, this article will attempt to shift the historical lens from a re-location of the lesbian ‘in the past’ to an analysis of the discourses that attempted to bridge the gap between those who were considered ‘normal’ and those who were ‘abnormal’ in the Netherlands in the period 1914-1939. By departing from a historical impulse that is no longer ‘motivated by the desire for the recognition of the present in the past’, this analysis will demonstrate how the omissions and ‘silences’ that have become characteristic of Dutch lesbian history might have the potential to reveal far more about the complexity of women’s engagement with sexuality than has previously been imagined.³

¹ J. Schuyf, *Een stilzwijgende samenzwering* (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1994).

² ‘Lollepotterij. Geschiedenis van het ‘sapphisch vermaak’ in Nederland tot 1940’, in *Homojaarboek 1: Artikelen over emancipatie en homoseksualiteit*, ed. by Dallas, Duyves et al. (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1981); ‘[...] het stilzwijgen over een halve eeuw lollepotterij voorgoed [was] doorbroken’, X. Schutte, *Lollepotterij ‘hout op hout, dat zaagt niet’*, <http://www.groene.nl/artikel/lollepotterij-hout-op-hout-dat-zaagt-niet> [accessed 29/07/2014]. Unless stated otherwise, all translations in this article are the author’s own.

³ J. Carter, ‘On Mother-Love: History, Queer Theory and Nonlesbian Identity’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14 ½ (2005), 107-38 (p.108).

Historical Que[e]ries

Prior to the publication of Schuyf's landmark study, the fledgling field of homosexual history had focused primarily on efforts to 're-discover' homosexuals of the past. Literary scholars and historians such as Lillian Faderman and Martha Vicinus, for example, contributed masterful narratives to the LGBT+ 'recovery agenda' in an attempt to catalogue the various forms of lesbian desire that had existed from the 'Renaissance to the present'.⁴ These initial historical approaches have been crucial for the admission of the lesbian subject into the master historical narratives from which she had previously been omitted and, as Laura Doan has argued, 'ancestral' histories such as Faderman's were instrumental 'in sustaining political identities and communities' at a time when discourses of historical legitimisation were vital for LGBT+ visibility and emancipation.⁵ This attempt to illustrate how queer historical practices might offer alternative understandings of historic female same-sex desire, therefore, should not be seen as an attempt to dismiss the valuable research that homosexual historians have undertaken under the banner of 'recovery history'. Engaging with the new analytical insights offered by queer theoretical practices may indeed offer alternative insights into historical constructions of homosexual desire, however, as Lisa Duggan powerfully asserted in her article 'The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History' (1995): it is important that queer historians recognise and 'acknowledge their debt' to these earlier modes of homosexual historiography, methods that have arguably made recent queer research possible.⁶

The queer impulse to reject a deployment of a 'modern system of sexual classification' to narrativise the desires of historical subjects, offers a strategy that allows explicitly for readings of historic sexual experiences between women that sit outside of our contemporary understanding of lesbian desire.⁷ As an analytical tool and point of theoretical departure, then, the term 'queer' might be most comprehensively understood as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'.⁸ The instinct to problematise any suggestion of a fixed subjectivity has resulted in the development of a diverse range of queer historical practices; Sedgwick's own

⁴ See, for example, L. Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women's Press: 1981); M. Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women who Loved Women 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵ Outlining the tensions between queer and homosexual historiographical practices, Doan explains that 'ancestral inquiry has often centered on whether the homosexual is defined by acts or identities or whether homosexuality is essential or socially constructed' (p. 14). In contrast to 'ancestral' approaches, queer historians 'emphasize the need for a dialogue with difference, discontinuity, alterity, and rupture' (p. 16). Ultimately, however, Doan sees the two projects as inextricably interlinked, particularly as queer genealogical approaches, in the Foucauldian sense, 'betrays a lingering conceptual investment in the discursive logic it claims to repudiate and problematize' (p. 16). L. Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. x.

⁶ L. Duggan, 'The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2:30 (1995), 179-91 (p. 188).

⁷ Carter, 'Mother-Love', p. 112.

⁸ E.K. Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 8. For a more comprehensive example of how the 'dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' in Sedgwick's understanding of 'queer' can be put into practice within literary studies, see R. van den Oever, *Mama's Boy: Momism and Homophobia in Postwar American Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

‘denaturalization of the present’, for example, signals an attempt to ‘render less destructively presumable homosexuality as we know it today’ in order to explore the complexities of our contemporary categories whilst avoiding the anachronisms of ahistorical ‘narratives of supersession’.⁹ More recently, historian Julian Carter’s ‘unlesbian dishistory’ draws on queer methodological approaches to illustrate what same-sex desire between women in the twentieth century may have looked like from ‘nonlesbian subject positions’.¹⁰ Carter’s employment of queer analytical practices facilitates an exploration of the ways in which the intersections of gender and sexuality sometimes formed specifically ‘nonlesbian’ experiences between women during the early twentieth century. His suggestion of ‘mother-love’, for example, is used as a designation to describe the sexual relationships between feminine presenting women that appear at once both erotic and maternal, challenging readings of historic lesbian desire as existing only within the parameters of a butch-femme dichotomy.¹¹

Laura Doan’s latest contribution to the field, *Disturbing Practices* (2013), tackles the issues of ahistoricism that have been highlighted in the methodological approaches outlined above, and outlines the perils of employing a mode of history-making that departs with a fundamental ‘knowingness about the sexual past’.¹² Using Foucault’s ‘Great Paradigm Shift’ as a point of departure, that is ‘the imaginary moment in the late nineteenth century when category of the modern homosexual was thought to displace the category of the sodomite’, Doan questions the efficacy of situating ‘sexual identity’ as the premise for research into the sexual past.¹³ In order to develop new modes of queer history writing, Doan forms a framework that fundamentally acknowledges that ‘nothing in the past is visible until we in the present make it so, and, [...] that history is always in the service of the present’.¹⁴ By reconsidering the ‘privileging of the binary relation between normativity and deviance’ Doan’s research on British lesbian subcultures suggests that, even until the late 1920s, many women had ‘little sense of sexual selfhood or subjectivity’ and ‘did not think to attach to themselves sexual labels or names’.¹⁵ Doan’s deployment of sexual categories in order to ‘pose questions rather than provide answers about sexual identities we already know’ is one that appears particularly useful for the discussion of Dutch same-sex desire in the early twentieth century, where it appears labels were designated rather than appropriated, and sexual desires did not always result in sexual identities. By employing a methodological approach similar to Doan’s ‘queer critical history’, this article will explore the extent to which the ideological structuring of Dutch female same-sex desire in the first half of the twentieth century may have resulted in sexual arrangements that are now ‘unheard of’.¹⁶

⁹ As outlined in her work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick describes a ‘denaturalisation of the present’ not only as an aim to trouble the categories of gender and sexuality that are often taken for granted but also to see the ways in which homo- and heterosexuality have been continually fragmented and reconstructed through various social and cultural practices. E.K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 48.

¹⁰ Carter, ‘Mother-Love’, p. 138.

¹¹ Carter, ‘Mother-Love’, p. 138.

¹² Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, p. 59.

¹³ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, p. 44.

¹⁴ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, p. 89.

¹⁵ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, p. 144.

¹⁶ Doan, *Disturbing Practices*, pp. 90-1.

‘Een breuk met het systeem van doodzwijgen’

While many of the queer historical approaches outlined in the brief summary above currently reside at the peripheries of historical research on sexuality, studies on the subject of sexuality and sexual behaviours can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century. Scientific publications such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) and Havelock Ellis’s *Das konträre Geschlechtsgefühl* (Contrary Sexual Feeling, 1896) were distributed widely throughout central Europe and formed the vanguard of what Iwan Bloch would later term *Sexualwissenschaft* (sexology).¹⁷ These early contributions to sexual research were characterised largely by the legacy of a post-Darwinian era and driven by a desire to categorise the countless sexual practices that appeared to deviate from the societal reproductive ‘norm’. Galvanised by the sheer level of sexological research emerging in neighbouring countries, particularly in Germany, the subject of sexuality became an increasingly popular subject matter in the Netherlands and helped to promote, as Gert Hekma has noted, ‘for the first time in Dutch history quite positive ideas of sexual variations’.¹⁸

A figure tied closely to the emergence of a ‘sexual science’ in both Germany and the Netherlands was Jewish physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld’s Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (Scientific Humanitarian Committee, WhK) was at the forefront of European campaigns against the criminalisation of homosexuality. Although initial efforts to establish a Dutch branch of the WhK were unsuccessful due to a lack of grassroots support, the growing Christian ‘fight against immorality’ in the Netherlands that had resulted in the introduction of a law restricting homosexuality in 1911 resulted in the establishment of the *Nederlandsch Wetenschappelijk Humanitair Komitee* (Dutch Scientific Humanitarian Committee, NWHK) one year later.¹⁹ Although the law restricting homosexuality, in particular its article 248bis, was peculiar because of its targeting of both male and female homosexuals, it simultaneously signalled a break in the systematic silencing of same-sex desire. What had once been an ‘unmentionable vice’ was now explicitly outlined in the Dutch penal code, situated amidst a number of laws introduced to help prevent immoral behaviour: ‘The adult who commits fornication [ontucht plegen] with a minor of the same sex, whose minority status he knows or should reasonably suspect, shall be punished with a prison sentence of up to four years.’²⁰ As Frank van Vree has noted in his recent work on popular entertainment and mass culture in the Netherlands, by the turn of the twentieth century local councils had become convinced of the idea of a ‘moral authority’, which was given form through the *zedenpolitie* (vice squad), whose role it was to counter immoral behaviour. Not only were alcoholism and

¹⁷ Bloch introduced the term ‘Sexualwissenschaft’ in his monograph *Das Sexualleben unserer Zeit* (1907). For more on the research of Bloch and Hirschfeld, see E. Mancini, *Magnus Hirschfeld and the Quest for Sexual Freedom: A History of the First International Sexual Freedom Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁸ G. Hekma, ‘Amsterdam’, in *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*, ed. by David Higgs (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 74.

¹⁹ G. Hekma, ‘Wrong Lovers in the 19th Century Netherlands’, in *Interdisciplinary Research on Homosexuality in the Netherlands*, ed. by A. X. van Naerssen (New York: Haworth Press, 1987), p. 53.

²⁰ ‘De meerderjarige die met een minderjarige van hetzelfde geslacht, wiens minderjarigheid hij kent of redelijkerwijs moet vermoeden, ontucht pleegt, wordt gestraft met gevangenisstraf van ten hoogste vier jaar’. For a comprehensive overview and critical analysis of the German and Dutch laws against homosexuality, see A. Tijsseling, *Schuldige seks: Homoseksuele zedendelicten rondom de Duitse bezettingstijd* (unpublished doctoral thesis: University of Utrecht, 2009).

gambling considered ‘moral vices’, but ‘physical and spiritual excesses’ were also signs of moral degeneracy.²¹ In conjunction with the laws restricting homosexuality, therefore, many local authorities also observed a cross-dressing ban (*travestieverbod*) for men and a trouser ban for women which was recognised in several major Dutch districts, including Groningen and Amsterdam.²² The strict distinction between ‘male’ and ‘female’ clothing accentuated the gap between ‘normative’ and ‘transgressive’ gendered behaviour in the Netherlands, serving to discriminate further against homosexuals to whom the sexological theory of ‘gendered inversion’ was inextricably tied. As Geertje Mak notes in her study *Mannelijke vrouwen: Over grenzen van sekse in de negentiende eeuw* (1997), the association between masculinity and female homosexuality had become increasingly popular in media discourses by the turn of the twentieth century; the figure of the woman ‘with the trousers’ was a widely discussed topic in the press, not only in terms of a wider ‘crisis of male masculinity’ but also in explicit reference to scientific theories of sexual deviance.²³

Against this conservative backdrop, Jacob Anton Schorer, founder of the *Nederlandsch Wetenschappelijk Humanitair Komitee*, returned to the Netherlands in order to fight the ‘injustice and tyranny’ of article 248bis. With Schorer at the helm, the NWHK disseminated thousands of pro-homosexual pamphlets and brochures in the hope of convincing the general public of the congenital, and therefore ‘natural’, nature of same-sex desires. Although Schorer’s organisation focused primarily on the persecution of male homosexuals, the ideological underpinnings of their writings about female homosexuality offer some interesting insights into the extent to which women were actively engaging with concepts such as ‘homosexuality’ during this era. An analysis of one of the NWHK’s first major publications *Wat iedereen behoort te weten omtrent Uranisme* (What everybody should know about Uranism, 1912), for example, signals the risks of assuming that the term homosexuality was a concept that was widely recognised in the Netherlands at beginning of the twentieth century.²⁴ In the introduction to the main argument of the pamphlet, it becomes apparent that both the term ‘uranisme’, featured in the title and coined by literary scholar and classicist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in the mid-1800s, as well as the label ‘homosexual’, are considered to be too technical for the average layperson and in need of clarification:²⁵ ‘Our goal [with this publication] is to inform the general public more accurately about the true nature of Uranisme (= homosexuality = love for members of the same

²¹ F. van Vree, ‘Media, Morality and Popular Culture The Case of the Netherlands, 1870-1965’, in *Twentieth-Century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. by B. Moore and H. van Nierop (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. 87.

²² For further information on the ‘trouser ban’ see J. Schuyf and M. Schoonheim, ‘Gescheidenis’, in *De lesbocyclopedie*, ed. by M. Hemker and L. Huijsmans (Amsterdam: Ambo-Anthos, 2009).

²³ G. Mak, *Mannelijke vrouwen: Over grenzen van sekse in de negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1997), p. 245.

²⁴ *Wat iedereen behoort te weten omtrent Uranisme* is a translation of the earlier German publication *Was muss das Volk vom dritten Geschlecht wissen!* (1901), produced by the WhK. At the time of writing this article, a comparison of the two publications has not been undertaken.

²⁵ The term ‘Uranian’ was developed by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in his nineteenth-century study *Forschungen über das Rätsel der mann männlichen Liebe* in reference to Plato’s *Symposium*. Ulrichs employed the term ‘Uranian’, or ‘Urning’, to denote men who desired males and the term ‘Urnide’, or ‘Urmingin’, to refer to women who desired other women. Ulrichs also deployed the terms ‘Dioning’ and ‘Dioningin’ to refer to opposite sex attraction and the categories ‘Uranodioning’ and ‘Uranodioningin’ to refer to men and women respectively, who were attracted to both the male and female sex.

sex)'.²⁶ Although the term 'homosexueel' was being used widely in scientific publications, it doesn't appear that the NWHK expected the general public to recognise or understand the term without further explanation.

While the pioneering German sexological research had left a deep imprint on the Dutch scientific landscape, the incipient sexual subcultures that were beginning to emerge in Berlin at this time do not appear to have been reflected in Dutch society. In the Netherlands same-sex desire, remained a taboo subject and the activities of sexual subcultures consisted of little more than irregular meetings in cafés, which remained at constant risk of police raids. While the Foucauldian notion of a 'Great Paradigm Shift', as outlined in the introduction to this article, may be an appropriate description for the way in which sexological frameworks were assimilated into Germany cultural discourses then, a general understanding of homosexuality appears to have been far less established in the Netherlands before the First World War.²⁷

'Een geheim bondgenootschap'

Three years after the appearance of the NWHK's *Wat iedereen behoort te weten omtrent Uranisme*, Joannes Henri François published his anonymous *Open brief aan hen die anders zijn dan anderen, door een hunner* (Open letter to those who are different, from one of them).²⁸ Under the auspices of the NWHK, over 40,000 copies of the pamphlet were sent to leading figures in the Dutch government, as well as medical practitioners and editors of several major publications within the Dutch press.²⁹ François' letter, which aimed chiefly to offer words of support to isolated individuals across the country, points to some important considerations that should be made in the study of same-sex desire in the Netherlands in the early twentieth century.

Preceded by an introduction by Felix Ortt, a prominent theorist of the Dutch Christian anarchist movement, the framework of François' letter appears strikingly similar to the earlier sexological 'case studies' that had been made popular by sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld. This stylistic choice would have no doubt lent the document scientific weight and would also have been likely to protect the authors against claims of propaganda, particularly in light of the 'intimate character' of the letter. Ortt goes on to explain to the 'normal reader' that the intimacy of the letter stems from the fact that it is from 'one of those, to their own'.³⁰ Although Ortt is quick to define François as a 'homosexual' in his introduction, however, in the letter that follows the author is clear not to define his desires in those terms. While François acknowledges a perceptible 'difference' between those who experience

²⁶ 'Ons doel hiermede is het groote publiek juister in te lichten omtrent den waren aard van het Uranisme (= Homosexualiteit = liefde van het eigen geslacht) [...]' J. Schorer, *Wat iedereen behoort te weten omtrent Uranisme: Hoe Uraniërs beoordeeld moeten worden* (Den Haag: Belinfante, 1912), p. 2.

²⁷ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 43.

²⁸ Joannes Henri François was more widely known by his pseudonym 'Charley van Heezen', under which he published the homosexual novels *Andere* (1918) and *Het Masker* (1922). He also published in the homosexual magazines *Wij* and *Levensrecht*.

²⁹ 'Bewaar mij voor de waanzin van het recht – 100 jaar strafrecht en homoseksualiteit in Nederland', Exhibition in the IHLIA archive, Amsterdam 18 November 2011-29 February 2012.

³⁰ 'een hunner tot de zijnen', *Open Brief aan hen die anders zijn dan anderen door een hunner*, ed. by F. Ortt (Den Haag: H. J. Berkhout, 1915), p. 7.

homosexual feelings and those who do not, his writing does not appear to indicate the presence of a self-reflexive 'homosexual identity'. His letter is not directed at a 'homosexual' collective but rather at those who are 'anders dan anderen'. Yet, although his letter doesn't suggest a collective naming, or the organisation of individuals around a particular label, his writing does allude to the existence a 'secret alliance' that enables someone who is 'like that' to recognise a like-minded individual:

We don't know one another, you, who are 'like that', and to whom I am writing this letter, and I, one of you, and so also 'like that'; but still there is something that binds us: you to me and me to you. There is something between us, that makes us instantly recognise one other, when we meet within the bustle of indifference.³¹

Although the term 'homo-sexual' was gaining traction in scientific research in the Netherlands at this time, there appears to be no indication that the term homosexual was widely used at this time by individuals harbouring desires for those of the same sex, or that the general public were well versed in sexological terms. Although Ortt, as a figure of authority, is able to 'diagnose' the desires of individuals that deviate from the norm as 'homosexual', François does not appear to use the category to articulate his own sexual preferences. Instead, his desires appear to be constructed along the lines of 'normative' and 'non-normative' behaviour informed by the wider 'moral crusade' that structured Dutch social and cultural life during the early twentieth century. On the subject of his female 'gevoels-genoten', François asserts in his letter that same-sex desire occurs just as frequently in women as they do in men, however he concedes that he knows little about the circumstances of 'zoo-aangelegde vrouwen' because their existence is so poorly documented. Despite this concession, however, François argues that it is socially 'much less difficult' for the 'zoo-vrouw' than it is for her male counterpart, given that 'intimate contact between two women is given far less attention than that between two men'.³² The intimacy between women that François alludes to in his letter is suggestive of the homosocial networks that existed earlier in the nineteenth century, most comprehensively documented in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's article 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America' (1975).

Focusing on female friendships in the nineteenth century, Smith-Rosenberg posits that before sexologists established a taxonomical framework to differentiate between 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' individuals, there existed a diverse range of social structures and norms that actively encouraged the development of exclusively homosocial environments. From the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, intimate female networks became an essential and established part of American society. These passionate and loving female friendships, Smith-Rosenberg contends, existed at a time during which passion, romanticism and desire were organised and structured in ways that were independent of the twentieth century 'sex pleasure ethic'.³³ François' assertion that public life was much easier for 'zoo-aangelegde vrouwen' than

³¹ 'Wij kennen elkaar niet, Gij, die 'zoo' zijt, en aan wien ik dezen open brief schrijf, en ik, een Uwer, dus óók 'zoo'; maar toch is er iets, dat ons bindt: U aan mij en mij aan U. Er is tusschen ons iets, dat ons elkaar dadelijk doet herkennen, wanneer wij elkaar tegenkomen in het gewoel der onverschilligen', *Open brief*, p. 13.

³² '[aan] intiemen omgang tusschen twee vrouwen [wordt] veel minder aandacht geschonken dan aan dien tusschen twee mannen', *Open brief*, p. 40.

³³ C. Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', *Signs*, 1:1 (1975), 1-29.

her male counterpart, suggests, much like Smith-Rosenberg's article outlines, that the homosocial structuring of women's networks presented an outlet for articulation of female homosexual desires that wasn't available to men in the early twentieth century. The indication of more intimate homosocial networks between women suggests that there existed alternative configurations of female same-sex desire in early twentieth century Dutch society that, to this point, have remained unexplored. With a further examination of the publications produced in the Netherlands during the interwar era, however, it becomes apparent that it remains problematic to assume that these networks resulted in an understanding of sexual desire as constituting a sexual identity at this time.

Women and *Wij*

Almost twenty years after the publication of his *Open Brief*, and together with close friend Johan Ellenberger, François and a group of 'like-minded' individuals assembled at the Empire Bar on the Amsterdam Nes in 1932 in order to prepare for the publication of the Netherlands' first magazine dedicated to homosexual issues: *Wij* (We). With the intention of encouraging interest in establishing a *Nederlandsche Vereeniging voor Menschenrecht*, a Dutch branch of the Berlin-based *Bund für Menschenrecht* - the largest organised homosexual movement to exist in Germany at this time - the magazine ran only for one issue before it was outlawed by the *zedenpolitie* and the organisation responsible for its dissemination disbanded. Taking into account the limitations of drawing conclusions based on such a limited sample of material, the contents of *Wij* nevertheless highlight some interesting points concerning the overtly masculine structure of homosexual organisations in the Netherlands during interwar era. Dedicated to the 'masculine ideals' of 'friendship and freedom', for example, it is clear that the collective pronoun *Wij* does not appear to have encompassed fellow female 'compatriots'. Endorsed by homosexual masculinist activist Adolf Brand, founder of the anti-feminist *Gemeinschaft der Eigene* (Community of the Special) in Germany, *Wij* offers nothing in terms of support or advice for the 'zoo-aangelegde vrouw', for whom no other publications or organisations existed to represent her social or political interests.³⁴ Published at a time when the sexual networks the magazine strove to emulate had existed for almost a decade in Berlin, the manner in which homosexual desire is portrayed in the pages of *Wij* still appears to be caught between the parameters of 'normalcy' and 'deviance' that had structured the earlier writings of Joannes François and Jacob Schorer. Although there appears to be a more concrete form of collective identity in Ellenberger's publication, made apparent chiefly through the title of the magazine, *Wij*, and in the editorial address, which declares: 'it's here! "Wij" - a magazine for us!', to whom the collective pronouns 'we' and 'us' refer is initially unclear.³⁵ In the article 'Attempt to understand! To all those who are normal', however, it becomes apparent that the construction of this collective identity is being formed primarily along the lines of the normative/non-normative binary:

³⁴ A message was published from Adolf Brand in the first edition of *Wij* congratulating the editors on their endeavour: 'Ich beglückwünsche Sie zu dieser Idee und wünsche Ihrer neuen Vereinigung und Ihrer neuen Zeitschrift von ganzen Herzen einen durchschlagenden Erfolg, der in Zukunft die Wiederholung von Homoerotenverfolgungen in Holland durch seinen gesellschaftlichen Einfluss einfach unmöglich machen muss! Adolf Brand', *Wij*, 1932, p. 5.

³⁵ 'Het is er! "Wij" - een blad voor ons!', 'Wat wil "Wij"?', in *Wij*, 1932, p. 4.

You have judged us because you did not understand, you will never understand because you are not like us [...] What is unnatural for you is normal [gewoon] for us: because we are born so. [...] Attempt to learn something about us and our lives, perhaps then you can allow us to live in freedom as you do.³⁶

Much like the earlier publications of the NWHK, *Wij* maintains a dual function as both a support mechanism for isolated individuals and as a mediator between those who are 'normal' and those who not. The magazine also echoes François' earlier suggestion of a 'secret alliance' between those individuals who are different from the others: 'Who I am, who writes this, does not matter. I am like you... and that gives me the right and duty to call you my friend'.³⁷

Although increasing number of publications calling for actions to be taken against the NWHK began to emerge at the beginning of the 1930s, such as Catholic minister Pater Bender's 'Verderfelijke propaganda', suggest that a more general knowledge about 'homo-sexuality' was starting emerge in Dutch society by this time, a self-reflexive employment of the term to indicate a collective sexual identity does not appear to have been widely adopted in the magazine.³⁸ With female homosexual desire disappeared entirely from the publication, it is not until almost a decade later that experiences and views of women-who-desire-women would be represented.

'Een onoplosbaar raadsel'

The first mention of female same-sex desire in the Dutch 'pink press' does not occur until a second magazine and organisation was established in 1940, under the name *Levensrecht*. The magazine was able to publish three issues before the German invasion in 1940, after which it was forced to cease circulation. Similarly to *Wij*, many of the articles featured in *Levensrecht* are concerned with the 'unsolvable riddle' (*onoplosbaar raadsel*) of homosexuality and heterosexuality. However, in the magazine's assessment on the lives of female 'homosexuals', which comes to light in a review of one of the most significant sources of female homosexual desire in the Netherlands during this period, Benno Stokvis's *De homosexueelen* (1939), there appears to be a markedly different conclusion drawn in this publication from those discussed previously in this article. Consisting of thirty-five autobiographical narratives, nine of which were written by women, Stokvis's *De homosexueelen* elicited much debate within the pages of

³⁶ 'Wat voor U onnatuurlijk is, is voor ons gewoon: omdat wij zoo zijn geboren. [...] Tracht iets van ons en ons leven te weten te komen, misschien kunt gij ons dan toestaan in vrijheid te leven zooals gij.' J.E., 'Tracht te begrijpen! Aan allen die normaal zijn', *Wij*, 1932, p. 6.

³⁷ 'Wie ik ben, die dit schrijft doet niets ter zake. Ik ben als Gij... en dat geeft mij het recht en den plicht mij Uw Vriend te noemen.' C.P. Aan allen!, *Wij*, 1932, p. 12.

³⁸ To qualify this suggestion more quantitatively, the term 'homo-sexualisme' appears three times in the magazine, 'homo-sexueelen' appears twice, and 'homo' appears once in the twenty pages of *Wij*. Descriptive terms appear to far outnumber the scientific and diagnostic labels. As can be seen in Judith Schuyf's original study, euphemisms such as 'zoo', 'anders' or 'van de verkeerde kant' were more commonly used to talk about homosexual desire, see Schuyf, *Een stilzwijgende samenzwering* (1994). Furthermore, although it is possible that a certain degree of self-censorship was involved in the writing process of the magazine, which may have influenced the authors' choice of terminology, the liberal censorship laws that had been place in the Netherlands since 1848 made it extremely difficult for a magazine or book to be censored or banned once it was available in the public domain. For more on censorship laws and literature, see in particular *Boeken onder druk: censuur en pers-onvrijheden in Nederland sinds de boekdrukkunst*, ed. by M. Mathijssen (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2011).

Levensrecht.³⁹ Originally intended for ‘Doctors, Clergy, Judges, Lawyers [and] Police Officers’, it appears likely, as Maurice van Lieshout has claimed, that *De homosexueelen* actually achieved much greater success among those who saw themselves reflected in his work than among the doctors and lawyers Stokvis aimed to educate.⁴⁰ In Arendt van Santhorst’s review of the anthology in *Levensrecht*, he approaches the paradoxical problem of the heightened social visibility of female homosexuality and the increasing sense of isolation for the ‘zoo-vrouw’ with sympathetic consideration:

On the subject of the women: nothing but praise. Without exception, we read her biographies with interest. That for them it is precisely like it is ‘comme chez nous’, was a revelation and increases our sympathy for this group of women, who currently have it much more difficult than we do, because there exists much fewer connections between them.⁴¹

Although the Dutch male homosexual subculture had become much better organised by the late 1930s, as illustrated by the successful existence of *Levensrecht* and a growing number of cafés and meeting points exclusively for men-who-desired-men, a closer look at the women in Stokvis’ anthology highlights their growing sense of isolation and the increased pressure they felt to ‘wear a mask’ in order to ‘hide their true spirits’.⁴² The bleakness of homosexual existence is echoed in many of the female autobiographies, suggesting that although there was a growing recognition of female homosexuality within wider society, this visibility had disastrous implications for same-sex intimacies between women. Female intimacy by the late 1930s had been pushed outside of the ‘natural’ homosocial order into a more suspect and pathologised sphere, in which same-sex intimacy between women could be perceived as ‘immoral’ and ‘deviant’.

The sexological theories behind works such as Stokvis’ offer, as Judith Schuyf has noted, a rare insight into the ‘image-forming’ of the dominant Dutch culture, shedding light ‘on the mentality of the outside world’ on the subject of lesbian desire at this time. Stokvis’ particular attention to the female ‘homo-erotiek’ in his work, a terrain he declares in his introduction to be ‘even harder to access still than the male, and thus even more neglected’, provides us also with an insight into the first explicit articulations of lesbian desire in the Netherlands in the twentieth century.⁴³ However, this presentation of female same-sex desire was far from neutral. Published as part of the series *Menschenleed*, Stokvis had been commissioned by Jacob Schorer and the NWHK to work on the collection. Stokvis was not only financially supported by the

³⁹ Benno Jules Stokvis had published widely on the subject on homosexuality prior to *De homosexueelen*, most notably his publication on the injustices of article 248bis in *Homosexualiteit en strafrecht* (1934).

⁴⁰ ‘Artsen, Geestelijken, Rechters, Advocaten [en] Politie-ambtenaren’; M. van Lieshout, ‘De homosexueelen 1939: Mijnheer is zeker óók zoo?’ in *Sek*, 11 (1981), 12-16.

⁴¹ ‘Haar biografieën lezen wij zonder uitzondering met interesse. Dat het aan den overkant al precies is ‘comme chez nous’, was ons een openbaring en vergroot onze sympathie voor deze groep van vrouwen, die het dikwijls nog veel moeilijker zullen hebben dan wij, omdat er nog veel minder verband bestaat’, Arendt van Santhorst, ‘Boekbespreking: De homosexueelen’, *Levensrecht*, 1 (1940), 12-15 (p. 15).

⁴² For more information on the café and bar culture for male homosexuals in Amsterdam, see G. Hekma, *De roze rand van donker Amsterdam: de opkomst van een homoseksuele kroegcultuur 1930-1970* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1992).

⁴³ ‘veel moeilijker toegankelijk nog dan de mannelijke, en dus nog meer verwaarloosd; werpt een licht op de mentaliteit van de buitenwereld’, B. Stokvis, *De homosexueelen: 35 autobiografieën* (Lochem: De Tijdstroom, 1939), p. 29.

NWHK but much of the material he received for his anthology came from members of the organisation. Looking at the careful selection of narratives, it is clear that the sexological framework of inversion, as mentioned earlier in this article, influenced the structure and sourcing of Stokvis' material. Almost all of the female autobiographies make reference to their masculine 'nature' or 'disposition', drawing on theories of the gendered inversion and most of the women claim to be invariably attracted to the 'feminine', which reflects with early twentieth century understandings of masculine-feminine complementarity. The congenital nature of homosexual desire, a theory strongly promoted by both Magnus Hirschfeld's WhK and Jacob Schorer's NWHK, is suggested in the way that the women claim that they had 'always been different': 'However far back I go in my memory, I always see myself as a recalcitrant and timid being, "different from the others"'.⁴⁴

Although the framing of the material was carefully chosen in order to present a particular 'type' of homosexual desire (inverted, congenital, and therefore natural), it is clear that sexological theory did influence women's own understanding of their desires, and often provided them with the awareness that they were not alone. Several of the women in the collection recall that the initial recognition of their 'anders-zijn' took place after reading Swiss psychologist August Forel's *Het sexueele vraagstuk* (1924), others claim that Radclyffe Hall's landmark lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) helped them understand their desires:

When I was about 29 years old, I read *The Well of Loneliness*. With amazement I found much of myself in Stephen Gordon. Then I knew ... And with great joy, I would even say: gratitude, I discovered that love between two women is possible.⁴⁵

The protagonist of Hall's novel, Stephen Gordon, is presented as the archetypal 'congenital invert'. With narrow hips and broad shoulders, Stephen is said to be masculine from youth and attracted invariably to the feminine. All of the women in Stokvis' collection show signs of the masculine 'invert'. However, although Stokvis presents the authors of the autobiographies as unproblematically 'homosexual' because of these inverted behavioural traits, the ways in which the women attempt to articulate their desires highlights that, even by the late 1930s, female homosexual feelings were still structured along the binary lines of 'normative' and 'non-normative' behaviour rather than in terms of a sexological homosexual identity:

Normal - abnormal - ... how often have those words gone through my head? [Abnormal was] the concept that I hated most of all because of the foul taste it left in my mouth: unclean, despicable, dangerous [...].⁴⁶

Of the nine female autobiographies, a third use the term 'homosexual' in their narratives, although only one autobiography uses the term in reference to a homosexual collective: 'In

⁴⁴ 'Hoe ver ik ook terug ga in mijn herinnering, altijd zie ik mezelf als een recalcitrant en schuw wezen "anders als die anderen"', 'XXVII', in *De homoseksueelen*, p. 146.

⁴⁵ 'Toen ik ongeveer 29 jaar was, las ik "De bron van eenzaamheid". Met verbazing vond ik in Stephen Gordon veel van mezelf terug. Toen wist ik... En met groote blijdschap, ik zou haast zeggen: dankbaarheid, ontdekte ik dat liefde tussen twee vrouwen mogelijk is', 'XXXI', in *De homoseksueelen*, p. 163.

⁴⁶ 'Normaal - abnormaal - .. hoe dikwijls zijn die twee woorden door mijn hoofd gegaan? ["abnormal"], het begrip, dat ik het meest van alles haatte om den walgelijken bijmaak, dien het voor mij had: onrein, verachtelijk, gevaarlijk [...]', 'XXVII', in *De homoseksueelen*, p. 146.

truth, I have experienced little of true love. But enough to know and fully understand the fierce suffering that is suffered among us “homosexuals”.⁴⁷ Much like in the writings of François, it would appear that although the women were labelled ‘homosexual’ by an authority figure, in this instance Stokvis, such labels were not being used widely by the women themselves, who, although understanding themselves to be ‘different from others’, had little opportunity to develop a sense of community under the descriptive label ‘homosexual’. Despite the similarities between the autobiographical accounts, it seems unlikely that these resemblances indicate a sense of collective identity. As Myriam Everard has claimed, the anthology more likely represents the agenda of the NWHK and Stokvis’ desire to establish a collective and cohesive category in support of his thesis that homosexuality was a congenital phenomenon that should not be restricted by the law.⁴⁸

Conclusions

As Jonathan Ned Katz outlines in his ground-breaking study *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (2005), the development from encouraged homosocial environments to a strict hetero-homo dyad was a much slower process in many societies than has hitherto been assumed. What began with the introduction of sexological neologisms in the 1890s, Katz claims, only developed into what has become known as the mythically eternal ‘heterosexual hypothesis’ during the 1940s. The late nineteenth century conception of a heterosexual-homosexual dyad signifies, therefore, simply ‘one timebound historical form – one historically specific way of organizing the sexes and their pleasures’.⁴⁹ The transition that Katz mentions between the nineteenth-century ‘procreative norm’ and the twentieth-century ‘pleasure principle’, alongside the cultural development from homosocial environments of the pre-war era to heterosocial spheres after the First World War, appears to have been a particularly protracted process in the Netherlands. The preservation of largely homosocial spheres of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in the Netherlands, even into early 1930s, presents a rather conservative societal image in contrast to the sexualised bar cultures that existed in places such as Paris and Berlin. In fact, the ways in which ‘the sexes and their pleasures’ were organised in the Netherlands in the interwar era seems to have been little removed from the world of ‘love and ritual’ that Smith-Rosenberg describes in her article on nineteenth-century female romantic friendships.

The suggestion of the existence of more intimate networks of women during the beginning of the interwar era, women who did not self-reflexively define their behaviours as ‘lesbian’ or ‘homosexual’, indicates that there existed alternative frameworks of female same-sex desire in the Netherlands during the early twentieth century that have to this point been unexplored. However, the subtle shifts that resulted in the increased visibility of lesbian desire after the 1930s, underlines the fragility of these homosocial structures, particularly within the wider context of the increasingly conservative social and political debates on ‘onzedelijk gedrag’ in Dutch interwar society. The assertion that sexological categories of homosexual desire did not accurately reflect the vicissitudes of Dutch women’s sexual experiences before 1940, then, gives

⁴⁷ ‘Ik heb nog weinig [liefde] werkelijk beleefd. Maar genoeg om ten volle te kennen en te begrijpen het felle leed dat onder ons, homoseksuelen, geleden wordt’, ‘XXXI’, in *De homoseksuelen*, p. 163.

⁴⁸ Myriam Everard, *Ziel en zinnen: over liefde en lust tussen vrouwen in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1994).

⁴⁹ J.N. Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 34.

rise to a range of new questions: Focusing more closely on the social institutions that contributed to the creation of a normative/non-normative sexual dichotomy, for example, at what point did the homosocial networks and passionate friendships between women in the Netherlands become a marker of ‘non-normative’ behaviour? To what extent did publications such as Stokvis’ anthology disrupt previous understandings of female intimacies and to what extent could it be argued they created a sense of an ‘imagined community’ between isolated individuals? Drawing on queer historical methods to investigate the historic sexual practices of women in the Netherlands has the potential, as this article has shown, to lead to more comprehensive understandings of the subtle shifts that took place in the experiences of women who did not understand sexual preference to be ‘a key marker of their identity’.⁵⁰ By focusing the discussion on the discourses that perpetuated the belief in a hetero-homo binary, it also becomes possible to query more purposefully the institutions that continue to label that which is not heterosexual as ‘non-normative’. By looking more closely at what the silences and omissions in Dutch lesbian history might tell us, a more comprehensive understanding of the historic configurations and organisations of same-sex desire in the Netherlands might be possible in the future.

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