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“The Seventies Meet the Twenties”:
Charlotte Wolff as writer, public figure and “period piece”

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Abstract

Between 1969 and 1980 Dr Charlotte Wolff (1897-1986) wrote a memoir, a novel and an autobiography – alongside two psychologically focused works which challenged assumptions regarding gender and sexuality. In this period she also made the difficult decision to visit Berlin, the city which had once been her own as a young medical student and then also as a doctor, before fleeing Nazi persecution in 1933. Wolff was Jewish. She was sexually, romantically – and openly – attracted to women. She had also been deeply involved in Berlin’s literary worlds before she fled and resettled, first in Paris, then in London. This study assesses what Wolff’s archives can reveal about the gaps between her early literary and scientific work and how she and her past were later represented, and then moves on to show how her later achievements were a dialogue between her books and the audience these increasingly attracted: gay and lesbian communities, in the United Kingdom and Germany, who sought to transpose Wolff’s stories of the past upon their own developing sense of history. Her responses to this, through her writing and her actions as a public figure, reflect the complexity of writing sexualities into histories. By depicting her own memories in contrast to her experiences of being approached as a historical object, Wolff’s life writing argued for a nuanced, milieu-specific and anti-essentialist approach to history. A clear case emerges for recognizing Charlotte Wolff as an astute critic with much to offer current research in the field of queer historiography, alongside histories of literature and science.
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List of Abbreviations for Sources Used

FFBiZ: Frauenforschungs-, -bildungs- und Informationszentrum, Berlin

SLA: Spinnboden Lesbenerchiv, Berlin

WC: Wellcome Collection, London
1. “A History of their Own”: introductory discussions

1.1 Overview

Homosexual women and men have a longing for a history of their own, which had inspired my correspondent to dig for their roots. ‘The seventies meet the twenties’ was the cry of young Germans, and not only those who were homosexual. They wanted to go back to the past before Hitler in all aspects of cultural life, to build their own future on a Germany which had once been a model of freedom.

Charlotte Wolff, 1980.1

Sehen Sie, damals war jemand wie ich nicht in einer ‘LESBISCHEN GEMEINSCHAFT.’

Wolff in a letter to a young historian, 1977.2

Charlotte Wolff (1897-1986), a doctor by training but a poet by preference, fled Berlin for Paris in 1933. She settled in London in 1936, eventually establishing her own private practise as a psychiatrist. It was 1980, and Wolff was in her early eighties, when her thoughts on the experience of being regarded as a “period piece”3 of Weimar Berlin culture were published in her autobiography, Hindsight. By then, she was well known to readerships in both the United Kingdom and Germany: with an earlier career in scientific research already behind her,4 she had produced a memoir,5 a novel,6 and two books on sexuality7 between 1969 and 1979. Beyond her written work, in that decade she also reached prominence as a public figure more broadly. In the United Kingdom she had appeared on television8 and in the mainstream press9 as a psychologist who sought to trouble assumptions about the fixedness of sexual identities and gender divides; in Germany she had delivered lectures, presented readings and given interviews to audiences primarily fascinated by her potential as a living remnant of 1920s Berlin.

In both those contexts, the stories Wolff chose to tell of her past did not fit comfortably with what was expected of her in her role as a “period piece” – and her ideas about gender, sexuality and history provoked and divided. With her presence as a public

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2 “Look, back then someone like me was not part of a lesbian community”. Wolff to Ilse Kokula, 5 November 1977, SLA. All footnoted translations, unless otherwise specified, are my own.
3 Wolff, Hindsight, 255.
figure in the 1970s and 1980s considered alongside the intentions and reception of her work as a writer in that same era, Charlotte Wolff emerges as an astute critic of certain assumptions and tendencies she detected in the histories being written around and about her: that sexual identities could be written retrospectively into the lives of people in the past, that they were an incontestably useful and universal concept, and that the trajectory of societal attitudes to sexuality within her lifetime and experience was most legible as a story of progress.

This study presents an assessment of how Wolff’s later twentieth century oeuvre of creative works – the 1969 memoir *On the Way to Myself*, the 1976 novel *An Older Love*, the 1980 autobiography *Hindsight* and the biography of Magnus Hirschfeld which Wolff saw published in 1986, shortly before she died – reflect her critical response to the experience of witnessing her own past being written into history. It is not a biography, nor is it necessary to have an exhaustive analysis of each of Wolff’s published works to show how Wolff reacted to being approached as a historical figure and how this, in turn, influenced her writing. Her books, read together, tell a story: Wolff began by writing about her past with no recourse to the vocabularies of sexual identity categories, nor any visible demonstration such a concept existed to her, before moving on to write a novel which had, as its central conflict, a tension between naming erotic feelings or leaving them unsaid. These books, translated into German, generated a great interest in Wolff among younger lesbians and feminists interested in hearing about her past and reclaiming her as a historical figure. Inspired by the problems this presented, Wolff then wrote *Hindsight*, an autobiography which set out her memories chronologically in an attempt to explain how sexualities, communities and identities were conceived of differently in her past, and how that in turn demands a cautious and unpresumptuous approach from historians in the present. Wolff’s biography of Hirschfeld was her opportunity to apply that same caution to the writing of another person’s history.

Her own history was certainly complex. Born in the Prussian town of Riesenburg (now Prabuty, Poland) to a liberal Jewish family who sold grains and valued education, by the 1920s Wolff was living in Berlin: there she studied medicine alongside philosophy, wrote poetry and translated the verse of others in the company of Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel, and eventually became a doctor involved with progressive sexual health clinics. As a Jew, Wolff was driven by the imminent threats of Nazism to flee Berlin to Paris in 1933. In Paris she put her recently acquired knowledge of the fledgling concept of ‘chirology’ to use,\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) Many cultures have sought to understand more about people through their hands for many centuries; chirology (as opposed to chiromancy) was a new concept in that it sought to do so with recourse to the discourse and the methods of Western science as it then stood. For more on the historical context of chirology and Wolff’s engagement with it, see Claudia...
analysing the lines and the forms of people’s hands – an occupation which not only provided her with an income in a remarkably fraught time but brought her, despite language barriers, into contact with artistic and literary worlds. She relocated permanently to London in 1939. ‘Chirology’ became endocrinologically informed studies of the hand as an aid to psychological diagnosis before becoming, by the 1950s, a complicated and under-examined part of her past. She continued to practice as a psychiatrist. Work towards her first creative prose publication, the memoir *On the Way to Myself*, began in the mid-1950s; research towards the first of her two ostensibly psychological but heavily literary books on sexuality began in the mid-1960s; her emergence in both the United Kingdom and Germany as a public figure began in the mid-1970s, with the publication and translation of her first and only novel.

Once in the public eye, Wolff found that younger generations of historians, journalists and readers were mostly interested in her personal life, particularly the times she had enjoyed before she fled Berlin in the 1930s. The young Lotte Wolff (as she had then been known) had worn suit jackets and ties, loved other women, frequented nightclubs where she could dance with other women, and never, so she came to claim, felt any social pressure to pretend she was attracted to men or otherwise obscure her sexuality.11 Nor did the older Charlotte Wolff hide any of this whatsoever: one chapter of her 1969 memoir contained frank descriptions of erotic and romantic encounters with other women, and this was also a prominent component of her novel – not to mention her books on sexuality.

As British and German gay and lesbian liberation movements of the 1960s and beyond began exploring the past in search of their own sense of history, they encountered Wolff and the outlines of her life story. Asking about her Golden Twenties in interviews or in letters, many expected they would hear stories rich with details to add to an emerging history bound to the concept of sexual identity: stories of discovering a true self and a real community against the grain of pressure to be ‘straight’, stories of struggle against social and familial convention and oppression. Instead, those who tried to find out about Wolff’s past often found their assumptions about sexual identities in history challenged. Drawing from archived letters and other interactions between her and her readership, this study will show that by the early 1980s, Wolff reached a point where she refused to be involved whatsoever with any project on gay and lesbian history as such.

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The reason for this, importantly, lies in the question of whether Charlotte Wolff saw her own history in terms of lesbianism at all. By her own accounts, in the Berlin of the 1920s and early 1930s she wrote, danced, drank and thought in amongst a crowd that, while open-minded about sex, did not think to categorise people in terms of it. Words like ‘lesbian’ were around, in Wolff’s social circles and others, but they were not as compulsory or fixed as later historians’ conceptions of lesbian identity in that time and place often suggest: at the important level of words themselves, *lesbisch* (as an adjective and thus a descriptor) was much more prevalent than *Lesbierin* (as a noun and, by extension, a more enduring entity and fixed identity). Both those terms coexisted with other words which reflected other ways to identify – and, for Wolff and some of her friends in that era, a lack of words could also be seen as a stance on sexual identity. This will be discussed in detail later, in an elaboration upon the idea of ‘the lesbian’ in relation to what can be surmised about how Wolff’s sense of self related to her sexuality when she was a young student and poet, drawing upon the vocabularies and concepts visible in the poetry she wrote in the 1920s as well as her translations, in that same era, of Baudelaire’s ‘lesbian’ poems. Clearly, to ground Wolff’s stances, reactions and decisions in the later parts of the twentieth century in as rich a context as possible, much can be gained from a closer look at the archival traces which remain of those moments of her past which were of so much interest to her later readers and researchers, but which they never had a chance to examine.

Wolff’s past has been researched and contemplated in terms of her work as a doctor, in terms of her spirituality and Jewish identity and the relation of this to her experience of gender, and in terms of her place in the field of psychology and its history. She has been understood as a “bridge” between an era in which sexual feelings “remained unnamed” and the developments of identity politics which followed. She has been recognised as a writer whose autobiographical modes of representing her past reveal as much through their omissions as through the stories she chooses to tell. Her questioning of assumptions around gender and sexual identities has seen her credited with a prescient

13 Rappold, “Die Handdiagnose.”
16 Alpert, *Like Bread on the Seder Plate*, 149.
awareness of the issues which would later be approached in the name of queer theory.\textsuperscript{18} Her early writing, however, and her cultural involvement in Berlin in the 1920s had, by her own accounts, been integral to her sense of identity, and was thus the well from which the more constant parts of her worldview likely sprung. What was she reading and who were her influences? What was she writing in the 1920s, and what can this show us about the way she viewed the society around her – and how does this relate to the stories she told and arguments she made much later in the twentieth century?

Wolff’s papers held at the Wellcome Collection in London grant us an opportunity to consider such questions: she preserved her early poetry, published and unpublished. Chapter 2 presents a detailed assessment of Wolff’s as yet unexamined poetry archive, in which her original poems and her translations of Baudelaire’s \emph{Les Fleurs du Mal} are read as important documents of her own conceptualisation of sexuality and gender in her youth. Wolff’s original poems deal with heartbreak, nightclubs and – very interestingly – sexological terminology in surprising and inventive ways which render them a valuable addition to what is known of people’s worldviews and self-perception in Weimar Berlin through literature. Likewise, her engagement with Baudelaire’s poetry, especially with ‘Lesbos’ and ‘Femmes damnées’, puts her directly and productively in dialogue with another poet’s representations of love between women. Alongside these findings, Chapter 2 also considers what Wolff’s literary work of the 1920s, as well as what can be known of its context through her later recollections of it, add to current understandings of how sexuality and gender were thought about among literary milieus in that time and place.

To think about Wolff’s significance as a writer, a public figure and as a problematic historical symbol, it is important to also consider the impact of the years she spent in Paris and newly resident in London, engaged with research into the meaning of the lines and form of the human hand. Questions as to whether this work still holds any untapped or overlooked value to its field, or whether it is all perhaps dated and justifiably obscure, have already been pursued in recent years,\textsuperscript{19} granting us an understanding of Wolff’s ‘studies in hand reading’ as straddling a margin between science and intuition and worthy of further investigation. In relation to this study’s argument for the importance of Wolff’s contribution to late twentieth century thought on sexuality and history, her analysis of the human hand transpires as a surprisingly relevant factor to consider. Chapter 3 discusses the problematic traces of racism

and the connections to eugenic ideology which are detectable in this early work of Wolff’s, alongside the silence which surrounded this upon the translation and republication of those same works in Germany in the 1970s. These complex aspects of Wolff’s oeuvre and her role as a public figure are viewed in light of a 1991 article in a German lesbian-feminist journal in which the author, having read one such republication of Wolff’s hand research, denounced her as unsuitable subject matter for any history that self-identified lesbians could relate to and be proud of.20 This raised an important question: what is it that people actually hope to create and achieve through the writing of histories?

As demonstrated in the quotation which opened this introduction, Wolff was acutely aware of gay and lesbian history’s personally and politically empowering functions and intentions. This pressure to present the characters in the stories of gay and lesbian history as wholly positive and exemplary often came at the expense of uncomfortable details. The uneasy echoes of racism and eugenics in Wolff’s mid-century research work were still audible in the 1970s and 1980s, but were wilfully ignored in the interests of preserving Wolff’s intelligibility as a character in a lesbian history still skewed towards positive representations. Chapter 3 presents a nuanced consideration of this, closing on the post-war years in which Wolff, safe in London, would have inevitably become aware of the atrocities of Nazism. Her faith in science was shaken, and while she never issued an apology or a retraction for the racism endorsed in The Human Hand, this era of traumatic realisations set a debilitating state of depression upon Wolff. This is visible in the diaries she kept in the 1950s, which were later adapted into her 1969 memoir On the Way to Myself.

Wolff’s rise in prominence as a public figure through her life writing between 1969 and 1986 is the focus of Chapter 4. Here, the insights into Wolff’s past established in chapters 2 and 3 assist in a greater understanding of the intentions and reception of these four works, which were written alongside her studies of human sexuality. Viewing these books chronologically, there is a perceivable shift in how Wolff chooses to describe and articulate concepts of sexuality and identity. This shift takes place not so much on the level of the concepts themselves as in the extent to which Wolff seeks to argue and explain her ideas, rather than simply present them and take a reader’s understanding for granted. Chapter 4 presents a case for this being an extension of the sometimes fraught but often productive dialogues which took place between Wolff and some of her readers through letters and through her public appearances, especially in Berlin. Through the thorough and well-filed

archives of published reviews Wolff preserved regarding her own books and the occasional publication of letters-to-the-editor from Wolff decrying what she perceived as misrepresentation of her work by reviewers, it is clear that Wolff closely followed the reception of her work – to the extent that a study of her work as a creative writer must consider how each book was received, and how her public statements and her subsequent work were influenced by that reception. She increasingly felt misunderstood and misrepresented, and thus a tone of urgent explanation is amplified in her later writing whenever she describes or discusses her thoughts on sexuality.

This is at its clearest when comparing modes of explanation and narration between *On the Way to Myself* and *Hindsight*. In the former, Wolff tells stories of her past with a structure that rejects chronology in favour of a thematic focus on the creative influence of ‘shock’ experiences. Nowhere in the stories she tells in *On the Way to Myself* does Wolff feel the need to address concepts of sexual identity and its many terminologies. The book’s longest chapter, ‘A Journey into Russia’, is centred around a complicated love story about Wolff’s emotionally intense relationships, as a young student in Berlin, with two women – and her much less emotionally intense relationships with many more. This story is told without any recourse to a vocabulary of sexualities and their identities, nor with any reflection on how it had felt or what it had meant to be attracted to other women. Overall, the book is concerned with spirituality, a sense of belonging and a lack thereof, depression, love, psychology and the notion of the self. It is not written with any sense that the stories it tells needed to be told in terms of the workings of gender or sexuality. Each of the numerous references she makes to her attraction to other women is briskly matter-of-fact and thoroughly devoid of label, explanation or elaboration. This generates an impression for readers that, in Wolff’s life, it simply had not been an issue; through writing, Wolff creates a social context in which love between women was not experienced in terms of any sense of marginalisation, a context in which she swore she had lived. In *On the Way to Myself*, Wolff shows readers what this social context was like, but sees no need to explain or justify it.

*Hindsight*, in contrast, is Wolff’s attempt to provide the much wider audience she had gained in the decade after *On the Way to Myself* with exactly such an explanation. It takes a chronological approach which reflects a great concern with how her past and her identity had been handled by so very many interested parties. Her love life and her social life are itemised in exhaustive detail from childhood onwards, as well as her divergent career paths and her lifelong engagement with worlds of poetry, literature and art. Notable in *Hindsight* is that Wolff chooses to describe her specific experiences as a Jew in Nazi Germany, and then as a
wartime refugee in Paris and London, in sparser detail than anecdotes of her feelings one day when she went for a walk around Danzig as a teenager or stood up in her cot as a baby. Likewise, while she reflects numerous times upon how love between women has had many different meanings, ideologies and vocabularies applied to it across the times and places in which she lived, she never portrays her own subjective experiences of same-sex attraction in terms of oppression or marginalisation. There is a determination to this prioritising; her narrative refuses to portray the course of her life as if the ruptures and wrongs forced upon it could ever define it. The stories told in *Hindsight* were designed to trouble the stories told by others of what her past meant.

In *Hindsight* Wolff wrests her personal identity away from that of the ‘lesbian’, instead rejecting the idea of such labels and explaining her thoughts with reference to her own work, *Bisexuality*, as well as with elaboration – an act which was implicit only between the lines in her 1969 autobiography. She stresses her working identity as that of a writer and poet, writing of her social circles in Weimar-era Berlin as something quite different to a prototype of 1970s gay liberation movements. She tells of her experiences being interviewed, being asked to contribute to historical projects, being seen as choice subject matter for them, too. This is how, in *Hindsight* and through her public presence around the time of its publication, Charlotte Wolff confronts the writing of history and her place in it.

What had changed for her between 1969 and 1980? She had published her two books on human sexuality, alongside the development of visible and vocal gay and lesbian rights movements which provided Wolff with a very active base of readers and critics. One significant turning point was the publication of her first (and only) novel, *An Older Love*, and its aftermath. In this book Wolff portrays the quietly turbulent emotional dramas of three elderly women. Two of them live together in a small village, in an intense relationship they are unwilling to label as homosexual (or any other words to that effect). The third woman, a psychologist whose biography would resemble Wolff’s in a more than passing fashion, struggles with her own heavy emotional involvement with the pair and her erotic, romantic interest for one of them, which she is unafraid to acknowledge. This woman is the nameless first-person narrator. The story tells of the slow but certain death of the friendship, with its foundations slowly exposed as unstable and insincere as the two village women continue to deny any eroticism between each other or inherent in their connection to the narrator. The book achieves uncommon representations of the love lives of older women, the complexities of how friendships and relationships are even defined, and the existence of relationships between people outside of generally accepted identity categories. *An Older Love* received
mixed reviews, both in the United Kingdom and in Germany where it had quickly emerged in translation, reflecting the mixed expectations of its audiences. Some readers, especially in Germany, had anticipated a ‘lesbian novel’ (at the time very much a rarity, especially in German) and were disappointed to find, instead, a novel of women who shied away from seeing themselves that way.  

Regardless of how the book was received, the translation into German of *An Older Love* brought Wolff another readership with an even more profound interest and investment in her past. This led to her return to Berlin for the first time since she escaped from there in the 1930s. Upon the invitation of L74, a Berlin lesbian organisation, Wolff flew there in 1978 to give readings from the German translations of *An Older Love* and the forgotten but rediscovered *On the Way to Myself*. It seems she enjoyed a small-scale hero’s welcome within the lesbian-feminist groups that had invited her or otherwise supported her visit. As an independent woman who could be seen as having lived by feminist principles, as a Jew forced into exile by Nazism, and as a readily self-identifying lesbian (at that brief moment), Wolff fell into place with this community right away as a revered elder and a symbol of the destroyed past these younger women mourned. She made many more visits after this, but the question of whether she wanted to be an elder and a symbol at all came to shape her dynamic with these Berliners.

Wolff’s reception as a public figure in the United Kingdom, her chosen country after exile, was of course different to the impact of her words and works in Germany – the nation which had emerged from the ruins of a society in which she was once very much at home. Over time, Wolff came to embrace a certain concept of ‘exile’ as a state of borderless creativity, to the point that she agreed with Julia Kristeva that exile was a productive position of dissidence and described herself with passion in one interview as “a happy Exile.” England gave her relative safety and stability, but never a sense of home. This came across in portrayals of Wolff in the British press, which tended to cast her ‘exile’ heritage, her foreignness, as part of her character. Tellingly, one obituary remembered her as “one of the few survivors of the Weimar Republic - the last?”

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21 This will be revisited in detail in Chapter 4, in terms of how the expectations held by many for the German translation of *An Older Love* fit into the broader context of the popularity of *Identifikationsliteratur* among feminist readerships.


represented another time and place: her age, her heritage and her traumatic experiences as a refugee from Nazism were all part of her media image. It seemed it was expected of her to be outspoken in this ‘outsider’ role.

To many amongst her German readership, Charlotte Wolff was a hero returned from exile, a relic of a lost and deeply mourned cultural heritage. Weimar Germany – and in particular Berlin – was at the time undergoing a renaissance of sorts: hence, the seventies meeting the twenties. Wolff is by no means the only writer to have documented this, though her choice of phrasing appears to be unique. Erhard Schütz has written of “the indelible Berlin myth”26 of decadence and permissiveness which had solidified by 1990 – a shared fantasy of the “Golden Twenties” in which an entire city, for an entire decade, partied hedonistically, dressed like Marlene Dietrich, and built glass skyscrapers at the crater-edge of a figurative volcano.27 Kniesche and Brockmann have offered a brief historiography in the form of their schematisation of “the various periods of Weimar reception in Germany” – thus, what Weimar, or at least the idea of it, meant to people at different points in the twentieth century. They conceive of the years following West Germany’s late 1960s student movement as a time of “attempts [...] to reevaluate Weimar more positively”, with this era followed by “a growing recognition [...] of Weimar’s complexity and importance for understanding the loosely defined but nevertheless vital concept of ‘modernity’ in the 1980s”.28 While very useful, Knietzsche and Brockmann’s schema is painted with a very broad brush. As such, it does not consider the historiographic significance of Weimar specifically in terms of the gay and lesbian historical recovery projects of the 1970s and 1980s.

These projects have been outlined elsewhere in a German-specific context, albeit mainly with a focus on love, sex and eroticism between men. Echoing Wolff’s observation that her correspondents had been inspired to “dig for their roots”, Clayton Whisnant notes that “for the first generation of gay and lesbian activists an important part of confronting


27 “Dancing on a volcano” is a common allegory for Berlin’s interwar situation, first ascribed to Weimar Germany’s economy in a speech by Gustav Stresemann: see Jonathan Wright, Gustav Stresemann: Weimar’s Greatest Statesman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 434. This volcano emerged again as an allegory for Weimar culture in Klaus Mann’s Der Vulkan (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1939). In the German translation of Hindsight, Wolff’s reference to Weimar Berlin as “the old story of the dance of death at the edge of an abyss” (Hindsight, 65) is translated as “Es war der berühmte Tanz auf dem Vulkan.” Wolff, Augenblicke verändern uns mehr als die Zeit, trans. Michaela Huber (Basel: Beltz Verlag, 1982), 81.

homophobia in the contemporary world was uncovering its roots in the past.”29 Of course, for those in Germany or otherwise interested in Germany’s past, this often meant Weimar.

“Drawing vitality from the gay and lesbian liberation movement that sprung to life in West Germany at the beginning of the 1970s,” writes Whisnant, “the study of gay history was driven forward by a relatively small cadre of devoted historians.”30 The main projects of these early forays into gay history in Germany were, he explains, “the fate of homosexuals under Hitler’s regime” and the “flourishing in the Weimar Republic” of Germany’s early homosexual rights movements. Whisnant cites the opening of Berlin’s Schwules Museum in 1985 as a landmark moment in the establishment of the “gay German history” he chronicles.

Unnoted by Whisnant is this:31 before the opening of the Schwules Museum, the women of Berlin’s Lesbische Aktionzentrum (LAZ) had formally established an archive which they had begun compiling in the early 1970s.32 Many of the women involved in this project were also involved with Charlotte Wolff’s return to Berlin in 1978. This archive, still extant today under the name Spinnboden, houses many invaluable resources for research into Wolff’s reception and significance in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, and played an important role in the research undertaken for this project.

Wolff’s recollections and encounters, as these early archivists must have known, reveal much about how the seventies met (and, occasionally, did not meet) the twenties, especially in terms of German histories of sexuality. In 1984, the devoted scholars and researchers of German gay history got their own exhibition at the Berliner Museum. *Eldorado: homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850-1950: Geschichte, Alltag und Kultur* ran from May until July of that year, and its thick, detailed catalogue of articles and essays has proven to be one of the most exhaustive sources for later researchers in the field. *Eldorado*, the exhibition and its book together, can be seen as a sampler of the intentions, directions, beliefs and assumptions of these early researchers – and is as distinctive a milestone as the opening of the Schwules Museum or the LAZ archive in the emergence of German gay and lesbian history as a field. Charlotte Wolff was not mentioned anywhere in *Eldorado*.

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30 Whisnant, “Gay German History,” 1.
31 This is, to an extent, forgivably so – his scope does not extend beyond research into male homosexuality’s depictions in historical works. His descriptions of the projects of the 1970s in terms of historiography are still useful and relevant to this study, and his tendency to describe histories of sex between men as histories of homosexuality is a typical oversight throughout the field.
Was she too marginal a figure? Not interesting enough? Quite the reverse. Wolff’s absence from historical projects like this one were not due to any lack of interest on the part of the researchers, but instead resulted from Wolff’s absolute refusal, by the mid-1980s, to be seen as ‘lesbian’ – and thus, as a part of ‘gay and lesbian history’. Responding to an invitation to read from *Hindsight* in conjunction with the *Eldorado* exhibition, Wolff wrote: “I loathe the words lesbian, schwule, and all those designations people bandy about. I am I, Charlotte Wolff, and that means that I am not to be categorised. For this reason alone, I can’t figure in any form or fashion in the Exhibition of the Berliner Museum.” Wolff’s aversion to becoming a character in gay history goes a long way towards explaining why she features so scarcely in histories of the twentieth century. The scholars who took the most interest in her – mostly in the name of feminist, lesbian or gay history – were the ones she rebuffed and rejected, reasoning that a foregrounding of her sexual preferences would be at the expense of acknowledging how she had actually interpreted her feelings and attractions at the time. The outcome of this confrontational but, as this study will demonstrate, historically sound stance is that, loath to be pigeonholed by history’s particular needs and priorities at that moment, Charlotte Wolff has instead come close to being forgotten.

Wolff’s role in discussions around sexual identity politics in the 1970s and beyond has been the subject of recent scholarship which posits her as a ‘reluctant lesbian feminist’ whose rejection of sexual identity categories in the 1970s and 1980s should be seen as a “prescient” of more recent debates taking place in the name of queer theory. As Toni Brennan has explained, Wolff initially refused to engage with terminology like ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ at all, seeing such a mindset as far more divisive and limiting than it could ever be liberating. Eventually Wolff did admit the necessity of collective action and unity in the face of society’s “mountains of stupidity and prejudice”. That, though, did not amount to an acceptance so much as a momentary understanding of people’s need for sexual identity categories. As early as 1976, Wolff claimed to “almost stutter when [saying] ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’”, a sentiment she continued to express in the numerous interviews she gave from the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s. By 1981, when she spoke with James Steakley

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33 Wolff to Christiane von Lengerke, 29 October 1983. WC PSY/WOL/1/4/3. By “schwule” Wolff refers to “schwul”, a German word roughly equivalent to “gay” but in certain regards closer to “fag”, given its history as a pejorative term reclaimed as a political act and its use almost exclusively as a descriptor for men.


for an interview published in the *New German Critique*, her utopian belief in humanity’s urgent need for a ‘bisexual society’ was unequivocal.\(^{37}\)

Nobody has tried to claim Wolff was the first to conceive of gender and sexuality in the way she did, though if we are to credit her with prescience we do run the risk of attributing a greater degree of originality to her ideas of a bisexual society than is perhaps warranted. Brennan is aware of this too – elsewhere in her work she outlines the contributions made by early sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing, Ellis and Hirschfeld to a remarkably unconfined view of human sexuality.\(^{38}\) In her own work Wolff claims “man has been preoccupied with bisexuality from the dawn of history”, citing unspecific early legends as well as the figure of Hermaphroditus in Greek mythology and the ‘third sex’ as spoken of by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*.\(^{39}\) Early in the seventies, Wolff even responded to Dennis Altman’s call for “the end of the homosexual”,\(^{40}\) through the establishment of a ‘bisexual society’ none too dissimilar to that of her own imaginings, with a scriptural exclamation that “there is nothing new under the sun”.\(^{41}\) She used that same quote, again, in *Bisexuality*, in summation of her review of thoughts on bisexuality, from Greek mythology to Freud.\(^{42}\) It would be futile to try bestowing a birth date upon the feeling that to define and delineate the endlessly surprising world of love and sex might be simplistic, if not oppressive. Charlotte Wolff certainly saw herself as an advocate, not an inventor, of such notions.

From her work as a doctor in sexual health clinics in the 1920s to her books on sexuality in the 1970s, which she wrote roughly within the parameters of psychology, Wolff – as a psychologist and psychiatrist, as well as an intellectually engaged woman of the twentieth century – would have developed her ideas in cultural contexts over which, to use Peter Gay’s phrasing, “brood[ed] the saturnine, trimly bearded face of Sigmund Freud.”\(^{43}\) The question of how, and to which extent, Wolff’s ideas interact with those of Freud is therefore worth addressing briefly in this overview. Stéphane Hessel’s autobiography remembers Wolff, as a refugee in Paris, as having been enthusiastically engaged with Freud’s work.\(^{44}\) This is

\(^{37}\) Steakley and Wolff, “Love Between Women and Love Between Men.” Wolff wrote to Steakley (10 January 1985, WC PSY/WOL/1/11/1) saying she felt this interview was one of the best she had experienced, and that the published results yielded an accurate representation of her thoughts – and that she did not often feel this way about how others portrayed her ideas and her past.

\(^{38}\) Chapter 3 of Brennan’s doctoral dissertation (“Charlotte Wolff’s Contribution to Psychology”) provides exactly such an overview of precedents of Wolff’s thoughts in early sexology.

\(^{39}\) Wolff, *Bisexuality*, 1. The discussions and preambles in Wolff’s two publications on sexuality generally see her acknowledging the shoulders on which she stands far more than they suggest a grand sense of originality on her own part.


\(^{41}\) Wolff to Dr C.A. Tripp, 11 June 1977. WC PSY/WOL/1/11/2. The scripture in question is Ecclesiastes 1:9.

\(^{42}\) Wolff, *Bisexuality*, 17.


\(^{44}\) Stéphane Hessel, *Danse avec le siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 32-34.
reflected in her early publications *Studies in Hand-Reading* and *The Human Hand*, which make passing but unspecific reference to “Freudian psychology” and “the psycho-analytical works of Sigismund Freud.” There are no further traces of this in Wolff’s archive: the first explicit mention she makes of any personal stance at all regarding Freud’s work is in 1979, where she simply declares herself to be “anti-Freud orientiert” as a psychiatrist. Viewed in light of *Bisexuality*, which had been her most recent work at that time, her claim of being anti-Freudian relates to this: Freud’s theory of bisexuality as a natural default state in humans is but the first chapter in a tale that declares ‘normal’ development steers the child towards heterosexuality, whereas homosexual inclinations reflect an arrest in development. Wolff, however, saw innate bisexuality as a lifelong trait, distorted and suppressed by social conditioning. She believed this strongly – it was not only the central thesis to *Bisexuality*, but a visible influence on how she chose to represent her past in *Hindsight*.

Wolff spoke out against the limitations of sexual identity categories in an era when self-proclaimed gay and lesbian communities, newly politically active and visible, often fought for tangible and much-needed social change. As mentioned already in terms of Whisnant’s work, one of the tasks of gay rights activism in this era was to establish a sense of heritage for those who felt a need to discover and resurrect people like themselves, omitted or veiled from recorded history. Gay and lesbian communities were also indescribably helpful to many people on a personal level. In many ways, the situation for countless people today is still more similar than it is different. It must have taken great strength of conviction for Wolff to risk being seen as such an antagonist – and, as this study will show, that is how some young gays and lesbians saw her. Many more saw her as an icon, though this often involved a selective interpretation of her stories and ideas. In this context, her presence had the potential to provoke and divide.

Considering Wolff’s stance on such labels, it is unsurprising that the recollections of her early life which appear in her autobiographical writing eschew the word ‘lesbian’, except

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47 This concept, used by Freud in his 1905 work *Drei Abhandlung zur Sexualtheorie* following the ideas of Fliess (Wolff, *Bisexuality*, 17-18), has contributed, over time, to a popular understanding of Freud as, by today’s standards and concepts, homophobic. Abelove has presented a compelling case, from Freud’s own correspondence, for seeing the situation differently: Freud, it seems, hated what was being done to sexual and gender nonconformists by psychologists in the United States in the name of ‘his’ theories. “Freud, Male Homosexuality and the Americans.” In *Deep Gossip* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1-20.
48 After Freud, the next name to likely come to mind for readers at this point is Alfred Kinsey, whose extensive work in the United States in the 1960s impacted upon the popular imagination so strongly that the ‘Kinsey scale’ (of sexual orientation) is still a widely intelligible phrase in discourse far beyond its field. Wolff itemises her points of difference with Kinsey in *Bisexuality* (31-32): “People tried to dichotomize the classification of phenomena […] and for this reason [Kinsey] confined himself to measuring homosexuality only, graded in accordance with its hetero- and homosexual components.”
– as Brennan has also observed – to occasionally describe a bar or event, or serve as a detached label for unspecified groups of people: the flat characters (such as the women who ran the bars, for instance) but never the rounded ones (such as Wolff herself, her friends and her lovers). As previously mentioned, *On the Way to Myself* completely avoids any discussion or story framed in terms of sexual preferences, even when sharing detailed tales involving numerous love interests. Brennan hypothesises in regard to *Hindsight* that this rejection of a ‘lesbian’ life story in favour of a past recalled in terms of “attraction without fear or label” was likely due to a “perceived acceptance” of her ways by those around her. “The reader [of Wolff’s autobiographies] could be forgiven for thinking they have landed in a world in which choice of love object did not matter”, ponders Brennan, “and yet the bells of cognitive dissonance loudly proclaim that this was not so in the times being chronicled, and it was not so in the times when the autobiographies were published, and arguably it is still an issue today.”

This stance of disbelief is a common response to Wolff’s approach to writing her own history, and it reflects an insistence that the past was a certain way, and a strong investment in believing in that particular sense of the past.

“This was not so”, as Brennan phrases it – but was it not so? What if we choose not to analyse Wolff’s memories of unsuppressed and unlabelled love and attraction in her early years as evident of cognitive dissonance, a term which insinuates a psychological defence mechanism akin to ‘wishful thinking’? What if, instead of being dismissed as deluded, wishful thinking, the manner in which Wolff chose to tell her stories can be seen to cast doubt on assumptions of unfailingly linear progress in Europe’s social attitudes toward sexuality within her lifetime? This troubling of popular notions of straightforward social progress was the essence of Wolff’s role as a public figure in both the United Kingdom and Germany in the later parts of the twentieth century. Certainly, Wolff’s rejection of much popular thought on sexual and gender identity categories can be seen as prescient of more recent work. This study’s focus, however, is not so much how Wolff’s ideas may have resembled those which gained traction later in the twentieth century in the form of queer theory, but how her ideas were formed by her past and what this meant to her readership, in their present. As Gertrude Stein once wrote, “No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating

51 Buerkle implies the same in passing when she sees this same mode of representation as “choreography” (“Points of Departure,” 15). Earlier, Marie-Luise Gansberg wrote of Wolff’s claims to have never experienced discrimination due to her gender or her sexual preference as “illusions”: “Daß ich immer eine Fremde war und sein werde”; ‘Aussenseiter’ als Interpretationsmuster in Charlotte Wolffs sexualwissenschaftlicher und literarischer Produktion.” In *Jüdische Kultur und Weiblichkeit in der Moderne*, eds. Inge Stephan, Sabine Schilling and Sigrid Weigel (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994): 171-172. Similarly, Wolff’s interviewer for *Der Monat* repeatedly insists her memories must be false or at least incomplete. “Alles ist Biographie; über die sexuelle Konditionierung des Menschen,” *Der Monat (Neue Folge)* 294 (1985), 44-59.
his time is the one that his contemporaries who are also creating their own time refuse to accept.”  

Speaking with Jenny Lacey on the BBC radio show Nightline in 1980, Wolff said she felt that present-day social attitudes towards human sexuality were, in many ways, more conservative and restrictive than in her own experiences of the past. Lacey speaks of 1920s Berlin as being “well known, of course, as a time of sexual license, liberation and freedom”, and asks Wolff if she feels current attitudes to sexuality in culture have gone “full circle” back towards how things were back then. Wolff’s response speaks for itself:

I don’t think that, ever, things go full circle – it is more like a spiral. I must say that my recent visit to Berlin reminded me of old times, but it was by no means the same. Times have changed, people have changed, people have become far more group-minded, far more fighting for rights […] while in the twenties there was an individual freedom. It wasn’t really ‘license’ – people took people as they were. If someone was homosexual, one didn’t ask particular questions, that is of course in special milieus, [which] you would call now the ‘progressive’ part of human society. One was freer, because there was no need for building, for making groups and fighting for one’s rights and putting a label on oneself, here I am, a bisexual or a heterosexual or a homosexual […]. I think personally it is a pity, but you can’t have it both ways. Because collective living has forced people to combine into groups, to go away from this wonderful individual existence which gave freedom, perhaps also license – it always depends how one looks at freedom.

Let us focus for a moment on Wolff’s emphasis on “special milieus” of the “progressive”. It is important to note she makes no claim that 1920s Berlin society as a whole offered the freedom she enjoyed – rather, that within her own social world it never even occurred to anyone to categorise themselves or others based on sexual preference. This can be read as a fleeting but lucid acknowledgement of the privilege of her particular experiences. Had Wolff felt the need to clearly stress that there were others in the same time and place dealing with the world outside of her “special milieu”, and for them things were perhaps tougher at that particular point in time, it would have been easier for her readers over the past few decades to consider her thoughts outside of a framework of wishful or deluded thinking. Wolff never claimed to be a social historian, though – at least prior to her Magnus Hirschfeld biography. She spoke and wrote of the past as it had happened for her, not anyone else.

Considering recent anticipation of the usefulness of subjective and “milieu-specific”

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52 Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation”. In Selected Writings, ed. Carl van Vechten (London: Random House, 1946), 457.
53 Wolff, interview by Jenny Lacey, Nightline, BBC, 4 October 1980.
approaches to sexuality in German history,\textsuperscript{54} it is definitely time for us to see what can be achieved by exploring rather than explaining away Wolff’s memories of ‘freedom’.

This is exactly what Atina Grossmann has called for, as one part of a wider project of reconsidering whether Weimar culture has already been ‘overdone’ in scholarship. “We still need to unravel what a woman like Charlotte Wolff remembered,” writes Grossmann, “when she reported years later, about her youth in pre-1933 Berlin, ‘In the atmosphere of the twenties one breathed the ‘permissiveness’ of freedom. One’s sensuous and emotional needs, whatever they were, could be satisfied[…]. Heaven was not somewhere above us, but on earth, in the German metropolis.’” Pertinently, Grossmann goes on to ask of Wolff’s writing “What did she really mean when she asked 1970s feminists, ‘Who were we and all those other young women of the twenties who seemed to know so well what we wanted?’ and insisted that ‘We never thought of ourselves as being second-class citizens. We simply were ourselves, which is the only liberation which counts, anyway?’”\textsuperscript{55}

Those questions of Grossmann’s – what did Wolff remember, and what was she trying to achieve through the way she chose to explain her memories to this later audience? – are at the heart of this project. By looking through her writing, her interviews and her archived correspondence, it becomes apparent what Wolff ‘really meant’ was to convey her conviction that, in a way, she was witnessing more sexual repression in the culture around her in the later years of her life than in her own youth. This position of Wolff’s shook at the foundations of popular assumptions that society is generally progressive over time – an assumption that to this day remains especially popular in the context of sexualities in history. As the discussion following this overview will explain further, popular histories of same-gender love and sex tend to work towards the solidification of a gay or lesbian identity as an unquestionably successful end point, or at least an achievement on the way to something even better. By today’s standards we could consider Wolff a queer critic, as with Brennan’s approach – but she was at the time seen more as a survivor, a remainder from an era and a milieu beginning to be written into history.


It is likely that significant amounts of what Wolff recalled of her reportedly fearless, unlabelled youth in her autobiographies and in interviews had been somewhat idealised in her mind by the passing of time. This does happen to memories – and, by the 1970s, Wolff was grasping many decades into the back of her mind. Wolff was aware of this herself when she wrote in her foreword to *Hindsight* “I am fully aware of the fickleness of memory. Imagination and emotions change and colour events [her emphasis], wrongly thought of as reality. We can only get glimpses of it through our imagination. And the light this most precious gift sheds on happenings and feelings is what counts – the real story.”

Wolff’s foreword, then, serves as a defence against the notion autobiography could ever be expected to represent a ‘truth’ unmediated by subjectivity.

Studies of autobiographies, their intentions and their reception have long since considered the blurred line between fact and fiction a given. With that in mind, contemporary life writing studies focus not on the arbitrary task of distinguishing ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’ but on the expectations readers tend to have for autobiography and other related genres: whether a work of idiosyncratic memory or complete fabrication, any book claiming to offer the subjective truth of its author’s own experiences will likely be interpreted differently, perhaps with “higher stakes”, than a book declared to be the invention of imagination alone. Recent work on autobiography’s place in German cultural history has acknowledged the limits of dwelling upon observations of “playful postmodern deconstruction” of how ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ overlap, calling instead for further attention to be paid to the function of autobiographies in relation to cultural memory.

Paul Eakin and David McCooye have each also argued autobiography to be closer to history than to fiction in what its readers tend to expect and assume of it: in McCooye’s words, “like other forms of history, [autobiography] is a form of testimony and as such it is not autonomous in the way fiction and poetry are.”

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Applied to Wolff’s work and its significance, what this means is that, if her written and spoken stories strike some as being the likely product of ‘cognitive dissonance’ or ‘illusion’, this is worth interrogating in its own right. This study is not interested in questioning her stories’ veracity, but in the grounds upon which others have felt the need to do so. What matters here is the context in which Wolff chose to tell these stories of her past, the possible motives behind how she did so, and the effects these stories had upon and reactions they drew from the people who heard them.

“The seventies meet the twenties” was how Charlotte Wolff recalled the history-conscious, yearning and mourning mindset of the young Germans she met and observed in Berlin in the 1970s. There is much to be learnt about both these eras by considering Wolff’s role as a self-described “period piece” of Berlin’s 1920s. While people did take an interest in aspects of Wolff’s young Berlin years beyond her sexuality, such as her friendship and collegiality with Walter Benjamin, this study shows it is undeniable that most readers and researchers of Wolff sought to make sense of her within a framework of sexuality and identity – usually as a figure in lesbian history.

Over time she tired of this, having never been entirely comfortable in the first place with this characterisation. As demonstrated earlier by the Eldorado incident, Wolff’s public presence in the final years of her life came to be strongly defined in terms of her rejection of homosexuality and heterosexuality as distinct categories or even as useful generalisations within humanity. Hindsight ends on a high note in regards to her interactions with gay and lesbian activists and historians in the 1970s, but between then and her death in 1986 the dynamic had clearly shifted. Until now, her encounters with the writing of history in the 1970s and 1980s have not been thoroughly documented or contemplated in regard to what they can tell us about history as a dialogue. Likewise, until now her early poetry and her work as a translator has not been examined, nor has her mid-century research into the lines and form of the human hand been thoroughly discussed in terms of its unsettling connotations and the silence which it met in later years. This study will demonstrate just how interconnected those three areas of research into Charlotte Wolff’s work, its meaning and its interpretation are, especially in terms of their implications for the historiography of sexuality.

Rita Felski has described how cultural histories of modernism beyond the canonical rendered the past “a more interesting and less familiar place”.62 Charlotte Wolff’s

61 Wolff, Hindsight, 252.
interventions into the writing of sexuality into history, through her written work and her public role as a “period piece” in the United Kingdom and Germany, certainly achieved that. The seventies could well be said to have met the twenties in Berlin with her arrival – but, when they met, the accusations of repression went both ways.

Imagine Walter Benjamin in Berlin, the city of his childhood, walking through the international avant-garde exhibit Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre, on display in 1977 in the new Nationalgalerie built by Bauhaus architect Mies van der Rohe in the 1960s. Imagine Walter Benjamin as a flaneur in the city of boulevards and arcades he so admirably described, happening upon the Centre Georges Pompidou and its multi-media show Paris-Berlin 1900-1933, which was a major cultural event in 1978. Or imagine the theorist of media and image reproduction in 1981 in front of a television set watching Robert Hughes’ BBC-produced eight-part series on avant-garde art “The Shock of the New.”

So begins Andreas Huyssen’s “The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s”. Huyssen imagines Benjamin encountering these late twentieth-century tributes to his own times as the seventies met the twenties in the context of art history, wondering if such a spectacle would have pleased or saddened him, envisioning this ghost Benjamin’s possible reactions to these repackagings of traces of the cultures of his lifetime. Perhaps, Huyssen speculates, Walter Benjamin would have looked around and quoted his own “Theses on the Concept of History”: “In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”

Unlike her friend Walter Benjamin, or many others, Charlotte Wolff really did experience situations very much like this. According to Hindsight, she loved the catalogue for “Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre”. Imagine Charlotte Wolff in Berlin, the city of her youth, being asked about how the lesbian communities of the twenties compared to what was going on in the present. Imagine Charlotte Wolff exploring the streets of a city made of much the same earth and concrete she knew from walking it before, but altered immeasurably by the aftermath of the horrors she had fled. Imagine Charlotte Wolff talking in a lecture hall crowded with young feminists in Berlin in 1978, wondering, perhaps, how many of them have ever met a Jew before while warning them how easily any society might creep into fascism.

Huyssen’s imaginary Benjamin strolls through retrospectives of art stripped of its political

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65 Wolff, Hindsight, 274.
66 Wolff, Hindsight, 266.
context, reduced to little more than a form of mass entertainment to which it had arguably once been antithetical: tradition overpowered by conformism in a similarly class-conscious context to that in which Benjamin had written his Theses. Charlotte Wolff, however, had to confront a differently absurd reversal of what she believed in and where she had come from. Her task as a writer was to wrest her own past, as she remembered it, away from being retrospectively written to conform to the ideological imperatives of the present – and, in doing so, to trouble people’s assumptions about their own time and place.
1.2 How Charlotte Wolff Rejected the Advances of History: five discussions on approaching the unapproachable

Homosexuality has existed throughout history, in all types of society, among all social classes and peoples, and it has survived qualified approval, indifference and the most vicious persecution. But what have varied enormously are the ways in which various societies have regarded homosexuality, the meanings they have attached to it, and how those who were engaged in homosexual activity viewed themselves. These are the crucial questions.

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In advance of assessing how Charlotte Wolff's 1970s and 1980s encounters with researchers and readers can be seen to complicate the writing of sexuality into history, further understanding must first be established as to how, why and when these histories have been and continue to be written: namely, the historiography of sexuality. What follows here is a series of brief discussions on how sexualities and identities have been conceptualised in recent historical thought, how this has shaped the ways we are able to think about Charlotte Wolff and her work, and how she may have influenced the writing of such histories through her disagreements with people who sought to write about her.

Five particular concerns relating to Wolff's role in the writing of history will be addressed here in detail: the potential for older people, broadly, to challenge younger people’s assumptions as to what is timeless; the difficulty in placing her on either ‘side’ of debates often assumed to typify how the history of sexuality was written in the 1970s and 1980s; Wolff’s direct engagement with the problem of anachronistic choices of word and concept by historians; and the underestimated extent of her influence on German-language histories of sexuality. To study historiography asks how, when and, most importantly, why histories have been written differently over time. It is in the asking why that complex but important discussions emerge about the motivations of historians and those who read (and need) their work. Prior to considering Wolff's role as an often unwilling subject and highly engaged critic of certain approaches to writing and imagining the past, the discussions in this section illustrate the concerns that must underpin any consideration of Wolff's thoughts and work in relation to the writing of history.

1.2.1 Charlotte Wolff and Other “Period Pieces”: on the importance of old curmudgeons as critics of history

Charlotte Wolff’s potential to disrupt the writing of history was multifaceted: she achieved this through what she wrote, the lectures she delivered, and her active engagement with her audiences and readerships. One common factor across all those activities was, at the risk of glibness, the fact she was still alive. Recent studies which discuss the symbolic importance of gay and lesbian history for people in the present make much of the act of reaching backwards to ‘reclaim’ figures from the past as part of one’s own sense of history and identity.68 When the figure in question is a Sappho or a Shakespeare, such a transaction is relatively simple: such figures, long dead, can only talk back through how others choose to interpret their texts. To write a history starring still-living characters, however – most likely these would be elderly people, like Wolff in the 1970s and 1980s – is a dialectic process in which these living historical ‘objects’ may choose to challenge what is being said about their past.

The historiography of sexuality is open to the possibility of significant changes in worldview across very short spaces of time, and conversations between generations of people interested and invested in forms of this history have often been possible.69 From there, an assumption tends to follow that older same-sex-attracted people must have quietly and gratefully approved of the way gay and lesbian history began to be written in the mid-to-late twentieth century: having witnessed or even experienced events and situations and then, later, to also witness their writing into history, then surely any sense of discrepancy these older people felt would be recognised.

Some older people around the time of the dawning of gay liberation in the 1970s (with its attendant history projects) did see their own past in quite different terms to those being written as history. Acknowledgements of this are rare but illuminating. When interviewed for the radical gay liberation magazine *Gay Sunshine*,70 for instance, the writers Christopher Isherwood (subtly) and Gore Vidal (bluntly) spoke of their past experiences in a way that challenged the view that a solid, unquestioningly gay identity is universally applicable, desirable and relevant to any man who had sex with other men. The interviewers’ questions

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70 These have been compiled as *Gay Sunshine Interviews*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1978).
and phrasings, calm with certainty, were sometimes rendered naïve by the responses they yielded. Isherwood, only a few years younger than Wolff, died in the same year as her: 1986. Vidal passed away recently, in 2012. Right up until the end of his life, Vidal’s disavowal of sexual identity categories made him a divisive figure, beloved by some and notorious to others. Charlotte Wolff’s role as a public figure in the 1970s and 1980s is, in that regard, comparable to Vidal’s, at least on the subject of sexual identity politics. Vidal in 1973, in *Gay Sunshine:* “I have never allowed myself to be pigeonholed [as a gay man]. Also I don’t regard myself as one thing over another. The point is, why not discard all the words. Say that all sexual acts have parity.” Which is my line.” This line of his is certainly similar to many of Wolff’s.

The mostly younger people of the newly founded gay and lesbian groups Wolff encountered in the seventies and eighties were, with a few vocal and notable exceptions, focused on securing basic legal rights in one form or another. They were busy trying to make life easier for self-identified gay men and lesbians in the face of harsh discrimination in employment, housing and the sometimes treacherous task of daily existence. The idea of daring to question those identity categories was commonly seen as an indulgence, if not a counterproductive, even dangerous distraction from the cause of the movement. This was the social context in which Wolff concerned herself – repeatedly – with the oppressiveness of ‘gay/straight’ as a false dichotomy, earning a reputation for herself in some circles, especially in the UK, as a killjoy and a traitor. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, particularly in terms of the animosity that developed between Wolff and the London periodical *Gay News.*

A similar sentiment prevailed when Gore Vidal recently expressed, in a *Time* interview, a flash of scepticism in regards to the notion of gay marriage (due to his mistrust of both concepts: *gay* and *marriage*): at least one popular mainstream gay news website seemed to relish casting him and Dennis Altman, with his similar opinions, as out-of-touch, irrelevant, privileged old queer intellectuals, their ideas having nothing to add to – and plenty

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71 Vidal is on the record as having said this about gay identity: “I don't want people in ghettos. I'm a universalist. I think people should intermingle. Once you get the idea that there's such a thing as a gay sensibility, then you've got to say that there's such a thing as a straight sensibility. It's just hopeless. But if other people are going to proscribe people belonging to a nonexistent category, one must fight back with every weapon.” Andrew Solomons, “Gore Vidal Receives a Visitor,” *New York Times* (15 October 1995). http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/home/vidal-visitor.html.

72 A quick note of reassurance: the interviewer quickly made sure he meant consensual ones only, which he did – bemused there was even a question as to that.


74 See, for example, Charlotte Wolff’s enthusiastic appraisal of the British faction(s) of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in the appendix to the second edition of *Love Between Women* (1973, 219-220). The GLF, as discussed by Altman (*Homosexual,* 216) were activists for gay rights as a means to an end: the eventual end of sexual identity categories. That was the main point of difference between the ideas of ‘gay liberation’ and ‘gay rights.’

to subtract from – ‘the community.’ The offence caused by Vidal et al in recent times, and by Wolff in the 1970s and 1980s, is not hard to explain: many community-minded gay men and lesbians (by that or any other well-fastened label) felt dismayed and threatened that the very foundations of their community were being rendered questionable, especially by people who were ostensibly part of that community. Criticisms in popular media of either Wolff or Vidal often hint at an interesting blend of anti-intellectualism and the reverence of experience over theory: to a gay man, lesbian or heterosexual very strongly attached to the idea of his or her sexual identity as an essential truth (and here it could be 2013 or 1983), a challenge to the stability of the homo/hetero dichotomy and its social identities might be interpreted as easily dismissible postmodern posturing, if it is coming from a decidedly academic source. However, coming from an elderly person (academic or otherwise) who claims to remember corners of society where things were seen and felt differently, such a challenge takes on a profoundly different set of properties. Rather than being a speculative, perhaps utopian series of imperatives, implorations and suggestions, the memories of an older person like Wolff or Vidal pose a decisively unsettling challenge to how histories of sexuality might be written.

Wolff’s and Vidal’s public presences are hardly interchangeable, it must be stressed – they are two different personalities with different backgrounds, speaking out in different contexts. They could both, however, be placed on a spectrum of troublesome elderly queer celebrities of the post-Stonewall era, along with the popular but at times reviled Quentin...
Crisp, the British writer who became a gay icon with his memoir *The Naked Civil Servant* (later adapted into film) but fell further and further from grace each time he voiced a barbed or melancholy opinion that hardly resembled the hopes or beliefs of gay rights or liberation movements. Wolff was even described as looking like Quentin Crisp in a *Guardian* article, and there was definitely an inference that the resemblance was more than skin-deep: “like Mr Crisp she guides society to reveal its sexual ambivalences.”

The particular type of trouble brewed by these figures was the casual, if not flippant manner in which they could unsettle so many people’s assumptions about sexual identity and history, not with recourse to theory but with something people often find much harder to argue against: memory, anecdote and personal experience. Another example, lesser known but remarkably clear in its purpose, is Donald Vining’s essay “How Can You Come Out If You’ve Never Been In [sic].”

Here, Vining explains the sense of amusement he and some of his peers feel “when [they] hear younger gays claim that after the Stonewall uprising, closet doors all over America swung open and thousands of us suddenly emerged” and illustrating the disconnect between his own memories and the way that “some of us who are up in years are credited with being ‘survivors’, people who have coped with what are imagined to have been terrible and scarring times.”

Of course, not all the older people pursued by gay or lesbian historical recovery projects rejected their premise. To most older people approached and interviewed, the work of these researchers would have seemed like a victory, a vindication and a relief. In the projects of early grassroots gay and lesbian history, the memories of the elderly were an obviously important focal point. “The spirit of the early gay and lesbian history projects,” wrote Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, “was to grab a tape recorder and go out and record the memories of our elders before they were lost. The urgency with which lesbians and gays went in search of their history, first in grass roots community projects and later in the academy, to reclaim a history before its bearers died, encouraged a focus on dates, places, names, and events.” Lapovsky Kennedy writes from an American perspective, and, in that particular passage, seeks to explain the tendency for those projects to prioritise specific data over the exploration of ideas, in response to – and in acknowledgement of – accusations of empiricism.

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81 Cunningham, “Masculine and feminine within her compete...”
or oversimplification. It was with the same sentiment and urgency (if not a greater sense of urgency, given their heavy awareness of the destruction of Weimar Republic-era cultures by the Nazis) that young German researchers went about that same task, including much of the attention paid to Charlotte Wolff. To them, as Brennan and Hegarty have pointed out, Wolff was – to use a very resonant phrasing on the matter of memory, history and inevitable loss, a phrase even more resonant when the Nazis’ public book burnings come to mind – a “burning library.”

Conducted with a sense of urgency and necessity, these research projects which date between the late 1960s and early 1980s had very little (if any) support from established academia. Usually, in place of helpful supervisors, established methodologies, peer reviews and recommended readings, researchers had to work with their instincts, unsorted papers and determination. With this in mind, it would be unfair to outline ways in which they could have potentially avoided an oversimplistic or presumptuous approach in their work. Still, while considering the interactions between those ‘grassroots’ researchers and their elderly interviewees, it is worth considering the effect of any assumptions brought into a study by its writer. At least one American researcher, Donna Penn, has acknowledged on reflection how she had not expected her older interviewees to hold any ideas about sexual identity that differed from her own:

For example, when I set out to conduct my first interview for a project on lesbianism in postwar America, I found myself facing an unanticipated problem for which, at the time, I had no contingency plan. Although a woman who had agreed to meet with me knew in advance the research topic, she announced before I even sat down, “You know, I'm not sure I'm a very good subject for you. I mean, I'm not a...” and she trailed off. Since she did not view herself as a lesbian, she was not altogether sure she was an appropriate research subject. Because she viewed “lesbians” as a “predatory lot” and “incredibly fickle in their relationships,” she didn't think of herself as one, despite the fact that she has remained for forty years with a woman whom she described as “very male.” I proceeded with the interview without any clear idea of how to or whether to accommodate this woman into my project.

It is in 1995 that Penn brings this memory up, while arguing the need for a queer – in effect, unpresumptuous – approach to continue on the work begun by lesbian historians. Her story demonstrates her point very well; the gap apparent between the mindset of Penn and that of her interviewee reveals volumes. Penn had assumed, unremarkably for someone pursuing

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86 Toni Brennan and Peter Hegarty, “Magnus Hirschfeld, his biographies, and the possibilities and boundaries of ‘biography’ as ‘doing history,’” History of the Human Sciences 22, no. 5 (2009), 38. Edmund White, essayist, novelist and memoirist (and gay man), titled one of his collections The Burning Library in connection to the saying (attributed by many as an Ivory Coast proverb – in any case a saying used over too many times and places in varying forms to attach to one original source) that when a person dies, a library burns.

lesbian history in that era, that ‘lesbian history’ would accommodate any romance, any sexual attraction between two women: even if they had lacked that word in the past, they would be content if not delighted to have it in their vocabulary now it was available. The interviewee, though, already had ‘lesbian’ in her vocabulary as a certain type of woman who loves other women, but not a type that includes herself. Perhaps her partner seeming ‘very male’ might have been an explanation, perhaps it had more to do with the ‘predatory’ and ‘fickle’ ways of the women that counted as lesbians in her worldview. Research done with the queer approach Penn argued for, and which has since become commonplace, would have relished the statements of that interviewee for their unsettling of identity categories, rather than feeling thrown by them.

Ageism exists. The online discussion on Vidal and Altman mentioned earlier states, in closing, how “it’s easy to dismiss the ramblings of an octogenarian who, it could be argued, is out of touch with the priorities of gay Americans today” – a sentiment towards which Wolff was keenly sensitive in her interactions with gay men and lesbians in the United Kingdom and Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. A fear of no longer being taken seriously in old age is traceable in Wolff’s writing as far back as diaries from the 1950s, and is strongly evident in much of her later writing: an exchange in the German feminist magazine Courage where Wolff writes in, horrified that her reception at a conference was assessed in terms of her comforting role as an elder, is the most vivid example, and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

There is a resonance between Wolff’s publicly expressed thoughts on the writing of sexuality into history and some recent approaches to the challenges of sexuality’s historiography. As one example, Wolff’s resistance to lesbian history as a story of straightforward progress and solid identity formation – the “spiral” she described to Jenny Lacey at the BBC comes to mind, as does her conceptualisation, in Hindsight, of social progress as ebbing and flowing like the tide – resembles Valerie Traub’s recent thoughts on how sexual and romantic configurations between women across history could productively be ordered into “cycles of salience” in terms of their comprehensibility for and comparability with people in the present.

88 “It’s Not That Gore Vidal Hates Gays Marriage…”
90 Wolff with Jenny Lacey, interview.
91 Wolff, Hindsight, 256.
Traub suggested this idea as a means by which historians of sexuality, and their readers, could get over an impasse between alterity (an insistence that people in the past can not be compared to those in the present) and continuism (an equally stubborn insistence that history is at its most useful when we find echoes of ourselves in the past, and thus should aim to be that echo).93 She is quick to note that division is markedly stronger among literary critics than historians,94 with historians accepting that change over time is a given. For historians, going by Traub’s argument, the question is the nature and the details of these changes, rather than whether anything has remained static and universal. As Barry Reay wrote recently, “the most useful sexual histories are those that provide depth of context without either assuming sexual identity or anticipating its complete absence [...], histories of desires that resist present-day sexual assumptions.”95 Wolff’s objections to how she perceived sexuality was being approached in the writing of histories do not deny a partial presence of sexual identity in the times and places of her youth, but certainly do call for a resistance to ahistorical assumptions.

Charlotte Wolff’s responses to the writing of her own past by others, alongside the similar reactions of well-known figures like Vidal, Isherwood and Crisp, as well as Vining’s pointed essay on having ‘never been in’ a ‘closet’, are clearly legible as a critique of tendencies still up for discussion today regarding the historiography of sexuality. In their old age, these thinkers – whether dismissed as curmudgeons or condescendingly positioned as ‘elders’ – rejected the idea that the history of sexuality is a straightforward progress narrative; they rejected notions of sexual identity as an innate disposition retroactively applicable to people in the distant past. The questioning and troubling of seemingly stable identity categories is often imagined to be a generational divide in which younger, self-defined queers (and, as time keeps going by, post-queers)96 strive to transcend the strict and inadequate categorisations of ‘gay and lesbian’ – terms which had been established in scholarship through the work of erstwhile radical liberation activists, suddenly middle-aged in tenured academia.97 Evidently, critiques of essentialist tendencies, ahistoricity and progress narratives

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93 For further thoughts along these lines see Joan W. Scott, “Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity.” Critical Inquiry 27, no. 2 (2001), 284-304.
94 As a salient example of this, Valerie Rohy recently took Fredric Jameson's "Always historicize!" – which served, in the early 1980s, as a warning against the universal in criticism (it was the opening line to his 1981 work The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act) – and put a question mark at the end of it, claiming that if ahistorical versions of the past (such as casting someone as a lesbian even if the concept and word were not part of her time and place) are dismissed as an outmoded approach rightly superseded by fragmented and disjointed, indeed milieu-specific histories, then a new hierarchy of ‘progress’ is put in place: “Ahistorical,” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 12, no. 1 (2006): 61-83. This argument is revisited in Nishant Shahani’s Queer Retrosexualities: The Politics of Reparative Return (Bethelehem: Lehigh University Press; 2012, 69-70). Both scholars seem to assume an absoluteness to historicity which, as addressed in Reay’s words in the paragraph at hand, does not have to be the case.
96 David Ruffolo, Post-Queer Politics (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009).
are not the reserve of one particular generation. “There is nothing new under the sun”, as Wolff liked to say – and to this we can add André Gide’s assertion that “everything has been said before, but since nobody listens, we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.”

When she spurned the advances of those who sought to write a lesbian history, and when she dismissed Altman’s call for ‘the end of the homosexual’ as “nothing new”, it was with a backward glance toward the friends she knew and the times she had in an era which preceded, if not coincided with the formations of identities and communities which were later preserved as modern gay and lesbian history. To Wolff, the idea of transcending constrictive identity categories – or living with no regard for them at all – had a history, and many people who could have been included in this history were instead being written into histories of communities and identities that had not been part of their own subjective realities. By expressing this in her life writing and through her presence as a public figure, she has contributed uniquely and productively to historiographical discussions that continue today.

1.2.2 The Straight Lines of Popular History: Charlotte Wolff’s challenge to the grand narrative

In a recent collection of his work, the Auckland poet Scott Hamilton pondered a poster about evolution which hung and faded over the years on the wall of a classroom when he was a schoolboy. We have all seen the image somewhere: a queue of creatures designed to depict a straight line of progress from the hunched hominids of long ago, to stooping cavemen and then to the upright homo sapiens we see ourselves as. Neanderthals had been decided as the ‘missing link’, so, as far as the poster was concerned, there were no missing links, overlaps or multiplicities – just a straight line of progress, with each step in the evolutionary process seamless, certain and sequential. As a historian as well as a poet, Hamilton was troubled by this straight line model of history – often known as the ‘progress narrative’ or the ‘grand narrative’ – and its pride of place in the history classroom. “Today,” he wrote in summary, “the notion that one homo genus evolved out of another in an orderly manner is wholly discredited.”


99 For a compelling argument against the assumption sexuality was commonly thought of as an element of self-perception and identity even decades after sexology’s “invention” of the category of the homosexual, see Laura Doan, “Topsy-Turvydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism and the Great War,” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 12, no 4 (2006), 517-542.

This is not to say that progress has never happened: social progress is often visible, invariably hard-fought and forever still in process. Even so, when we sense we have arrived at point B or point X from point A, and are glad to have done so – and that is progress – it is crucial to acknowledge that the path we took there may have had more loops, detours and side-streets than we realised. Jean-François Lyotard wrote in regard to knowledge itself, and ‘science’ in its broadest sense, rather than history in particular “we no longer have recourse to the grand narratives [... but] the little narrative [petit récit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention.”101 Following this, historians and critical thinkers have asked what might unfold if the grand narrative approach to the history of sexuality, “in which the present is the undisputed heir to the past”, was no longer to be trusted, unexamined.102 That phrasing comes from a conference paper Jeffrey Weeks presented in 1989, in which he went on to explain how “historians have always argued about the degree to which the present is the source of the questions we ask of the past, and the interpretation we impose on it”, allowing us to “increasingly […] see the present not as the culmination of the past but as itself historical: a complex series of interlocking histories whose interactions have to be reconstructed, not assumed.”103 Around the same time as Weeks wrote this, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was writing, in the field of criticism rather than history as such, with a similar and profoundly influential grasp on the historicity of sexuality (past and present) – something that is still in the process of being acknowledged.104

Following on from ideas like Weeks’ and Sedgwick’s, research into the history of sexuality has moved beyond thinking of ‘the homosexual’ – as an identity, as a social category – as something that was invented just once, once and for all, some time in amongst the fervour of nineteenth and early twentieth century sexological research. Certainly, categorisations of the sort were made by sexologists105 and it has been shown that even some of the most pathologising generalisations and conclusions made in the name of sexology

101 Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword Fredric Jameson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 60. In his foreword, Fredric Jameson does make a connection between Lyotard’s thoughts on the grand narrative and others’ work on the history of sexuality, with Foucault as his example: “master-narratives […] have become peculiarly repugnant or embarrassing to First World intellectuals today: the rhetoric of liberation has for example been denounced with passionate ambivalence by Michel Foucault in the first volume of his History of Sexuality.” (xix). Taking the much broader idea of the petit récit and applying it specifically to histories of sexuality, what results is the “milieu-specific” approach followed in this study.


105 For an accessible and decisively edited selection of works by prominent British and European sexologists of the era – Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld and Havelock Ellis, among others – alongside consideration of what their works tell us about how sexuality, gender and the idea of sex as an element of identity had been conceived of differently (or similarly) in their approaches, see Sexology Uncensored: the documents of sexual science, eds. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
proved not exclusively oppressive but sometimes even helpful to people in need of something to relate to – a way to make sense of themselves and their situations. But this could never justify an assumption that, in the wake of the neologisms of sexology in Britain and Europe, everyone with access to this new vocabulary uniformly came to conceive of their selves as innately either ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual.’ It is significant that the most frequent and illuminating point of reference in Grossmann's call for continued and nuanced reconsideration of the configurations of sex, gender and identity in Weimar Berlin – her protest against the popularly held belief that Weimar Berlin sexuality is an overdone topic – is Charlotte Wolff's *Hindsight*.

We can see a continuation of Weeks’ and Sedgwick’s concern with the historicity of the present in recent research. Some discussions in queer historiography are very useful in considering how German gay and lesbian history, particularly the later twentieth century rediscoveries of Berlin in the time of the Weimar Republic, was (and is), of course, about a lot more than the past in itself. “Recently,” writes Heather Love, “long-standing debates about gay and lesbian history have shifted from discussions of the stability of sexual categories over time to explorations of the relation between queer historians and the subjects they study.” Questions about who in the past could be seen as gay or lesbian have begun to be replaced, Love explains, with this question: “why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?” – as well as the question of what sorts of relationships historians hope to forge with these gay-like, lesbian-like and otherwise resonant characters in history. Historians of gender and sexuality, she argues, often see themselves as rescuers of forgotten or misunderstood figures of the past. Importantly, Love posits the idea that perhaps it is the historians being rescued here, rather than (or, at best, as well as) their subjects: rescued from their own sense of invisibility in history, and an enduring under-representation in the present.

Alongside this, Love provides a thoughtful explanation for the endurance of the grand narrative of progress in the history of sexuality. “Although many queer critics take exception

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to the idea of a linear, triumphalist view of history,” she reasons, “we are in practise deeply committed to the notion of progress; despite our reservations, we just cannot stop dreaming of a better life for queer people.”\footnote{Love, Feeling Backward, 3.} Wolff also acknowledged, at least for a time, the political importance (not to be confused with historicity) of a ‘genealogical’ gay and lesbian history, a grand narrative.\footnote{Wolff, Hindsight, 256.} As the 1970s became the 1980s, and the letters requesting she participate in lesbian history projects continued to arrive, she could see how much these projects meant to the people involved with them even when she took issue with their assumptions about how people thought and felt in the past. She did not claim, at least not directly, to be rescuing these young historians – but she certainly did not act as if she wanted or needed to be rescued by them.

1.2.3 **Charlotte Wolff and the concept of the essentialist/constructionist divide**

As shown in the discussions above, the problem with labelling people in the past using the words and mindsets of the present is that it is ahistorical, but the allure of doing so comes from the power that can be gained through self-representation. What should also be apparent by now, though, is that in the 1970s and early 1980s, not every historian of sexuality was preoccupied with a flawed but politically empowering search for gays or lesbians of the distant past. Some – like Weeks and the other like-minded writers listed earlier – were interested in how ideas about sex and identity are formed, how they differ across space and time, and how they might differ again in the future. The division between these two divergent approaches became strongly entrenched in the field during its earlier years: for a time we had the essentialists and their ‘gay and lesbian history’, so it is said, pitched determinedly against the social constructionists, with their histories of sexual identity categories.\footnote{An overview of these developments in the field can be found in Annamarie Jagose, Queer Theory (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1996).}

The accuracy and usefulness of considering historiography in terms of such a divide has recently been questioned – it was of course not entirely clear-cut, and talk of ‘the essentialists’ in opposition to ‘the social constructionists’ is “too often a fantasized dialogue between straw men”.\footnote{Scott Spector, “After the History of Sexuality? Periodicities, Subjectivities, Ethics.” In After The History of Sexuality: German genealogies with and beyond Foucault, eds. Dagmar Herzog, Scott Spector and Helmut Puff (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 4.} That is why this study strives to avoid describing ‘essentialists’, for instance, believing ‘essentialist tendencies’ are instead a more productive point of discussion. This atmosphere of clashing tendencies was, in any case, the climate in which Wolff found...
herself approached so often as a potential object of historical research. Concerned with Wolff’s role in the writing of history as this project is, it is worth asking how she engaged with debates between essentialist and constructionist approaches during her lifetime, whether directly or indirectly.

It would be oversimplistic to write as if there had been, at any moment, a resoundingly clear beginning or end to that debate. Here, then, for a quick and selective overview of the work that came to be known by “the harsh and mechanistic term ‘social constructionism’”, told in terms of milestones rather than strict beginnings or endings. The idea of the homosexual as an invented, socially contingent category was explored by Mary McIntosh in a sociological context in 1968, by Dennis Altman who called for the ‘end of the homosexual’ (as a category) in 1971, and by Jeffrey Weeks in regard to the writing of homosexuality into history in 1977. The most famous text from this era of social constructionist thought is, arguably, Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*: originally published in French, this first emerged in English translation in 1978. Foucault’s broad considerations of sex (and its discourse) in relation to power included the bold and memorable announcement, criticised by Sedgwick as “an act of polemical bravado”, that the homosexual was invented as a category, as a “species”, with the publication of Westphal’s article on “contrary sexual sensations” in 1870. Years later, discussions of the invention of ‘the homosexual’ as a social category later broadened to include its implicit flipside: the invention of ‘the heterosexual’.

To write people into history as gay men and lesbians, no matter how they saw themselves, is clearly a contestable act. In the words of Laura Doan, Foucault's

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116 Here I am indebted to Gayle Rubin's account of the “long history of sexuality studies” as described by Heather Love, encompassing a “genealogy [that] includes not only lesbian and feminist work of the 1970s but also gay history, sociology, and anthropology as well as work in deviance studies, Chicago School sociology, midcentury urban studies, and sexology.” “Introduction,” *GLQ* 17, no. 4 (2011), 4.
117 I include that phrase as it reflects how social constructionists did not necessarily rally around the term with enthusiasm: it was written by one, Jeffrey Weeks. “Remembering Foucault,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (2005), 187.
119 Altman, *Homosexual*.
120 Weeks, *Coming Out*.
121 Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 44. The dramatic impact of Foucault’s work – here, specifically, those few lines on the invention of a species – on subsequent research into the history of sexuality has been discussed by Halperin and Weeks, among others: Halperin's “Forgetting Foucault: Acts, Identities and the History of Sexuality.” In *Sexualities in History: A Reader*, eds. Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay (New York: Routledge, 2002), 42-70. Here, Halperin comments on the increasingly rote yet vague evocations of Foucault's work that seemed to have become a prerequisite in sexuality studies, whereas Weeks’ “Remembering Foucault”, written in response years later, sought to document the excitement and importance of first reading and reacting to Foucault's work when it was new.
“oversimplified account of the genesis of a species [...] overstates the degree to which that creature had become intelligible within and throughout Western culture.” An idea, once uttered or printed in some corner of society, must traverse much time and space (not to mention contest with other ideas) in the slow process of becoming widely accepted as a truth in any given cultural context. As Martha Vicinus wrote, “the question of when and under what circumstances the modern lesbian identity arose is, perhaps, impossible to answer.”

Charlotte Wolff’s frequent objections to others’ attempts to write of the past as if the same concepts and worldviews had always existed can easily be seen as a criticism of essentialist approaches to the writing of homosexuality into history, although she never used that term. This does not, of course, mean she could be described without doubt as a social constructionist: her arguments appeal for a balance of both tendencies. She pressed for people to acknowledge how prejudices, assumptions and stigmas brought about by social pressure shaped our ideas about human sexuality, but also believed in a sort of hormonal determinism. Increasingly, over time, she saw this as a lesser influence on the development of our sense of self and of sexuality than the ‘brainwashing’ of socialisation. There is no evidence suggesting Wolff ever engaged with the ideas of social constructionism and essentialism in those exact terms. Interested as she was in questions around society and sexuality, it was only due to her appeal as an ‘object’ of research that historians became a significant part of her world. Her immediate background had been psychology and its vocabulary. It follows, then, that Wolff’s engagement with ideas relating to essentialism and social constructionism would be phrased in different terms.

After all, one historian’s or social theorist’s ‘social construction’ might at times strongly resemble some psychologists’ ‘behaviourism’. This is visible in a section of Hindsight outlining one of the many arguments Wolff got into when she spoke to audiences in Berlin, this one with the generally young and punchy crowd of the Lesbische Aktionszentrum:

[An audience member] put me through the mill, attacking me on one point after another, taken from my book Love between Women. She objected with obvious signs

127 Wolff’s tendency to describe humanity as ‘brainwashed’ can be traced as far back as On the Way to Myself (233).
128 Here is not the place to try defining behaviourism, but the term has been used in discussions of lesbianism and psychiatry by Wolff in the excerpt at hand; see also Jane Rule, Lesbian Images (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1975), 31-50. The women arguing with Wolff in that audience subscribed to the view that lesbianism was a choice, political as much as personal, a strategy that could be adopted by any woman. This has been elaborated upon by Jagose (Queer Theory, 44-57); for an example of the notion in action in Berlin in the 1970s, see Monica Kühn, “The Lesbian Action Center, West Berlin: the formation of group solidarity.” In German Feminism: Readings in Politics and Culture, eds. Edith Hoshino Altbach, Jeanette Clausen, Dagmar Schultz and Naomi Stephan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984): 311-314.
of anger, that a person's endocrine make-up could have anything to do with homosexuality. She declared the idea to be utterly mistaken. I explained that hormones played a part in many, but by no means all, people who became homosexual, and told her to read my book carefully once more. She believed blindly in behaviourism, and so did the majority of the students present. Several supported her, saying: 'The milieu makes people, and we become what society teaches us.' I pointed out that individuality, intelligence and critical faculties were considerable forces of defence against outside influences which go against the grain. I asked them: “How then have you become lesbians in a milieu which despises lesbianism?” “Protest,” they shouted, “we protest.” I left it like that, as the discussion had shifted onto an irrational plane.129

This argument concluded, according to Wolff, with her conceding “the all-important influence of the milieu, but [telling them] behaviourism by itself was as dead as the dodo.”130 Her correspondence from this era contains another version of that same argument: she wrote to the young sociologist and social historian Ilse Kokula in 1977 taking issue with what she saw as a complete refusal by sociologists to consider the possibility of any hormonal or endocrine influence on a person’s sexual feelings. This letter was quickly followed by another in which Wolff sought to clarify that she still believed social factors were “in most cases” a far more significant influence.131 While that debate, in either manifestation, was clearly not directed towards the writing of history in itself, discussions of whether one is inclined or influenced towards any given identity are relevant, whether this is expressed in the words of psychology, history or social activism. A belief in sexual identity as informed by social context would likely lead to a very different imagined history of sexuality than one written by someone who thought of sexuality as predetermined by biology. One thing that is certain is that Wolff’s thoughts on sexuality could not be classified easily as either essentialist or constructionist.

In 1996, with arguments around essentialist and social constructionist tendencies still relatively fresh in people’s memories, Annamarie Jagose wrote in *Queer Theory* that “there is significant agreement that homosexuality, as it is understood today, is not a transhistorical phenomenon.”132 This agreement has surely gained in traction in the years since Jagose wrote that. Sexual identities, categories and concepts depend on their societies. Essentialist histories of sexuality and identity can be meaningful to people in the present, but they are the product of selective recovery of the past. “We wanted to validate [gay and lesbian identities],” wrote Jeffrey Weeks of the work of the social constructionists, “but not by reference to a false and

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130 Ibid.
131 Charlotte Wolff to Kokula, 2 June 1978; 23 June 1978, SLA.
impossible history or anthropology.” Charlotte Wolff’s refusal of involvement in so many history projects was a rejection of this ‘false and impossible’ history, and the stories she told in *Hindsight* were of this history’s purpose, its urgency and its value, but ultimately also of its limits.

### 1.2.4 On word choice when writing about Wolff

As this chapter so far has established, describing Charlotte Wolff’s 1920s self as a lesbian would be ahistorical, regardless of the usefulness of doing so for any given history and its purposes. There is no evidence she described herself that way at the time, and plenty of material which suggests she refused to retroactively phrase her past sense of self as having been so. Despite this being a major point of emphasis in Wolff’s life writing, almost every work which describes Wolff’s younger years does this. It is surely time to write her into a study that at least tries to consider her on her own terms, and the importance of doing so.

The question of how and why histories were written which, in Wolff’s case, gave her cause to object to (and participate in) their writing has been threaded throughout this series of discussions. As mentioned very early on, in considering the potentially disruptive force of older people’s memories, the historians and independent researchers who set to work creating histories of (homo)sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s were often doing so in the name of activism rather than (or as well as) academia. Giving a sense of history to people who felt they lacked one – alongside so many other forms of oppression – certainly would have been a radical task. Many of these histories saw the radical task at hand as being to look back through the pages of time, find homosexuals and write about them, replacing a ‘tribade’ or ‘pederast’ or total lack of descriptor with the terminology of the present day. Works like these sought to strengthen their politicised sexual identities in the present with the idea of a hidden history of ‘forerunners’, of lesbians and gay men in all but name, who by the reasoning of such a project would surely have identified as such, had the words been in currency. One example of this “simple but enduring lesbian and gay practise of listing famous homosexuals

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133 Weeks, “Remembering Foucault,” 188.
134 The notable exceptions here are Buerkle (“Points of Departure”) and Grossmann (“Continuities and Ruptures”).
135 Of course, academia and activism are not mutually exclusive. Gayle Rubin has insightfully discussed how, in terms of the history (and the present tense) of the gay and lesbian rights movement, activism and academic work can support and inspire each other, and in some cases are the same thing: see “A Little Humility” in *Gay Shame*, eds. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 369-373.
136 Michael J Lecker has raised this point in regards to Andrea Weiss’ biography of Erika and Klaus Mann, puzzling at the author’s tendency to write with a sense of ‘they were born too soon for the modern gay world’ in a work that otherwise clearly demonstrates that they were (as we all are) wholly of their time. See “In the Shadow of the Progress Narrative: The Problems and Potentials within GLBTQ and Intellectual Biographies.” *Politics and Culture* 2 (24 May 2010). www.politicsandculture.org/2010/05/24/in-the-shadow-of-the-progress-narrative-the-problems-and-potentials-within-glbtq-and-intellectual-biographies/.
from history”\textsuperscript{137} as a political act has been described by Rebecca Jennings: her study explains how lesbian writers and historians in Britain from the late 1960s onwards tried to foster “a sense of historically grounded, collective lesbian identity” with their studies of people like Katherine Mansfield or Queen Christina of Sweden as “lesbian forerunners.”\textsuperscript{138} This certainly took place in similar circles in Germany, too, as Chapter 4 will demonstrate.

Beyond listing ‘forerunners,’ this approach also endorsed progress narratives in which a solid, essential lesbian identity is presented as the rightful default setting for women who are attracted to each other – an identity which was simply unavailable in the past. Lillian Faderman, for instance, wrote this: “While a lesbian identity was impossible for many women to assume during the 1920s, sex with other women was the great adventure” before moving on to tell of a 1930s where “for most women who loved women, a bisexual compromise was the best they could manage.”\textsuperscript{139} This was doubtless a sad reality for many women, but the flawed assumption at work here – that a lesbian identity would have, under better circumstances, been the ultimate end-goal for any one of these women – is obvious. Faderman’s work was pioneering in its time, but the writing of histories and historiographies of sexuality has certainly moved on beyond being able to confidently assume the presence of a drive towards a fixed sense of sexual identity.

In a study like this it is clearly necessary to be cautious with words. I do not argue for the writing of histories devoid of words like ‘lesbian’ – that would be as ahistorical as those histories with a surfeit of it; the word and its connotations have been around in one way or another since Sappho was singing to her students. The word has not always meant the exact same thing across all times and places, though: the history and historiography of sexuality (among other histories of identities and chosen communities) has surely reached a point where we cannot uncritically frame the past within the ideas of the present without at least acknowledging that we are doing so. This study explores identity concepts and terminologies in several different places, times and milieus: this demands as much clarity as possible.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{137} Nealon, \textit{Foundlings}, 5.
\textsuperscript{138} Rebecca Jennings, “From ‘Woman-Loving Woman’ to ‘Queer’: Historiographical Perspectives on Twentieth Century British Lesbian History,” \textit{History Compass} 5, no. 6 (2007), 1902.
\textsuperscript{140} For an excellent consideration of this same point, relating to portrayals of the life and potential identity of the American modernist writer and editor Jane Heap, see Holly Baggett’s introduction in the published volume of Heap’s letters: \textit{Dear Tiny Heart: The Letters of Jane Heap and Florence Reynolds}, ed. Holly Baggett (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 9-13. Heap spent time in Paris in the 1930s, where she was known as the charismatic leader of an avant-garde group of lesbian-identified women who followed Gurdjieff; Wolff describes her encounters with exactly such a group of women in \textit{Hindsight} (139-140) and specifically with Heap in \textit{On the Way to Myself} (93).
To ahistorically describe Wolff as a lesbian, then, would miss a very important point. Over time she came to loathe the word, and not just on aesthetic grounds. She felt it was being used to misrepresent her own past. So how did she see herself, in this past? What can we learn from that, when viewed in light of how she later sought to articulate her remembered thoughts and experiences? If we insist on seeing Wolff and her friends as ‘lesbian’, even if just for the convenience of the term and its relevance to some people in the present, such questions become a lot harder to ask – let alone to answer.
2. ‘The Twenties’: understanding Charlotte Wolff’s 1920s poetry, translations and literary connections

2.1 On recovering forgotten poetry

As Ilse Kokula has pointed out, when Erich Mühsam wrote that verse in 1904, the literary, independent ‘lesbische Weib’ must have already been an established stereotype – otherwise his satirical humour would have been lost on any audience. What Mühsam’s parody of this turn-of-the-century Berlin literary milieu also illustrates, perhaps more so, is exactly what Charlotte Wolff, in her later life-writing and in her interactions with readerships in the 1970s and 1980s, found herself trying to emphasise repeatedly: her sexuality, by any description, was not something that excluded her from social and cultural worlds beyond that of a specific subculture of women who loved women. Wolff’s frustration at attempts by younger scholars to include her in ‘lesbian history’ was, to a significant extent, the result of her sense that no attempt would ever be made to include her in any other approach to history, including the literary. This chapter seeks to reconcile Wolff’s own personal ‘history of sexuality’ with her contributions to literary history, with recourse to a hitherto unexamined collection of poetry and translation she produced in the 1920s, currently housed at the Wellcome Collection in London. These poems she wrote, and the reflections of her involvement with literary worlds written years later in her autobiographies, are stages upon which many points she sought to make about the irrelevance of sexual identity in her past were enacted.

To begin understanding what Charlotte Wolff meant when she told her readers in 1980 that she, and other women like herself, did not think of themselves as oppressed in Berlin in the 1920s, it is crucial that we find out as much as we can about her life back then. This is not solely a matter of biographical milestones – names and dates, jobs and associations – but,
importantly, an exercise in deducing as much as possible about the ideas and views she would have likely subscribed to. If we are able to see how these did and did not endure (whether fully intact or altered by time and experience) in her later life-writing, or otherwise manifest in the sometimes divisive opinions she would express as a public figure in the United Kingdom and in Germany, then a significant part of this much-needed historiographical understanding will have been reached. We will be able to see where she was coming from: ideologically, culturally and socially. What emerges is a series of fragmented reminders that Wolff’s intensifying aversion, from the late 1970s onwards, to histories and theories dependent on sexual identity categories can be traced back to the ideas she engaged with and the company she kept as a young woman in the 1920s. She was very much of her time.

Wolff’s autobiographies, especially *Hindsight*, are heavy with attempts at stressing exactly this – in keeping with the contemplative retrospection promised by the title. She tries to weave cultural and historical context around her personal narratives as if to strengthen the chances of her readers in 1980 actually understanding what she has to say: the strongest example of this, and one already evoked here numerous times for its direct relevance to the aims of this research, is her repeated but not entirely consistent refusal to write about herself, her friends and her lovers in the earliest parts of the twentieth century as if their approach to sexual expression, identity and community entirely resembled the approaches commonly assumed by her readership towards the end of the century. She would explain intently that even when the new vocabularies of sexology were bringing sexual identity categories into linguistic currency (as per Mühsam’s 1904 poem and also two which Wolff wrote in 1924 – these will be examined later), this did not mean she or the people around her related to any of it: for better or worse, not everyone saw this science and its words as applicable in their own lives. Sexual identities, in short, were stressed as very much historically contingent in Wolff’s *Hindsight*. She had been around to witness more than one moment of their supposed invention. Across time and across cultures, she had experienced more than one way to configure one’s sense of self and sexuality.

No matter what Wolff said or wrote later in life about how concepts of identity and community simply did not cross paths with her thoughts about sexuality in her younger years, this did not mean that in the 1920s she never thought about how sexuality and society related. She put her thoughts on the matter into verse, as we will see later in the chapter. When translating them, how did she engage with Baudelaire’s ‘lesbian poems’, which sought to celebrate but also condemn love between women? What can be found in her poems “Café”
and “Furor Sexualis,” which make use of the vocabulary of sexology? Were the poems she had published in Vers und Prosa addressed to her girlfriend, and if so, what would that mean for literary history? Whatever it was that Wolff was thinking and feeling about sexuality and society as a young woman in Berlin, what her archives of published and unpublished poetry and translation reveal is that she actually wrote some of it down at the time.

Writing in 2013, it is difficult to imagine that the interdisciplinary approach of research into literature, society and history which considers text alongside context was once disputed and doubted. New Historicism, as it was named upon its emergence, was initially associated with sociohistorical discussions of Renaissance literature, but the term gradually took on broader connotations. By 1989, Anton Kaes wrote, it had become a “catchword for all those recent tendencies that focus on the dynamic interplay between the literary and the social world.” He wrote this in the course of explaining and defending the potential usefulness of the approaches associated with new historicism for the study of German literature. Kaes sensed in the appeal of new historicism the “promise”, if not the existence, “of a critical method that perceives the literary text as a communal product rather than the expression of an author’s intention; that disputes the autonomy (and isolation) of the work of art and reconnects it to its cultural context; that consistently crosses disciplinary boundaries; that draws on recent theoretical work, and nevertheless seeks historical and textual specificity.”

Such a method would not dwell on the symbolic ‘death of the author’ as per Barthes’ post-structural polemic, but on the social world of the text as being part of it – which would include, implicitly, its author and his or her situation.

The need for a method in German literary studies which “emphatically validates history”, Kaes argued, was urgent “at a time when memory is increasingly usurped by the mass media.” He recalled an anecdote told by the decidedly new-historicist Stephen Greenblatt: in 1985, after having visited the ruins of a synagogue destroyed on Kristallnacht and then seen Shakespeare’s Der Kaufmann von Venedig performed at the Deutsches Theater, Greenblatt was shocked to realise some young East Germans with whom he had seen the play could not detect any connection between the anti-Semitism in Shakespeare’s play and

145 Ibid.
146 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author.” In Image-Music-Text, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 142-148. Barthes’ general point, that ‘authorial intent’ can mean nothing whatsoever once a text is placed in the hands of the reader and thus hardly warrants being a default approach to literature, is of course valid and important. As per Kaes’ footnote, however: “Barthes, of course, overstates his point; after all, it is the author who picks and chooses his quotations.” “New Historicism,” 219: n.40.
Germany’s own past. “The prospect of a world without historical memory”, Greenblatt concluded, “is appalling.” That prospect was, for Kaes in 1989, what gave New Historicism its “unique force and urgency.”¹⁴⁸ In 2013 it would not make much sense to declare one’s method to be new historicist – ‘interdisciplinarity’ has been well-established in its wake, but it does owe much to the speculations of new historicist scholars like Kaes who saw great potential in, and a great need for, literary studies which addressed social and historical contexts and their significance. The historical memory at stake in this thesis is, at its broadest, the revelation that interactions between still-living ‘objects’ of historical inquiry and those who seek to write them into history can result in the exposure of these researchers’ assumptions, and of the histories they wish to create as just that: wishes.

Like the era in which interdisciplinary approaches had to be named and defended, the days in which one had to laboriously justify paying any scholarly attention to the work of writers outside of pre-established canons are certainly over. It is – obviously – worthwhile and necessary to investigate why and how a writer’s work has been overlooked or even forgotten, be this in the form of exclusion from some form of canon or from recorded histories of literature, culture and experience. “Until recently,” wrote Cary Nelson in 1993, “many people engaged in recovering forgotten authors might easily see themselves as doing real, productive, material work that made high theory seem hopelessly self-indulgent or useless. And theorists, in turn, might see themselves as engaged in settling far more intellectually ambitious problems than literary historians were willing to consider – even ‘universal’ ones.”¹⁴⁹ Written in reflection on his 1989 work *Repression and Recovery*, Nelson’s thoughts on what it can mean to recover and engage with non-canonical poetry echo the anxieties raised around the same time in regard to rifts between gay and lesbian history and queer theory which were yet to be (and are always in the process of being) reconciled¹⁵⁰ – and, indeed, the rifts between new historicism and more text-centred approaches hinted at earlier. How could ‘history’ be written when the nature of facts themselves were in doubt?

Nelson reassures us of the continued necessity and purpose of literary history as an act of recovering the forgotten and suppressed – even when history is no longer seen as a straightforward matter – by acknowledging the need for historiography, as recognition of how histories are written by and for their own times and contexts, to come to the fore of literary

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¹⁵⁰ Maynard, “Respect Your Elders.”
(and other) histories. “When recovering texts that have clearly been repressed or marginalised for political reasons or because of the culture’s history of racism and sexism, there is a strong desire not only to disseminate the texts again but also to come to understand the experience of their authors and even to imagine that disseminating these texts gives their authors a voice in the culture and an opportunity to communicate again.”\(^{151}\) Here we have a timely caution for what can happen if recovered literary texts are viewed only in terms of the oppression we assume or even hope they represent: “In this commendable desire to compensate for a century of cultural repression, the well-known unreliability of language’s mediations was forgotten. Forgotten too was the knowledge that authors often have purposes other than straightforward communication or representation when they write.”\(^{152}\) He concludes thus:

In the end, we need to admit that we will never know for certain what it was like to live in an earlier period. The experience of gaining access to another author’s consciousness is a fantasy. And the histories we construct are constructed in the service of our own needs, compulsions, plans and interests. That is not to say, however, that the desire to make repressed and forgotten traditions visible again is illicit. But the process of recovery is as much a process of current cultural critique as it is one of restoration. And what we ‘recover’ in many ways will never have existed before.\(^{153}\)

Such thoughts provide a foundation for my ‘recovery’ of Wolff’s poetry. I am under no illusion that I have unearthed transparent crystals of her thoughts, her life and her times, and I am wary of the understandable and, to an extent, inevitable temptation to read a ‘recovered’ text in alignment with what one wishes to recover. Nelson’s work was not all caution and hesitation, though: it also spoke of the importance and usefulness of ‘recovery’ projects to further our awareness of how little we know, and of the usefulness of suppressed and non-canonical poetry as rare (albeit closer to opaque than translucent) windows into aspects of unknown, under-examined experience. In the specific case of writers silenced, obscured and persecuted under Nazism, the importance of recovering their work is obvious. This recovery project, traceable as far back as Drews and Kantorowicz’s 1947 work *Verboten und Verbrannt*,\(^{154}\) still continues today.\(^{155}\) Renate Wall’s *Verbrannt, Verboten, Vergessen*, a 1988 lexicon of women writers whose lives and works had faded from cultural memory,

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\(^{151}\) Nelson, “Facts Have No Meaning,” 11.

\(^{152}\) Ibid.

\(^{153}\) Ibid.


\(^{155}\) See, for instance, Kerstin Schoor’s editorial foreword in *Zwischen Rassenhass und Identitätssuche: Deutsch-jüdische literarische Kultur im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010).
included a listing for Charlotte Wolff.\footnote{156 Renate Wall, Verbrannt, verboten, vergessen: kleines Lexikon deutschsprachiger Schriftstellerinnen 1933 bis 1945 (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1988), 211-213.} Her poetry has nonetheless remained unexamined until this present study.

As well as examining a selection of Wolff’s poetry and translations for the first time, this chapter will also consider the years in which she had the chance to write it, and the significance of her attempts much later in life to evoke the importance of – and even redistribute and promote – some of her early poetry. As we progress through readings and contextual discussions of her poetry and translations, which can be traced back to the early 1920s, not only will we gain a stronger sense than ever before of this peak in her poetic productivity, we will be able to compare her writings to her broader social context and biographical situation. This, in turn, can later be considered in light of what she chose to describe and emphasise later on in life, when readers, journalists and historical researchers alike frequently cast her as a relic of the history of homosexuality, to which she responded by casting doubt upon their methodological and cultural assumptions. This response, significant yet so far underexplored in research into the historiography of sexuality, was the most repeatedly stressed message Charlotte Wolff had for her readers and audiences by the 1980s: from her own memory and experience, writing a history of gay men and (/or) lesbians would be ahistorical and misleading from the start, if it were to assume sexual identities and communities had, always and everywhere, been an intrinsic part of love and sex between women (or between men).

Embarking upon a description of her social worlds in the early 1920s in Hindsight, Wolff appears conscious of the difficulty of communicating their overlaps and their simultaneity through writing. “The task of describing simultaneous events is almost impossible. One wishes to have the palette of a painter to juxtapose what, unfortunately, has to remain sequential in writing.”\footnote{157 Wolff, Hindsight, 72.} The worlds she wished she could depict simultaneously were, on one hand, that of her literary milieu (especially Walter and Dora Benjamin) and, on the other hand, that of “a quite different world [which] aroused [her] interest, [her] sense of adventure, and [her] sensuality.”\footnote{158 Wolff, Hindsight, 72.} Many would refer to that world as Weimar Berlin’s lesbian subculture – but Wolff, of course, had an aversion to both those words, which this study interprets not as a difficult fussiness but a reflection of Wolff’s sensitivity to a vocabulary symptomatic of the tendency, detectable among many in her 1970s and 1980s
readership, to view the ideologies of the past as very similar if not identical to their own ideologies when discussing sexuality’s histories.\(^{159}\)

In the descriptions of queer nightlife which followed that cautious preamble in Hindsight, Wofff makes some effort to occasionally re-introduce characters from her literary milieu (“‘Dora [Benjamin’s] friend Ernst [Schoen] frequently came to lesbian clubs with both of us.’\(^{160}\) as a gesture towards depicting this overlap. There is a real sense here that, in writing Hindsight, Wolff was attempting to confront the recurrent notion that she – or anyone else – had been part of some distinctly lesbian world. This argument will be revisited at length in Chapter 4. In advance of that, this present chapter looks at Wolff’s 1920s poetry and the contexts of its production in terms of their relation to concepts such as flânerie, Neue Sachlichkeit, ‘sexual cynicism’ and modernism, and their visibility through her previously unexamined work as a poet. Throughout all this, her assertion in Hindsight that she and others in her milieu “never thought of being second-class citizens”\(^{161}\) through their gender or their sexuality, will resonate. Charlotte Wolff’s work as a poet and translator offers illuminating insights into the past which she later remembered in resistance to how it was being written into histories.

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\(^{159}\) Her issues with the word ‘lesbian,’ present but relatively nascent during the writing of Hindsight, are discussed at several points in this thesis. She describes ‘subculture’ as a “hideous” term. Hindsight, 73.

\(^{160}\) Wolff, Hindsight, 75.

\(^{161}\) See page 17 for Grossmann’s use of this quotation from Hindsight, 106.
That Charlotte Wolff’s poetry collection is held in the Wellcome Collection at all is something worth remarking on: it is not a literary archive, as such. As Toni Brennan has discussed, the diversity of material in Wolff’s archive defies categorisation of the collection, as a whole, as one of ‘psychology’ or ‘literature’ – or, indeed, as a ‘lesbian archive,’ whatever that might mean.\textsuperscript{162} By their own description, the Wellcome Collection “explores the connections between medicine, life and art in the past, present and future”\textsuperscript{163} – a very appropriate venue for Wolff’s papers, which embrace all three of those broad categories. The Wellcome Collection certainly keeps its promise: at the time of my research visit in 2010, their museum space hosted “High Society,” an exhibition on drugs in society.\textsuperscript{164} This drew on all manner of archival ephemera and the materials of centuries’ worth of popular cultures, all sourced from within the collection. The cumulative effect was that all knowledge we might have had about drugs in December 2010 was made to seem as historically contingent and potentially quaint as any of the older materials, whether Victorian English opium literature or 1960s American ‘reefer madness’ films. The history of medicine is, after all, impossible to divorce from social history: it is society that determines what the priorities of medicine should be. Wolff’s papers, consisting of medical notes, poetry and everything in between, are a vivid depiction of medicine’s many overlaps with other aspects of culture and society.

In keeping with the importance of historically-minded interdisciplinarity stressed earlier with reference to Nelson and Kaes, it would be almost impossible not to think holistically, beyond the text itself, when looking at Wolff’s archived poetry: it is filed away amongst the manuscripts for her autobiographies, the press clippings she collated of her books’ reception, small fragments of personal, legal and business correspondence dating from the thirties until the sixties, and a wealth of later correspondence of every sort. A sizable portion of her archive is still inaccessible to readers: certain photographs and notes from the years she spent researching the human hand and notes from her work towards \textit{Love between

\textsuperscript{162} Brennan, “Charlotte Wolff’s Contribution to Psychology,” 97. Here she discusses Wolff’s papers as a ‘queering’, through their interdisciplinarity, of the British Psychological Society’s archives. At the time of her research they were held there, as Wolff had bequeathed her papers to the Society.


Women and Bisexuality are embargoed for decades yet.\textsuperscript{165} Wolff had bequeathed her papers to the British Psychological Society, which recently entrusted them to the Wellcome Collection in the interest of better storage and research access. These papers, as a whole, represent a self-collated archive. The first person interested in Charlotte Wolff’s place in cultural memory, then, was Charlotte Wolff.

Wolff preserved her early poetry throughout her lifetime: the contents of PSY/WOL/7, a folder marked ‘Verse’, are the oldest papers in her archive. Wolff must have taken care to file these poems and pack them in her luggage when she fled Berlin for Paris in 1933, and again when she settled in London later in the thirties. Nobody else would have been in a position to preserve her poetry. The contents of her archive suggest she saw her own poetry as worth preserving and also worth promoting: letters she wrote in the 1970s and 1980s indicate, significantly, that this self-preserved archive of poetry was more than just a venue for her own private nostalgia. Rather, she selectively distributed this poetry among correspondents well into the 1980s, posting out her well-preserved copy of Vers und Prosa, possibly even re-typing some of her earliest verses for less risky redistribution.\textsuperscript{166} She was not just an archivist of her own literary history; she was its lending librarian.

One must assume Wolff’s archive of poetry was pared down over those many years. Did she make a small selection from a much larger back catalogue when preparing to leave Nazi Germany for Paris in 1933? Did some poems from her 1920s oeuvre find their way into a wastepaper basket in London at any point in her life – or even after her death? Of course, we will never know, but the least likely scenario seems to be that that was all there ever was: the selection in the ‘Verse’ folder in the Wellcome Collection is small, and consists predominantly of her Baudelaire translations. There would have likely been many more original poems at some point. In her later life writing she mentions having written some poetry in German in the late 1950s or early 1960s, but no trace of this work remains.\textsuperscript{167} Wolff’s narration in Hindsight seeks to generate the impression that the early 1920s was the

\textsuperscript{165} PSY/WOL/6/1, containing interview notes towards Bisexuality, is embargoed until 2084, presumably to protect the privacy of her interviewees. For the same reason, PSY/WOL/6/3/2, containing photographs taken for hand research, is embargoed until 2040. In the future, an exhaustive biography of Wolff could be possible once more of this material is accessible.

\textsuperscript{166} In a letter she wrote to Eva Rieger in June 1978, for instance, she mentions having enclosed two poems which she wrote when she was barely twenty (Wolff to Rieger, 14 June 1978, SLA). This was in the midst of an exchange in which Wolff sought to convince Rieger, a young scholar and critic active within Berlin’s lesbian/feminist communities, to think of her as a poet and author – and certainly not as a Psychoanalytikerin. Writing to Rolf Italiaander in the 1980s, she sent him Vers und Prosa and later asked for it back (Wolff to Italiaander, undated letter, PSY/WOL/1/10).

\textsuperscript{167} See pages 174-175 of Chapter 4 for further discussion of this.
peak of her poetic productivity.\textsuperscript{168} In any case, what remains in that archive folder is this: one issue of \textit{Vers und Prosa}, several drafted and, in some cases, redrafted translations of poetry by Baudelaire, two bundles of poetry about people from the Bible, typed on card, and a small series of manuscript sheets of original poetry that dates back to the same era as the Baudelaire translations. As will soon be apparent, these 1920s poems offer insights into Wolff’s thoughts in the 1920s on love, sexuality and its discussion in society – insights which offer a new perspective on histories of modernism, \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit} and its presumed-inherent ‘sexual cynicism.’

Is it significant that those were the poems that endured? Did she selectively archive particular poems which portrayed specific aspects of her earlier life and thoughts? This is possible, but we have no way of knowing. What is apparent, though, is that in the 1970s and 1980s she actively redistributed a small selection of her poetry among select correspondents: the cycle of poems which had also been published in \textit{Vers und Prosa}.\textsuperscript{169} This may have been due to disinterest on her correspondents’ part: one thing absent from later twentieth century correspondences in which she distributes her early poetry is any indication of what the recipients thought of it. Likewise, despite seemingly having had opportunities to the contrary, writers (whether journalists, historians or otherwise) opted not to bring her poetry into discussion in any detail when describing Wolff’s past. Aspects of Wolff’s 1970s and 1980s correspondence, then, read in part as failed attempts to shift the attention of her readership away from their preoccupation with her sexuality and toward her past engagement with literature.

Further to this, both her autobiographical works include, at one point, a poem – but the mode by which she introduces each poem demonstrates a hesitant shyness to put her own poetic works forth as if they would be of interest to her readership in their own right. In \textit{On the Way to Myself} her poem “Die Juden” is included ostensibly because Wolff saw a fatalistic significance in the fact she found it on a slip of paper when she had been searching for something else entirely. She claims she wrote it in 1925, but no copy of it remains in her archive, reflecting its incompleteness.\textsuperscript{170} In \textit{Hindsight} she inserts her poem “Jesaias” into a story about visiting a cathedral with a statue of Jesaias at its portal, later evoking it again in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{168} Wolff, \textit{Hindsight}, 70-77.  \\
\textsuperscript{169} See note 166.  \\
\end{flushright}
the interests of demonstrating how much it resembles a poem by Christa Wolf.\(^{171}\) That both poems Wolff chose to incorporate into her later life writing were drawn from her spiritually focused oeuvre, rather than from the romantic or erotic works she also wrote when she was young, is noteworthy. She offers neither analysis nor reflection alongside the poems when she brings them into her life writing, instead shifting back to the almost unrelated narratives at hand as quickly as possible; they serve as fleeting verifications for her claims to being a poet. And yet when she describes her creative processes in detail in *Hindsight*, it is not these poems she focuses on, but her “love poems.”\(^ {172}\) Wolff might have genuinely felt ‘Die Juden’ and ‘Jesaias’ were her best poems, but the flippancy with which she weaves them into her stories and the fleetingness with which she describes them is at odds with that: the narrative space allocated to the “love poems,” on the other hand, is generous. It is entirely possible that if any reader or correspondent had shown sufficient interest, these poems would have seen republication – in some cases, first-time publication – in the 1970s or 1980s.

If such an interest had been forthcoming, readers may have been surprised to realise Wolff’s early poetry had plenty to say about sexuality: just not necessarily what most of her readers in the 1970s and 1980s may have hoped or expected. In this chapter, through looking at her own poetry and her translations of Baudelaire we can develop a stronger understanding than ever (but by no means exhaustive) of what Wolff found important in the 1920s, and find a context for her style and sentiment in what is already known about literary cultures of that time and place. This, in turn, can help us make more sense of the palpable desperation with which she would list connections, contacts, relationships and influences in her later autobiographical writing, correspondence and interviews. Aside from her 1928 doctoral dissertation on birth control and reproductive health, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, these poems and translations are the only archival fragments that remain from Wolff’s 1920s. As already made evident, though, they are not only relevant to the ‘twenties’ side of the equation of “the seventies meet the twenties,” in which Wolff’s remembered and represented 1920s are investigated in light of what readers had come to expect and want from her by the late 1970s. Their preservation, their occasional redistribution and, above all, their pointed yet vague evocation in Wolff’s own depictions of her past make them very much a part of her 1970s and 1980s, too.


In keeping with what Wolff later told readers in her autobiographies, the contents of the ‘Verse’ folder suggest the early 1920s were, for her, the most poetically creative time of her life. Her engagement with “biblical poetry” as a teenager and perhaps also as a young woman also emerges in these papers: a series of poems typewritten on cards each bears the name of a Biblical figure as its title. It is difficult to date these poems, but amongst them one can find ‘Jesaias’, the poem mentioned earlier for its inclusion in Hindsight. ‘Jesaias’ was written, according to Hindsight, when Wolff was still a teenager – and there is no suggestion she ever returned to writing poems which engaged with scriptural figures. These, then, would be Wolff’s oldest poems, but it is difficult to date the copies held in her archive. At the level of forensics it is worth noting that cardboard does not age as dramatically as thinner paper. Alongside this, the sheen of the cardboard and the solid darkness of much of the type upon it suggest it is possible Wolff re-typed these poems later in life. She seems to have valued her juvenilia highly, having possibly re-typed it and certainly having kept it her whole life. An exhaustive literary biography could one day analyse these works in detail; this study, with its focus on Wolff’s interactions with and disruptions of the writing of sexualities into history, is limited to analysing her “love poems”, including her reworkings of Baudelaire.

The remainder of the contents of PSY/WOL/7: Verse lends itself well to the task of establishing its age. A copy of Vers und Prosa, Franz Hessel’s short-lived literary journal published by Rowohlt, bears its publication date (1924) on its front cover and contains an untitled cycle of verse credited to Lotte Wolff. There are many sheets of poetry, typed on thin paper – in some cases, the purplish, fainter type of a carbon copy. None of these papers bear a date, nor are they filed in any semblance of order, but nonetheless several clues allow us to speculate with a fair amount of confidence that they all date back to the early 1920s. Amongst these manuscript papers one can find drafts for the untitled cycle which appeared in Vers und Prosa, as well as work towards the Baudelaire translations Wolff composed for another issue of the same journal in the same year. Two unpublished original poems by Wolff are also to be found in this folder. Each sheet of paper is similarly aged and yellowed, and all are in the same typeface. The unpublished poems do not appear to have been edited or otherwise reworked; if they were, the draft versions were not kept. As such, it is not possible to assess them critically in terms of their development as poems, but nonetheless they are still remarkably interesting works, both as literature and as historical documents.

173 Wolff, Hindsight, 197.
174 Publication of this journal ceased the same year it began: 1924.
There is only one poem in this folder which can be dated with certainty to any later than the 1920s: a typewritten translation of Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” on a different paper, typed with a different machine. According to Wolff’s recollections in Hindsight, this translation was done during wartime, probably in the early 1940s, in a basement where she spent each night sheltering from the threat of bombs overhead and, apparently for the first time in her life, making friends with working-class people. If we accept the likelihood that the newer-looking typed poems on card are re-typings of very early works, as is certainly the case with ‘Jesaias’, then what we have in PSY/WOL/7 is a tangible but only partial reflection of the storyline put forth by Wolff in her life-writing: she took great interest in reading and writing poetry in her youth, then, during the “time of her life” as a student immersed in a creative and intellectual milieu in Weimar Berlin she actively took part, not just as a translator but as a writer, before the long hours and seemingly secure routine of her work as a doctor became a priority. After only a few years established in her medical career in Berlin, with the rise of Nazism her work in Berlin was suddenly far from secure. She fled, and as she came to terms with this and its aftermath, for a long time she lost all desire to speak or write in German. It is at this point that the archive reflects an absence: the German poems she was encouraged to write in the 1960s by another exiled writer friend according to a story in On the Way to Myself are nowhere to be found. The German-language translations and poetry of the ‘Verse’ folder of Wolff’s archive span a period from the 1910s to the 1940s only.

The analyses which follow will demonstrate how by preserving her early poetry – both published and unpublished, both original and reworked from Baudelaire – Wolff preserved a remarkable wealth of documentation showing ways in which her later stances on sexuality and history, whether through her life-writing or her statements as a public figure, were a reflection of her thoughts and experiences as a young poet in the 1920s.

175 Wolff, Hindsight, 174. In this description she credits “Ode to a Nightingale” to Percy Bysshe Shelley – a reminder that, with autobiographies, one is only ever dealing with the words of an unreliable narrator. Perhaps she had Keats’ poem momentarily confused with Shelley’s “To a Skylark.” In any case, it is Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” which she translated.
176 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 192.
177 See pages 174-175 for elaboration on this in Chapter 4.
2.3 “Feuerlilie”: Wolff’s untitled cycle in Vers und Prosa

With the exception of the two poems she chose to include in On the Way to Myself and Hindsight, the only original poetry of Wolff’s to see publication within her lifetime was a series of eight poems published in 1924 in Vers und Prosa. All untitled, just one word describes them in the journal’s contents page: “Gedichte.”178 For reasons which will soon be apparent, I have decided to refer to these poems in this section’s discussion as the “Feuerlilie” cycle. Vers und Prosa, a short-lived journal edited by Franz Hessel, went out of existence in 1924: the same year it was launched. It is said to have had a great reputation among intellectual circles, but that its exclusivity made it an unsustainable publication.179 Helen Hessel had described issues of the journal as “Heftchen […] voller Leben, kleine Kramläden der Geistigkeit.”180 It had international attention: overseas press described it as a “little monthly […] devoted to all that is strong, fresh, and vital in the work of […] younger writers, known and unknown.”181 Upon its launch, one London periodical announced it as “a magazine which intends to make a serious attempt to create a home for the younger literature, for creative efforts in verse and prose which might otherwise, under present difficult conditions, never see the light of day.”182 Aside from Wolff, contributors included Friedrich Wolf, Anton Schnack, Klabund and Ludwig Strauss – as well as Wolff’s friends Franz Hessel and Walter Benjamin.183

None of Wolff’s poetry has ever been described, let alone assessed. It is impossible to know how the “Feuerlilie” cycle was read in its time: no letters of support or critiques of her poetic works are held amongst her papers at the Wellcome Collection. Wolff’s autobiographies reveal nothing about critical response to these works, beyond unspecific assertions that Franz Hessel had faith in her “literary gift” and encouraged her to write more.184 What follows here is an interpretive close reading of these poems, accompanied later by thoughts on their possible biographical context and its significance. I argue that these verses comprise a cycle, depicting the end of a relationship from the perspective of a numbly

180 Helen Hessel cited in Niedracka, Der Meister der leisen Töne, 136.
181 Hermann George Scheffauer, “A Panorama of German Books,” The Living Age (12/7/1924), 72.
182 Ethel Talbot Scheffauer, “Foreign Notes and Comment,” The Bookman (April 1924), 238.
183 Vers und Prosa 6 (1924).
184 Wolff, Hindsight, 96.
heartbroken anonymous narrator – and that, while the narrating voice remains nondescript, there is reason to interpret its absent, unnamed addressee as a woman. Moving later towards the cycle’s context in Wolff’s 1970s and 1980s life-writing, I will present a case for how this poetry parallels a particularly intense episode in her personal life, and thus lends itself well to being read with the poet herself as the imagined narrator, whether any given reader was aware of her situation or not. As well as selective quotations in the discussion below, the cycle is included in its entirety as an appendix. 185

Each section differs strongly from its neighbour in structure and style, and there is no secondary writing that confirms these verses to be a cycle rather than a cluster of independent poems – after all, there is no secondary writing about these poems at all. 186 Reading every section together, though, it would be very difficult to deny the cyclic, narrative effect of these poems as a sequence. Verses which question and struggle against a loss of love merge into later ones which crash towards a pained acceptance. Certain tropes and images recur across different sections, too: for destiny and fate a star, for the beloved addressee a tiger lily. Fragmented references to parts of bodies recur across verses too, described first in terms of their closeness, then their distance, then their suffering. This cycle takes its narrator on a walk (sometimes literally) through some of the more painful stages of loss in between shock and acceptance. Its varying approaches to structure, form and content reflect an emotionally woozy wavering between tenderness and violence, spiritual introversion and concrete encounters with the city. Its cyclic nature can even be detected in its use of weather imagery to reflect the passing of time. Evocations of bleak weather increase in severity throughout the cycle: a slightly menacing wind through the trees in this first poem gives way to fog, wind and hail in the next, then snow in the fifth. The cruelty (and indifference) of the elements is a topic not revisited again until the eighth and final poem in the cycle. Here the narrator portrays the present moment as a lukewarm summer with “Frühling verpasst” – a sudden time-lapse. The entirely omitted springtime in between the cold and tumultuous season of the earlier verses and the summer declared in the closing poem barely registered in the mind of this momentarily dumbstruck narrator.

185 See Appendix A.
186 In their only reprinting that has taken place so far, they are not recognised as a cycle: only a selection of the poems is included. They are printed alongside an excerpt from Augenblicke verändern uns mehr als die Zeit (the German translation of Hindsight) in which Wolff states most of the poetry she wrote was love poetry dedicated to women. See Liebe und ein starker Geist kennen kein Alter – Phantasie hat keine Zeit: Materialen zur Erinnerung an Charlotte Wolff, ed. Jürgen Minz (Berlin: Charlotte-Wolff-Kolleg, 1998), 18-20.
Another level of cyclic narrativity can be detected from shifts in pronoun usage: in the first verse of the cycle the addressee is ‘Du’ or, otherwise, one half of an implicitly two-person ‘wir’. There is no ‘ich’ in this first verse; the poetic voice expresses itself only as the other half of that ‘wir’. What emerges through this is a sense of unity and togetherness as the departure point of the cycle’s narrative. Drama is absent, at least for the time being. Imagined situations are described in a subjunctive mood, making them seem timeless or perhaps even impossible – in any case, desired by the narrating voice rather than actualised by the collective ‘wir’ of the addressee and the narrator. The near-absence of punctuation, alongside these dreamy subjunctive situations and the rolling, steady breath-like rhythm of the tightly structured stanzas as they each end with ‘zittern’/‘Gittern’/‘umwittern’ give this verse a sense of peaceful quietude, while the subject matter itself hints at this being merely the calm before an emotional storm. The verse carries a sense of impeded, subdued passion. Strong feelings are echoed by faint shifts in a charged atmosphere rather than by anyone else around them: the houses and people the ‘wir’ might touch are distant, abstracted figures in a world that, in the moment, is really only populated by two. A sense of exclusion and isolation is palpable in lines like “stehen wir beide vor Gittern.”

The voice manifests itself as an ‘ich’ for the first time in the second poem of the cycle, an ‘ich’ asking questions and posing imperatives to the addressee. This immediately shifts the tone of the cycle – we are jolted, away from the pensive hypothetical scenarios of the previous verse, into confronting the questions and requests the narrator still has for its addressee. The sudden barrage of these, after the absence of the ‘ich’ in the earlier poem, adds to the intensity of the voice’s need, as if all these questions had been held inside for too long. One literary scholar, Sarah Guest, has commented on Wolff’s autobiographical writing style by highlighting her tendency towards mixed, if not incongruous metaphors, suggesting (politely) that this reflected how Wolff was “not a professional writer.”187 A similar overabundance of not necessarily compatible imagery emerges in this verse too, as it speaks of breasts, floods and children’s play in the space of one brief stanza, before turning instead to an ominous image of black stars, which becomes a recurring trope in the cycle. It could be said that the rush of loosely collaged imagery in this verse is consistent with the overwhelmed urgency of the voice as it opens its mouth as an ‘ich’ and holds forth, at last, with all its rhetorical questions and suppressed thoughts. Of course, it could also be said that Wolff had trouble

187 Sarah Alicia Guest, “Narrating the Self: Women in the Professions in Germany, 1900 – 1945” (PhD thesis, Department of German Studies, University of Birmingham, 2011), 94.
with mixed metaphors, whether writing as a young woman in German or, as per Guest’s observations, as an older woman in English.

This gradual fading and withdrawal of the ‘du’ and strengthening of the presence of the ‘ich’ continues with some steadiness throughout the cycle. Two verses prior to the end of the cycle, there is a brief section free from any rhyming scheme or structure. Different in form to all other parts of the cycle, it sticks out almost like a spoken-word interlude in a song. As the last of the poems to implicitly address the ‘Du’, it reads as an acknowledgement of the addressee’s increasing distance, a tender and reluctant farewell:

Du hast die Seele
Stumm und weiß gemacht
Gib sanfte Decke
Deiner Hand
Der Feuerlilie
Vor den Pforten.

The final two poems in the cycle do not address a ‘Du’ at all – as if the narrator has reached an uncomfortable peace with a voice that no longer reaches the addressee, accepting the reality of their parting. While the cycle incorporates a variety of approaches to structure, form and content (the fragmented free-verse of the fifth and the sixth poems juts out in contrast against the tight alternating rhyme scheme of the second poem, the simple four-line rhyme scheme of the third, and the very strict metre and rhyme in the fourth poem, for instance) the final two poems are identically structured. In these two poems, the flourish of one lengthy line is shadowed by the abruptness of the next: the effect is one of relentless wavering between wordy reflection and quiet sadness. Their main point of difference is in what they address: the penultimate verse is impersonal and didactic in tone, and uses symbolism in an attempt to reflect upon the human condition from quite lofty heights. The final poem in the cycle is decidedly less lofty – in fact, a crash back down to earth, depicting a violently clumsy encounter with the physical world of the city, in diction devoid of symbolic imagery.

The penultimate verse comes across as a lesson to the reader as well as a message for the addressee. Dwelling on a plane of symbolic reflection rather than concrete description, it addresses a possibly universal ‘uns’ rather than the already-farewelled ‘Du’. No mention is made of an ‘ich’: this particular poem is concerned with humanity as a collective, rather than
the narrator’s own situation – at least explicitly. Bearing in mind the ‘lost springtime’
constructed through the narrative progress of weather throughout the cycle, this weatherless,
wholly introspective verse’s place in between the harsh winter and the lukewarm summer
suggests this is where the springtime went. Spent in reflection, unaware of any outside world,
where did this season of reflection take the narrator?

Nicht Leidenschaft, nicht der Opfer Müh’n
Neiget den Stern
Der Mensch allein, der die Gnade verliehn,188
Formt uns von fern.

Atmet sein Mund alle Tiefe ein,
Die uns enthält,
Sind wir schauern vor Blüh’n und klein’
Kindern gesellt.

The physical vulnerability of both the narrator and the addressee, created through their
repeated exposition throughout the cycle to the assault of harshly cold elements (the flood, the
rain, the hail, the snow and the wind), is here transformed into a kind of social, mental
vulnerability. The star imagery’s meaning wavers throughout the cycle and is not always
clear, but seems to always entail an element of fate and destiny – one’s ‘calling,’ whether one
wishes to follow it (as seen in ‘Wen sein Stern verläßt / Der ist keinem Freund’, in the fourth
poem) or escape it (like with ‘Schwarze Sterne stehen’, in the second poem). With this in
mind, the ponderings of the narrator’s lost springtime communicate a belief that fate is
merciless if not irrelevant: in the end, everyone is subject to the pressures of society itself
(‘der Mensch allein’). The phrasing here creates an ambivalence between spirituality and
social conditioning: ‘der Mensch’ is elevated into a godlike position, granted the power of
‘die Gnade verliehn’ and credited with an ability to make people tremble, childlike, beneath
the force of its very breath. It seems unlikely that the ‘Mensch’ in question is specifically
male and intended as a statement on gendered power dynamics: such a reading is of course
possible, but seems at odds with the tone of the poem and with Wolff’s own lifelong use of
the term.189 In any case, it is still humanity being described, rather than any higher power:
what is communicated here, then, is an absence of higher (or lower) powers, be they fate and
destiny (through the ‘Stern’ imagery) or religion (significantly absent through the godlike

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188 This particular clause is grammatically difficult to decipher as it stands, but this is how it was printed in Vers und Prosa
and also in Wolff’s archived manuscript. Likewise, regarding the lack of punctuation at the end of certain lines: this is a
faithful transcription of the published versions of the poems. This is a frequent occurrence in the poems of this cycle, and can
be seen to lend a lingering, pensive and withdrawn note to the voice.
189 Wolff used the term ‘Mensch’ to refer to people in general throughout her life: this can be seen in her 1928 medical school
dissertation as well as in her 1980 interview with Jenny Lacey for the BBC.
positioning of ‘der Mensch’). It is the will, the pressure and the presence of other people, as the daunting collective force of society, oppressing itself through people’s treatment of each other.

In the final poem of the cycle, we swerve instead into a purely physical world. The seasons are evoked once more, as is the narrator’s own corporeality. This clashes – literally – with the physical world of the city, as this verse depicts nothing more than the narrator, perhaps still mentally enclosed within the interiority of the previous verse, bleeding after walking head-first into a lamp-post:

Ich werde ganz verloren sein
Mein Atem steht quer
Das Auge zieht sein Feuer ein
    Der Kopf hängt schwer.

Er stößt an den Laternenpfahl
Die Hand greift leer
Auf der Stirn ein rissiges Mal
    Brennt sehr.

Through its contrast with the previous verse at the level of subject matter, this final poem evokes a sense that simply existing as a physical entity in a concrete world is a potentially violent, alienating experience: a shock. Shock was an important concept in literature and psychoanalytical thought at the time: Benjamin applied it to Baudelaire, using ideas he had read in Freud.190 Wolff, too, was fixated on the idea of shock as integral to creative and emotional development: On the Way to Myself, as will later be discussed, was structured around the idea of “three shocks” productively punctuating the course of Wolff’s life, as she viewed it at the time of writing in the early sixties. Benjamin’s thoughts on shock often endorsed the notion of modern city life as a shock experience in its own right – in which one’s senses and sensitivities are assaulted by the sounds, sights, words, objects and movements of bustling city streets. By closing this poetic cycle with the physicality of an urban shock experience, so soon after immersing the reader in abstract thoughts and emotionally loaded symbolic descriptions, it seems the poet sought to generate an effect of shock upon the reader as well as upon the narrator.

Closure implies a ‘last word’, too – an inevitable sense that the closing message is that which will linger and endure. In effect, this cycle’s structure sees the sadness and subtle brutality of the final poem, with its tangible cityscape and almost slapstick comedic physical disaster, prevail over all that preceded it. While Wolff demonstrates an awareness of (if not mastery over) a diverse range of forms and structures, alongside an ability to evoke Symbolist-like imagery, lofty didacticism and spiritual concern across the cycle through its content, she chooses to bring it to a close on a decidedly modern note in keeping with its context of *Neue Sachlichkeit*: whatever our deep thoughts or troublesome heartbreaks, ultimately we are just bodies trying to stay alive in a city. *Neue Sachlichkeit*, it has been noted, was never a decisive and specific aesthetic approach so much as a tendency:¹⁹¹ this poetic cycle can be seen to tend towards it as it progresses forth to its stark, unadorned close.

There is nothing in the “Feuerlilie” cycle that overtly declares the gender of the addressee, or of the narrator. In terms of traditional symbolism, however, there is enough to suggest the addressee should be read as feminine. Flowers, generally, have been associated with ‘the feminine’ in Western literature for centuries (at least), and the lily’s association with grace and purity is said to extend to the tiger lily – as, at least, a stronger, more forthright, indeed more fiery variation on the virtues associated with white lilies. Its German name, ‘Feuerlilie’, of course evokes fire and thus warmth and eroticism. German literary scholars have also argued that “der Realismus nutzt das Symbol der Lilie hauptsächlich für die Darstellung komplexer und schwieriger Liebesbeziehungen oder unerreichbarer Liebespartner.”¹⁹² Wolff was not writing in the time or context of Realism, but she did stress an image of her younger self as well-read and partial to Dostoyevsky in her later life-writing: she would have had enough exposure to Realist literature to have been aware of such connotations. Her declaration in *On the Way to Myself* that she spent her teenage years reading Trakl, Rilke, Stefan George and Alfred Lichtenstein alongside “the Romantics” allows us to assume a consciousness and decisiveness behind the symbolic allusions that occur in Wolff’s poetry.¹⁹³

Thinking just in terms of the flower itself, its bright orange colour, its large, dense petals, its dramatic stamens and its festive speckles, it stands out aesthetically as the only object of beauty in a poetic cycle that otherwise only evokes the grey and the bleak: barred gates, hailstorms, floods, snow and lamp-posts. The shared vulnerability of the narrator and

the addressee faced with the harshness of the elements is intensified on the addressee’s part when we associate her with this flower. At once bold and fragile, the addressee is still implored to protect the tiger lily (which grows in her head, if we recall the second verse in the cycle) with the gentle cover of her hand as she crosses an unknown threshold, moving further away from the narrator. The departure of the tiger lily thus represents the departure of beauty from the cycle’s narrative – reflected more broadly on a stylistic level by the cycle’s shift away from symbolic imagery towards austere Sachlichkeit.

What of the gender of the narrator, then? The dynamic between narrator and addressee in the “Feuerlilie” cycle is not one of two tiger lilies intertwined. Through the cycle, the narrator and its addressee are entrenched in markedly different situations: the addressee absent, seemingly of her own volition, and evoked through memories of hands and implicitly delicate floral imagery. The narrator affords itself no such tenderness: the cycle closes leaving a lasting impression of its narrator as a seething, reeling fool nursing a forehead wound and a broken heart. Clumsiness, head wounds and intense heartbreak are by no means the sole domain of the masculine, at least not in the world of this poem: nothing in the cycle forces or even gently compels a reader to assume a male narrator. There is, in any case, a great contrast between the narrator’s conduct and experience in the cycle (as a flawed human struggling through an uncaring cityscape) and the addressee’s depiction (as an absent figure associated with grace and beauty). Both are vulnerable to the physical and social cruelty of the outside world, but that is all they have in common in the cycle. Their differences do not encourage any assumption that the narrator and addressee are polarised, either in manner or in gender – just that they are in different positions, as lover and beloved (or heartbroken and heartbreaker).

In a way, there would be little need for readers to wonder about the narrator’s gender: the poet’s name is right there in the by-line in Vers und Prosa, and it is a woman’s name. Faced with a nondescript narrator whose language and message do not suggest otherwise, one tends to imagine a poetic voice that at least resembles what they know of the poet. On this level, Wolff’s published verse was, without much sense of socially enforced coyness, readable as love poetry from one woman to another. Later, particularly in the case of her unpublished poem ‘Furor Sexualis’, I will demonstrate how it is not plausible for readers to assume some semblance of the poet herself in the place of narrator in all of her poems – but, as the next section on the likely biographical and cultural context of the “Feuerlilie” cycle will show, it is
possible and productive to read these particular poems as an expression of Wolff’s personal situation.
2.4 Possible biographical context for the “Feuerlilie” cycle

Most of my poems were love poems written for women.\textsuperscript{194}

The mystery surrounding those waiting hours[…] heightened erotic tension, and created the voltage which powered the poems and translations I wrote at that time. It was then that I translated Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du Mal.\textsuperscript{195}

It is never a given that any poetic narrator equates to the person who wrote it into being. Often, it does not at all, and nor is it obliged to. Keen to demonstrate an awareness of that basic tenet of literary analysis, often we can overlook or dismiss as irrelevant the very possibility of the words of the poetic voice resembling the thoughts and feelings of the poet who created that voice – namely, poetry as a means of self-expression. In a study such as this one, however, concerned with the historiographical significance of literary works, such a pursuit is inherently worthwhile. As this section will discuss, there is reason to interpret the “Feuerlilie” cycle as Wolff’s poetic response to the departure of her “great love” Lisa from Berlin – and thus, from her life. The timing is right, and all Wolff’s retrospective life writing gives the impression that no other romance of hers matched that with Lisa in its intensity. The quote in italics above is Wolff in \textit{Hindsight}, describing what she remembered of the situation in which she translated Baudelaire and wrote her own poems: the “waiting hours” she mentions are for Lisa, and the “voltage” she credits with instigating her creativity is intrinsically linked with Lisa – and eroticism – in this description. It would be excessive to declare in a doubtless tone that the cycle is addressed directly to Lisa, but I argue that these poems can be read as having been at least inspired by the situation Wolff faced with her. I will take some time here to retell the story put forth by Wolff in \textit{Hindsight} as synchronous with (and generative of) the writing of this poetry in the course of providing a plausible back-story of these poems in their cultural-historical context.

Going by Wolff’s later recollections, the story of her and Lisa’s relationship is romantic high drama. This is the story she tells in \textit{Hindsight}: as a teenager, she was infatuated with a photo she had been shown by her then-girlfriend Ida, of another girl who had been her

\textsuperscript{194} Wolff, \textit{Hindsight}, 59.  
best friend in Odessa. Wolff shows no reluctance in depicting her younger self – referred to henceforth as ‘Lotte’ – as hopelessly romantic. She writes this, for instance, of Lotte’s first glimpse of this photograph of a stranger: “I was struck by her face. She had dark hair and an unusually high brow, large black eyes, a Mona Lisa smile, and a sensuous mouth, redolent of an oriental woman.” Ida’s photo of Lisa reminded Lotte of Nastasia Filipovna of Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*, a character she had already fallen for: “one of the most attractive women ever depicted in fiction.” From one photograph and its hints at her favourite Dostoyevsky woman, Lotte was lost in daydreams of all the conversations and encounters she could have with Lisa. By convincing her parents of her (dubious) need to see a sinus specialist in Berlin, she made it to the big city, where she arranged to meet Lisa. Retelling their first meeting, the same physical descriptions return as well as this: “But where did her high brow with its two bulbed prominences come from? This was the forehead of a thinker, reminding me of the sculpture by Rodin. It seemed an oddity in a beautiful woman’s face.” This disproportionate fascination with Lisa’s forehead is echoed in the “Feuerlilie” cycle too, where “Stirn und Mund und Hände” are weighted equally: from those components alone, Wolff writes to evoke a sensuous and cerebral character.

Returning to the *Hindsight* story: back in Danzig and still a schoolgirl, Lotte kept up a correspondence of long letters and poetry with Lisa. She was invited back to Berlin to visit during the holidays – it was on these visits that she was immersed in worlds of art and poetry, including her encounters with Else Lasker-Schüler. Lotte and Lisa’s romance endured from visit to visit, but was left in suspense when Lisa had to return to Russia with her family in 1917. Life went on, of course, and Lotte became a Berliner in her own right: as a medical student, a poet, a part of the world she had once been captivated by as a visitor. In 1923, according to *Hindsight*’s chronology, Lisa was back in town for a while. A married woman and a mother by then, her feelings for Lotte still remained the same, and the time they spent together during this period comes across in Wolff’s lengthy passages about it in *Hindsight* as by far the most intense and emotionally taxing episode in their relationship, if not the entirety of Wolff’s (love-)life. The “Feuerlilie” cycle was published in 1924.

Considering the resemblance of the cycle’s narrative to the story Wolff tells in *Hindsight* of Lisa’s departure, let us first reduce the poetic journey to a brief synopsis:

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197 Ibid.
narrator pines for newly absent addressee, narrator hopes and wishes for a return that never happens, narrator questions the nature of a society that could enforce such an unwilling absence, time is lost in a haze of sadness, and, finally, narrator re-emerges in the physical world of the city, stunned and disillusioned. Going by the story in *Hindsight*, Lisa had been in Berlin for about four months—“It could have been four years […],” Wolff wrote, “the elasticity of time had been stretched to such an extent that I lost count of days or months”200—when her husband made a sudden appearance and the dynamic between Lisa and Lotte soured and saddened. Before long, Lisa, husband and child were back in Russia permanently, and Lotte was despondent. Wolff describes being so severely depressed that she was at risk of failing her final examination—but losing herself in her studies eventually proved a decent enough distraction.201

She and Lisa did eventually have one more reunion, under circumstances so adventurous and dramatic they were far easier to narrate in prose than in verse: Wolff first achieved this with the chapter “A Journey into Russia” in *On the Way to Myself*, which will be discussed later in this thesis for its significance as, for a long time prior to 1980, the extract of writing that Wolff would direct anyone towards if they asked her about lesbianism (in their own words) in her past. It is a story that entails high adventure, danger, prostitution, bisexuality, sanatoriums, Russian spies, an open-minded lack of romantic possessiveness that could today be described as polyamory, a lecture on film theory—and no mention whatsoever of ‘lesbianism’ or any other sense of sexual identity or community. Had the verses of this cycle made it into print beyond *Vers und Prosa*—rediscovered, for instance, amongst the foraging for traces of lesbian and gay history in the seventies and eighties, and republished in an anthology to suit—it is not hard to imagine how a critical response may have read: Wolff was a lesbian, this was a lesbian relationship, those were of course greatly marginalised and suppressed by society, thus Wolff’s love poetry speaks of secrecy and barred gates, obligatory lies and misery.

As we know, however, and as Wolff consistently stressed in her later role as a “period piece” and public figure, not every relationship between two women in the time and place of her twenties was treated in the same way by society or conceived of in the same terms by whoever was involved. To entertain a pointed hypothetical situation briefly: if more of Wolff’s unpublished verses were ever found, one day we could yet discover how she would

201 Ibid.
have poetically treated a separation from a woman in a situation closer to her own – someone like her friend Ruth, for instance, who Wolff remembered in *Hindsight* as a rival as well as a friend, someone whose friendship sometimes “spilled over into eroticism” as they danced, got into physical fights and wrote poetry to each other.202 Those poems would have likely been very different to the “Feuerlilie” cycle: none, however, remain archived.

Thinking about her selective re-typing and redistribution of her early poetry much later on in the 1970s and 1980s, it is possible that Wolff chose not to actively promote and redistribute (or even re-type) the “Feuerlilie” cycle due to the strong likelihood of it being interpreted as a poem ‘about lesbians’. The misery and heartbreak evoked in the cycle are implied at one point to be the result of humanity’s unfairness in general (in the penultimate verse), but across the poetry more broadly, the narrator’s sad situation is portrayed as deeply personal, not collective. Lisa was someone whose story may well have evaded the recognition of history (queer or otherwise) were it not for Wolff’s writing. She was married and had a child: two factors that certainly do not prevent anyone from being attracted to their own gender, but do make it less likely that it will be recognised by history or society. There is no indication at any point in Wolff’s writing that Lisa ever thought or talked about herself using any of the vocabularies of sexuality and identity that were used by some Berliners at the time. It follows that in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the era in which Wolff seemed through her media presence as if she would have been thrilled to never hear the word ‘lesbian’ again, Charlotte Wolff would have felt a sense of protectiveness towards these poems, reluctant to subject them to their likely interpretation.

Ultimately, the question of why Wolff kept her early poetry to herself, despite having preserved it well, and even at times when she was intent to stress her own personal literary history to her 1970s and 1980s readerships, is a question that cannot be answered here. Wolff may have struggled to answer it herself. Around 1939, on the topic of love between women in Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin wrote that “die lesbische Liebe trägt die Vergeistigung bis in den weiblichen Schoß vor. Dort pflanzt sie das Lilienbanner der ‘reinen’ Liebe auf, die keine Schwangerschaft und keine Familie kennt.”203 A lily-like banner of pure, intense love that knows no pregnancy and no family: one wonders if his friend Lotte Wolff and her love troubles, which he would have heard so much about, and her poetry which he would have...

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surely read (the next section, on translating Baudelaire, will attest to this), had been on his mind when he wrote that. It would be presumptuous and unproductive to declare the ‘Feuerlilie’ cycle was certainly about the poet herself and her situation with Lisa, but this much is certain enough: Wolff wrote this cycle, its narrator is deliberately left ungendered, its addressee is implicitly feminine, and the narrative’s arc from anguish to a cold city reality has a lot in common with the story Wolff told in Hindsight about Lisa’s departure from Berlin in 1923. The past several decades of historiography have recovered plenty of queer cultural remnants from cabarets, nightclubs and novels – but Wolff’s poetry, written and published in the milieu of her friends Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel, reflects a continuing need for histories of literature and histories of sexuality to acknowledge their intrinsic connections to each other. The very existence of Wolff’s poetry – arguably love poetry between two women – in Vers und Prosa sheds new light on both: it is the product of a community bound by ideas, not by a sense of sexual identity.
2.5 “Was soll ich noch von furor sexus schreiben?”: sexology and the city in two unpublished poems by Charlotte Wolff

Wolff’s unpublished poems from the early 1920s reveal intriguing insights into how her immersion in Berlin’s café and bar cultures intersected with her own thoughts and feelings, as well as the swelling proliferation of sexological thought and terminology that was part of her world as a reader, a thinker and a student of medicine. She wrote poetry in the language of sexology, and this reflects how her engagement with poetry and her involvement in the world of sexual medicine were not at odds with each other as we might assume if trying to work with the conventions of narrative. The words and ideas of sexual science were, for a time, part of her poetic voice. The effects of overlapping these words with her world were, in this time, part of her poetry. Importantly, the stance that emerges towards this language of sexology in Wolff’s poetry is ambiguous if not negative: as will soon emerge, their use is blasé and detached in one poem and parodic in another. In Wolff’s poetry, the narrator never uses sexological terms to describe itself – and thus, to whichever extent a reader is content to read certain poems of Wolff’s as self-narrated, while these archives of verse demonstrate Wolff’s awareness of, and engagement with scientifically devised terms of sexual identity in the 1920s, rather than suggesting she identified with these words, her poetic narrators’ positioning away from them reflects a lack of identification.

In the ‘Verse’ folder amongst her papers at the Wellcome Collection, two pieces stand out as testament to this: the poems “Café” and “Furor Sexualis.” “Café” is clearly located in and descriptive of people and places in Wolff’s world. Its materiality offers plenty to a reader interested in the locations and crowds of the past as well as showing us more of Wolff’s inner world and how she related to the outer. “Furor Sexualis” appears to be a mocking commentary on what it means to write scientifically about sexuality. Both deal with collectives, with women, and with sexuality, but each presents a very different treatment of those general themes and the two poems do not appear to represent the same narrative voice.

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204 A few years before writing her study of historiography which transcends such assumptions and is, in so many ways, at the heart of this thesis, Atina Grossmann included Wolff in a broader study of German women doctors in exile, in which she was cast as “Charlotte Wolff, an unabashedly ‘out’ lesbian, [who] combined a hectic life of medical practice by day and the gay subculture at night.” (‘German Women Doctors,’ 78). This forgivable wonderment – how did she do it? – reflects certain assumptions about what it meant to be a doctor and what it meant to be an ‘unabashedly ‘out’ lesbian,” which Grossmann’s later work put into question.
In advance of reading these two poems, it is crucial to remember the ways in which the cultural meanings of sexual terminologies in Wolff’s younger years differed from vocabularies which were in currency by the 1970s and 1980s – even when the words themselves, on their surface, were near-identical. Chapter One’s discussions have shown how it would be a tough if not futile task to precisely date the emergence of the term ‘lesbian’ in the sense it is usually understood today. Obviously enough, its origins lie in the work and legacy of Sappho of Lesbos – but just as Sappho’s poetic fragments have meant different things to different readers, likewise the transformation of a literary allusion into a fixed identity category would by no means be a straightforward process. As will be discussed later in this chapter in regards to Wolff’s translations of Baudelaire, the word ‘lesbian’ (and its French and German equivalents) was still in flux between being a literary allusion and an optional, descriptive identity category in Wolff’s 1920s. While widely understood, it was not a term everyone used. Nor, as was already established in the discussion chapter, was it one that every woman who loved other women (instead of or as well as men) saw as applicable to her own sense of self or situation.

It is plausible to imagine the young Wolff as a student, as a writer, and as a scholar engaged with literature and thought, reaching for a dictionary from time to time in Danzig and in Berlin. What would she have found, in terms of sexuality and its vocabulary? Plenty more than one might assume if starting out from an English-language context. As Robert Beachy has said, “the love that dared not speak its name, as Oscar Wilde put it, had many names, at least in German.” This echoes truth even at the level of the reference shelf. It has been written that the Oxford English Dictionary shied away from mentioning lesbianism by that name until 1976, despite pleas from within their ranks as early as 1933 for the dictionary to honestly reflect language as it was used. If the sixth edition of Meyers Lexikon were sitting on a bookshelf at the Wolff homestead or in the library at her school, from a very young age she could have read of ‘lesbische Liebe (Tribadie)’ and understood it as “Befriedigung des

205 For a discussion that predates Wolff’s era but speaks volumes on just how mutable the meaning of ‘Sappho’ has been in German literary scholarship, see Joan DeLean, “Sex and Philology: Sappho and the Rise of German Nationalism.” In Re-reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission, ed. Ellen Greene. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 122-145. Similarly, Diana Collecott has been cited by Doan and Garrity as one of the first scholars to recognise that the word ‘sapphic,’ in English-speaking circles around the turn of the twentieth century, had multi-layered meanings. These addressed “aesthetics and intersubjectivity as well as sexual practise, with all that these involve for women in a patriarchal culture.” – that is to say, only certain women who loved women were deemed, and deemed themselves, ‘sapphic’ or ‘lesbian.’ Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.


Geschlechtstriebes zwischen zwei weiblichen Personen."^{208} This clinical description was devoid of judgment. In that same dictionary, she could have read of the adjective ‘bisexuell’ as pertaining to anything that was “beide Geschlechter habend, hermaphroditisch”, particularly plants (but not excluding people).^{209} This definition, plants included, was still at the forefront of Wolff’s mind when she was pressed for elaboration on her thoughts on bisexuality by unsympathetic, religious and sexually conservative listener-callers during a 1980 interview for the BBC.^{210} This is yet another small example of how Charlotte Wolff’s 1970s theories on sexuality and gender, which endorsed a flexible, even temporal approach to gender and sexual identity in an era when ideas such as ‘womanhood’ and ‘homosexuality’ were more often considered innate or, in any case, fixed, her ideas were actually sourced from earlier times – something she would readily admit.^{211}

If Wolff had turned to the *Grosse Brockhaus* in 1932 she would have found the exact same definition for ‘lesbische Liebe’ which appeared in that earlier *Meyers* – but this time, however, darkened by sad footnotes of the times and how they worsened: “Die [lesbische Liebe] wird nach deutschem Recht nicht bestraft ( -> Homosexualität), dagegen ist sie strafbar nach S. 129 des österr. StGB, und nach dem Schweizer Strafgesetzentwurf von 1918.”^{212} Unsurprisingly, the entry on ‘lesbische Liebe’ is brief and best read as a supplement to the main course, ‘Homosexualität.’ It is in this entry that the 1932 *Brockhaus* does its encyclopaedic best to relay all the popular beliefs of the time, pertaining to men, women and a few gender variants, too. Homosexuality of the early 1930s German reference-shelf variety had these as its synonyms: ‘konträre Sexualempfindung,’ ‘Inversion,’ ‘gleichgeschlechtliche Liebe’ and ‘auf das gleiche Geschlecht gerichteter Geschlechtstrieb.’^{213} Among men it could be referred to more specifically as ‘Päderastie,’ so proclaims the *Brockhaus*, and among women, ‘lesbische Liebe’. Here there is no insinuation that ‘Päderastie’ strictly meant anything more than sex between men: this will soon be relevant in discussion of Wolff’s poem “Café.”

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^{208} *Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexikon* v. 12 (Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, 1908), 438. The cited definition could be translated as “gratification of the sex drive between two female persons.”

^{209} *Meyers*, v.2, 907.

^{210} Wolff and Lacey, *Nightline*.


^{212} *Der Grosse Brockhaus* v. 11 (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus Verlag, 1932), 334. “Lesbian love is not penalised under German law, however it is liable to prosecution under S. 129 of the Austrian penal code, and under the Swiss penal code bill of 1918.”

^{213} It is especially hard to ‘translate’ the words of a different time and perhaps also a different worldview, but all we can do is try: for these, I would use ‘contrary sexual feeling, inversion, same-sex love and ‘sex drive directed to the same gender’ (a phrase still used today: ‘same-sex attraction’).
In this same 1932 entry, Magnus Hirschfeld is quickly credited as having suggested ‘drittes Geschlecht’ as an all-encompassing alternative to the many specifically gendered terms on offer. This is a good example of the dilution that happens when an idea becomes an encyclopaedic reference in any time or place (or medium).\textsuperscript{214} In one sentence, the Brockhaus of 1932 swiftly declares that older beliefs in homosexuality as an innate condition were being phased out in favour of new (and psychoanalytical) explanations, and yet just as swiftly and somewhat paradoxically goes on to report in detail on the physiologically ‘effeminate’ constitution of some male homosexuals, and the ‘Viraginität’\textsuperscript{215} of some among the females.\textsuperscript{216} This Brockhaus homosexuality was linked to sadism, masochism and other fetishes, and insofar as it manifested itself as a neurosis, was controllable if not curable.

None of these German dictionaries’ attempts at cataloguing sexualities in the earlier parts of the twentieth century incorporates the idea of ‘lesbisch’ corresponding to a noun describing women who loved women. The earliest dictionary appearance I could find of ‘Lesbierin’ – the noun – was in a volume from 1969: “Lesbierin - Frau, die zu einer anderen Frau sexuelle Zuneigung empfindet; dazu lesbisch.”\textsuperscript{217} Of course, that does not mean the noun was never used beforehand. The Oxford situation described earlier is proof of how dictionaries are as bound by ideology, social prejudice and its limitations as any other book. They are not transparent measures of language and its use in society, and would be closer to the opposite when it comes to the vocabularies of sexuality beyond whichever social (and legal) boundaries are drawn up in the time and place any dictionary is compiled. What do the seemingly detached and objective definitions of ‘lesbische Liebe’ from the very start of the twentieth century tell us, then? A very coarse narrative could be traced out from these dictionary-defined spectres of how love between women was put into words (and, thus, thought about) in twentieth-century Germany: from ‘lesbische Liebe,’ with no nouns in sight, to the same but with a heavy appendix of criminal-code admonishments, to, by the end of the sixties, a noun taking precedence over any adjectival description. The difference between the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{214} Magnus Hirschfeld’s Berlins Drittes Geschlecht (Berlin: Seemann, 1904) begins with his clear declaration he finds the term ‘drittes Geschlecht,’ “der schon im alten Rom gebräuchlich war,” far from ideal but still a lot better than the other, more recently coined word doing the rounds: homosexuell. And this, all for the simple and sane reason that Hirschfeld felt that to describe someone in terms of a sexual act would have the unfair effect of making it sound as if they were having sex all the time. This has also been noted by Brennan (“Charlotte Wolff’s Contribution to Psychology,” 78.). Hirschfeld saw the whole idea of speaking about a ‘drittes Geschlecht’ by that or any other name as a ‘Notbehelf’, a makeshift term, better than nothing but never quite satisfactory. Wolff, overall, felt the same.
\textsuperscript{215} A term they defined as entailing “meist nicht nur eine unvollkommene Entwicklung der inneren Geschlechtsorgane mit schwacher oder ganz fehlender Menstruation, sondern ähnelt auch in der Ausbildung der sekundären Geschlechtsmerkmale einen Mann” – “for most, not only an incomplete development of the inner sexual organs with weak or completely absent menstruation, but secondary gender characteristics which resemble, in their development, those of a man.” Gross Brockhaus, v. 19, 605-606.
\textsuperscript{216} In some ways, this is reminiscent of how Wolff would later try to talk of hormonal and social influences in the same breath, much to the annoyance of those ideologically bound to a belief in one and a refusal of the other.
\textsuperscript{217} Wörterbuch der deutsche Gegenwartssprache, v. 3 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag,1969), 2355.
\end{footnotes}
purpose of adjectives and of nouns should be obvious: adjectives describe, nouns define. On a
certain level, that was Charlotte Wolff’s great issue with the development of sexual theories
and the writing of sexuality’s history in the 1970s and 1980s.

Another important word to consider in advance of reading “Café” is lila. Lila is
usually translated into English as lavender or mauve, but neither of these words evoke the
exact same sense, so this discussion will focus on lila rather than any possible translation of it.
The collective depicted in ‘Café’ dances to “lila Psalmen,” and the significance of this colour
must not be overlooked. In Wolff’s Berlin, lila was recognised by many as the colour of the
queers: the Päderasten, the lesbische Frauen, the drittes Geschlecht, the happily married
people whose nights at the bars were part of their happiness, the fetishists, and the countless
other people who never matched their erotic lives to nouns or adjectives. The allusion to lila
in Wolff’s poem offers us an opportunity to examine claims she made, much later in life, that
in the 1920s she was unaware of much of the cultural material that was later rediscovered by
researchers in search of a gay and lesbian past. Songs, films and magazines reclaimed in
1970s and 1980s historical projects as emblematic of Berlin’s 1920s sexual subculture had, so
it seemed, gone unnoticed by Wolff.

On the colour lila and its collective sexual symbolism, in Ruth Margaret Roellig’s
1928 book Berlins lesbische Frauen: “Irgendwer hat einmal das ganze abseitige Getriebe
derer Menschen, die weder schwarz noch weiß sind, als ein ‘Bild in Lila’ bezeichnet, und so
hat sich wohl der Begriff dieser zarten, weichen, halb unausgesprochenen Farbe auf die ganze
Bewegung übertragen. Man spricht von der ‘Lila Nacht’ von Berlin, kennzeichnet Zugehörige
jener Kaste als ‘lila’ – ja, es gibt ein Bundeslied, ‘Das Lila-Lied.’”218 In the early 1980s, a
correspondent of Wolff’s announced she would spare her from what she saw as the banality of
the newly republished version of Roellig’s book, writing this to Wolff: “Ich habe Dir diese
Buch nicht geschickt und Dich auch in diesem Vorwort nicht erwähnt, weil ich dieses ganzes
Buch als banal betrachte […] Es hat nichts mit Wissenschaft, nichts mit neuen Erkenntnissen
[…] zu tun.”219 There is plenty of opportunity for “neue Erkenntnisse” to occur in reading and
researching Berlins lesbische Frauen, and this correspondent would have thought so too: her
issue is with the reception, in 1981, of Roellig’s book as a document of a lesbian history

218 Ruth Roellig, Berlins lesbische Frauen (1928, reprinted as Lila Nächte: Die Damenklubs im Berlin der Zwanziger Jahre,
which sought to depict a world in which thoughts on sexuality and identity in the 1920s, at
their essence, matched the assumptions of scholars in the 1980s.220

The “Lila Lied” was inspired by Richard Oswald’s 1919 film *Anders als die Anderen,* arguably the first film campaigning for the rights of sexual minorities. Despite the film having been co-written by (and co-starring) Magnus Hirschfeld, with regret Wolff told one of her 1970s correspondents that she had been entirely unaware of Richard Oswald’s films at the time.221 This was in the course of an exchange of letters in which two young researchers in Berlin wrote to Wolff, hoping to locate her past in amongst all the cultural references from 1920s Berlin ‘lesbian history’ that had thus far been unearthed by their research. Had Charlotte Wolff read Anna Elisabet Weirauch’s 1919 novel about girls with girlfriends, *Der Skorpion,* for instance – and as a writer, did she associate with Weirauch? Did she read the queer periodical *Die Freundin,*? The answer to all those questions was ‘no’: an ambivalent ‘no’ in regards to Weirauch, and a bemused and slightly wistful ‘no’ in response to the *Freundin* questions.222 Almost surprisingly, it seems nobody ever asked Charlotte Wolff in the 1970s or 1980s what the colour *lila* meant to her in the 1920s, or if she sang the ‘Lila Lied’. There is no suggestion in her autobiographies that the song was a part of her life – but nor does she suggest she was aloof from popular culture. In any case, when she wrote “Café,” Wolff would have been aware of the association between *lila* and the erotic cultures within which she was involved but not immersed. In a 1979 interview not published until 1997, Wolff had been asked to describe a series of bars she frequented in the 1920s: she described the décor of one bar as “elegant, es war die berühmte lila Farbe, die immer mit schwul verbunden ist.”223 *Lila,* it seems, had been an erotic symbol in Wolff’s world which meant enough for her to write it into a poem. With all these aspects considered, let us now see how “Café” and “Furor sexualis” make use of this vocabulary of sexual terminologies and symbols.

220 In the 1994 edition of the republication of *Berlins lesbische Frauen as Lila Nächte,* the editor Adele Meyer admitted to having excised a “heutzutage […] höchst befremdlich klingenden” (“these days highly inappropriate-sounding”) foreword by Magnus Hirschfeld from the 1981 version. The 1994 edition saw it re-introduced “dem historischen Dokument zuliebe”: *Lila Nächte,* 7.
221 Charlotte Wolff to Eva Rieger, 11 February 1978, SLA.
222 Charlotte Wolff to Eva Rieger, 6 October 1977, SLA.
2.5.1 “Café”

Rot und Palmen
Wenig Paederasten
Wir hören tanzend
Diese lila Psalmen
Und suchen uns
   In süße Rollen
   Einzutasten.

Viel schwarze Köpfe und Chinesenhand
Münder rot verzogen in ein Lied
Auch eine Puppe an der roten Wand
Mann? oder Weib? oder etwa Hermaphrodit?

Soll ich den Abend im Café ve[r]wüsten
Der Mund quillt auf, das Auge irrit
Die Luft stößt sich an verhaltenuen Lüsten
Nachts wird der Traum verwirrt.

Viele flehen um ein Stück Himmel
Ihr Atem jammert und steht
Aus dunkler Stimmen kreisend Gewimmel
Löst sich bald ein Gebet

Keine Rettung von oben und unten
Der Pfeil springt in Leere hinein
Und von all den Tr[f]äumen den bunten224
Bleibt in der Hand ein Stein

One particularly striking aspect of “Café” is how, from its very first stanza onwards, it makes use of sexological terms like Päderast and Hermaphrodit in the course of flatly, inexpressively describing scenery. In Wolff’s 1920s, as discussed above, the term Päderast did not necessarily connote anything beyond a man who had sex with other men.225 The more pathological, sinister and predatory overtones of the word as we would perceive it today are not implicit in the text. The structure of the stanza seems intent on casting these men as part of the furniture, a passive and subordinate presence: they are grouped, by phrasing, together with the red and the palm trees rather than with the ‘wir’ of the following line. Their unimposing presence is stressed by the use of ‘wenig’ as a quantifier. This invites readers to assume the

224 In the original manuscript the amended words read, respectively, as ‘vewusten’ and ‘Traumen.’ As with the transcription of the “Feuerlilie” cycle earlier, the transcription above is a faithful replication of its original: in this case, the unpublished manuscript found in WC PSY/WOL/7. Punctuation is only included where it was present in the archived copy.
225 This is not to say it was never seen as suggestive of a preference for much younger men: this too was commonly understood. John Henry Mackay’s novel Der Puppenjunge (1926, republished Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1999) is a detailed document of what it meant to be seen as and to see oneself as a Päderast in Berlin in the early 1920s.
collective ‘wir’ in question excludes the Päderasten, and perhaps also the ambiguously
gendered prostitute at the wall. The inclusion of that second figure, while implicitly depicted
as part of the scenery rather than the collective at the centre of the poem, opens the possibility
of the crowd embracing expressions of gender beyond those two most popular categories of
“Mann? – oder Weib?” The question-marks themselves render those categories somewhat
arbitrary.

That first stanza creates an ambiguous eroticism amongst the crowd it depicts. As the
poem continues, it depicts this crowd as they seek but do not quite succeed to make contact
with each other; the poet creates a tense build-up to the fulfilment of their collective desires.
Any individual experience falls by the wayside in this poem: the next stanza tells of “Viel
schwarze Köpfe und Chinesenhänder226 / Münder rot verzogen in ein Lied”, a singing, grabbing
entity comprised of the sum of those parts, not wholly formed people as individual subjects.
The verse shifts then, momentarily, to the perspective of the poet’s ‘ich’, removed if just
briefly from the crowd of heads and hands and mouths. The subject speaks, and time suddenly
takes form in words as it clatters forward from evening to night: “das Auge irrt,” as time
chops and changes, and the narrating ‘ich’ is perhaps drunk or otherwise overwhelmed as it
takes in the dense atmosphere of desires: “Die Luft stößt sich an verhaltnen Lüsten / Nachts
wird der Traum verwirrt.”

As already discussed, the description of the café’s music in this poem as “lila
Psalmen” likely connotes the symbolic colour of Weimar Berlin’s queer subcultures. Wolff
wrote from a standpoint aware of broader cultural references, though – as stressed in all her
later life-writing, she was well-versed in canons of poetry, philosophy and religious scripture.
She would possibly have been aware of a place for lila in some of these literatures, too –as a
colour evocative of spirituality.227 The subject matter of ‘Café’, as its first stanza’s evocation
of sexual and gender categories gives way to a sense of collective spirituality in later stanzas
(“Aus dunkler Stimmen kreisend Gewimmel / Löst sich bald ein Gebet”), is a blurred fusion
of the erotic and the spiritual. Wolff’s choice of lila as a descriptor in this poem can be seen to
play on this double meaning, in alignment with the simultaneously erotic and spiritual
atmosphere depicted.

226 It is unclear if ‘Chinesenhänder’ refers to anything beyond its literal meaning.
227 The Metzler Lexikon literarischer Symbole (407) describes how lila (as Violett), being a mixture of blue and red hues, has
been used to evoke equilibrium between – even transcendence of – polarities, whether of ‘male’ and ‘female’ or of ‘heaven’
and ‘earth’. 
The poem’s closing stanza describes the collective’s prayer as an arrow shot into a void, with no salvation offered from above, nor below – but despite this, ‘Café’ does not quite suggest damnation or hopelessness. Heaven and hell have nothing to offer the people of this poem; whatever they are after is in that space in between the above and the below, the ground upon which they stand. The closing lines of the poem declare that “von all den [Träumen] den bunten / Bleibt in der Hand ein Stein.” Whether a cold hard rock or a precious gem, whether something to be treasured or thrown through a window, a stone is something tangible, something there. It might not compare to the brightness of their dreams – indeed, it could be read as a direct contrast – but it is real. The ambiguity of what the stone could connote lends it a certain power: as the poem closes there, leaving the people it depicts grasping something tangible in their hands, it is left to the reader to imagine what this is and what the crowd of the poem chooses to do with it. As Wolff wrote much later in Hindsight, “heaven was not somewhere above us, but on earth, in the German metropolis.” That was the line that had lingered in Atina Grossmann’s mind when she wrote in 2007 of how we still need to ask what it was that Wolff meant when she said things like that to her audiences and readerships in the 1970s and 1980s. This poem reads as an endorsement of that same sentiment Wolff expressed so many years later, and, similarly to the ‘Feuerlilie’ cycle, it closes leaving its readers focused on the tangible and the possible, rather than the symbolic and imaginary.

Reading this poem parallel to Wolff’s autobiographical recollections of its time of writing, it is possible that “Café” was written as a reflection on an at once erotic and spiritual experience that took place regularly at one of her favourite bars: a ritualistic, circling dance called the “Schwarze Messe.” This ritualistic dance was of so much importance to Wolff, at least by the time she wrote her autobiographies in reflection, that it dominates her descriptions in both On the Way to Myself and Hindsight of the 1920s bar cultures she was part of. This is how she described the dance in Hindsight:

A strange creature, a tall woman who wore a black sombrero and looked like a man, ruled the dancers with an eagle’s eye. She was of a striking beauty. We called her Napoleon. […] She called us out to join her, and we arranged ourselves like a garland around her. She stood in the middle of the circle and uttered commands in her hypnotic voice. We stepped forwards and backwards, holding a drink with one hand and our neighbour with the other. This went on and on until we got the command to drink and throw the empty glasses over our shoulders.  

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228 Wolff, Hindsight, 66.
229 Grossmann, “Continuities and Ruptures,” 214.
231 Wolff, Hindsight, 78.
The same ritual was also mentioned in On the Way to Myself in Wolff’s description of what she phrased, intriguingly, as “a queer life by night”: ‘queer’ was a couple of decades away from being recognisably reclaimed as a positive rather than a pejorative term for gay people and the like, but Wolff’s usage of it here, in 1969, is neither pejorative nor sexless. Her description of the Schwarze Messe in this earlier autobiography ends so: “The symbolism of the performance is obvious. There and at other clubs, through evenings and nights, the tunes had that nostalgic flavour which goes with the end of an era.”

Wolff’s description in Hindsight of the clientele at the bar which hosted the Schwarze Messe also resonates with the way she configured the Päderasten and the lone prostitute in amongst the scene-setting in the first stanza of “Café”: “Apart from prostitutes, the women present were dyed-in-the-wool lesbians... It was the real thing, all right, in spite of the presence of men. Most of them belonged to one or other sexual variation anyway. Their presence was in line with the set-up of all lesbian clubs in the twenties. The love which dared not show its face quite openly used men as a camouflage.” That excerpt, as well as echoing the scene set by the first stanza of “Café,” is exemplary of the frequent but inconsistent moments in Hindsight where Wolff, writing for a late twentieth century audience, opts to uncomplicatedly refer to people in the 1920s as lesbians. This sometimes occurs a few pages away from utterances like “Labels like ‘lesbian,’ ‘hetero’ or ‘homosexual’ were out of place in my world”.

The decision to title this poem “Café” and the involvement of a vocabulary of sexological terms very much of 1920s Berlin invite readers in any time and place to imagine the depicted scenario as worldly rather than abstract. The sense of earthly, erotic spirituality it evokes is grounded in specific physical detail, and might even refer to the ritualistic circle dance Wolff took so much care to depict in her autobiographies in 1969 and 1980. “Café”

233 Wolff, Hindsight, 66.
234 Wolff, Hindsight, 78.
235 Wolff, Hindsight, 60.
shows us evidence, in verse, of Wolff’s engagement with the culture of sexual science that thrived in Berlin in the 1920s, and reflects with lively immediacy, through its descriptions of a self-answering collective prayer and its closing sense of realistic promise, the same notion of ‘heaven on earth’ that, written again so many years later in *Hindsight*, sounded like a platitude. Its voice is that of an insider – but, as will be demonstrated in discussion of the next poem, “Furor Sexualis,” this was not always the case with Wolff’s poetry, even when it sought to describe eroticism between women.

2.5.2 **“Furor Sexualis”**

Viel kleine Schäfchen, ein paar Böcke
Schwül ist die Luft und flach das Land
Der Teufel fuhr den Weibern in die Röcke
Sie lächeln müd und sind schon halb erkannt

Sie tanzen zage etwas schwere Reigen
In Wäldern werden sie lasciv
Sie möchten gerne sanft Verhülltes zeigen
Man lagert sich gefällig etwas schief.

Die Zahl des Möglichen in dieser Schar
Ist gross, ein Durcheinandertreiben
Wie man auch fällt es gibt ein Paar
Was soll ich noch vom furor sexus schreiben?

*Furor sexualis* is a term that appears in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis.* It never makes it into a glossary there, nor is Krafft-Ebing’s use of it necessarily its first appearance in sexological thought, but it is likely where Wolff encountered the term – she recalled having read his work at some point while still a young woman in Berlin. Its definition is grasped easily enough by the resemblance of the Latin to the English: a sexual frenzy, an uncontrollable, violent sexual drive. It has also been argued that it was, at one point, an early and not so enduring term for what we now call sexuality. Whether meaning frenzied sexuality or sexuality in itself, *furor sexualis* was a term from a time of frenzied sexual taxonomy. It’s also the name of another of Wolff’s unpublished poems: one which seems, remarkably, to satirise the field of sexology.

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237 Wolff, *Hindsight*, 60; 104.
The poem is only three stanzas long, the rhyming scheme is conventional, the mood is distant and unemotional (if not ironic): stylistically, as well as in terms of its tone, it could be compared to the satirical poetry of Walter Mehring (another friend of Wolff’s) and perhaps even to the subtly ascerbic rhymes of Mascha Kaléko. The overall message of the piece seems to be that sex is difficult, if not absurd, to write about. The tone of bemused detachment is brought about by the distance of the voice from the third-person plural ‘sie,’ and the even more detached, reporter-like ‘man.’ This removed, mocking voice presents an erotic scenario in which women in a trancelike state dance, reveal themselves and find ways to be sexual with each other – with countless options as to how they might configure themselves. Only in the final line does the voice insert its own presence: “was soll ich noch von furor sexus schreiben?”

Like ‘Café’, this poem is another depiction of collective eroticism: this time with the collective in question clearly depicted as women. It is never made clear whether the animals mentioned in the first line are intended as a presence in their own right (as actual farm animals, intended as scenery) or a comparison, introducing the people of this verse first figuratively as these animals – but the latter makes more sense. In this verse, disjointedly and hazily, readers are invited to act as voyeurs observing the ways of these creatures. This conflation of humans with animals, together with the natural landscape suggested in the next line (“Schwül ist die Luft und flach das Land”) quickly establishes the idea that in this verse, this poem deals with the idea of sexuality as a part of nature rather than as a social and cultural experience. This is at odds with the cultural artefacts which emerge throughout the verse: the women are skirted, they dance “schwere Reigen” rather than instinctively and freely, the influence of a devil is suggested, and the final line evokes worlds of science and writing.

Only one overtly masculine subject is included in the poem: “der Teufel”, said to have driven into the women through their skirts. In keeping with the poem’s title, these women are not acting of their own accord. The devil makes them do what they do; their actions are the result of furor sexualis. The devil in this line is – quite interestingly, when all Wolff’s other verses are considered, be they original or Baudelairean – the only Biblical or moralistic moment in this poem. Here he seems more of an allegorical devil of carnal drives than a deeply judgemental devil of hell and damnation. Overall, this verse is devoid of any concern with heaven or hell, angels or devils: once this devil’s presence within the women is established, he is no longer mentioned.
In the final line, the narrating voice reveals itself as a present, real observer/voyeur rather than an ‘objective’ narrator which feigns authority through its complete absence. Imagine, for instance, the difference between a documentary where the voice-over narrator spouts expertise and is never seen, and one where the narrator is seen on camera, pondering how to make documentaries. That is the shift that takes place in the final line of ‘Furor Sexualis’: an exposure of the source of the voice, and thus a diminishing of the voice’s authority as it is ultimately reduced to a subjective, first-person perspective. Through its positioning away from the observed ‘they’ of the collective of women, and through its awkward and even confused-sounding observations (“Die Zahl des Möglichsens in dieser Schar / Ist groß, ein Durcheinandertreiben”), we can interpret this voice as representing an outsider to the portrayed collective. This bemused, confused observer, armed with a vocabulary of sexological terms and a supposedly objective, removed standpoint, is revealed through the course of the poem to be inadequate for his or her task – the task itself rendered absurd. This observing voice, reporting on ‘furor sexualis’ from a distance, seems to represent Science itself: stumbling and wordy, it is not fit to represent the erotic world of these women. The prevalence of documentary style, distant observations made in reporter-like tones, and a skepticism towards psychology which have all been attributed to a *Neue Sachlichkeit* literary aesthetic\(^{239}\) are all visible in “Furor Sexualis.”

In this line, and with its ‘ich’ interrupting out of nowhere like an uninvited guest, Wolff was inviting people to question why ‘furor sexus’ and ‘schreiben’ would even be thought of together. A quiet protest against the impossibilities and paradoxes of sexual science, perhaps. Wolff’s memories in *Hindsight* of what sexology meant to her when she was a young woman in Berlin suggest detachment and distance if not disdain: “Even after I had studied the works of Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld and others, I never applied them to myself,” she writes at one point.\(^{240}\) “I was fascinated by the case histories in [Hirschfeld and Krafft-Ebing],” she writes elsewhere, “but had not been affected personally by the work of either author.”\(^ {241}\) Those assertions, made so many years later in 1980, seem all the more real when seen alongside this poem Wolff wrote as a young woman, scoffing at the idea sexuality would ever make sense as a science.


\(^{240}\) Wolff, *Hindsight*, 60.

\(^{241}\) Wolff, *Hindsight*, 104.
Another cultural phenomenon contemporary to “Furor sexualis” – but never mentioned in Wolff’s later life writing, and thus not necessarily a direct part of her own life\textsuperscript{242} – is the \textit{Wandervogelbewegung}. There were many women-only groups among this movement, and the depiction in ‘Furor sexualis’ of women forming an exclusive collective in a rural setting, dancing in their skirts and wandering into the woods does evoke the spirit and the aesthetic of a women’s \textit{Wandervogel} group. This means it is possible ‘Furor sexualis’ operates as sharp satire on more than one level: firstly, of the scientific analysis of eroticism, but also of the \textit{Wandervogel} women’s established ideology of non-sexual, ‘pedagogical’ eros\textsuperscript{243} and their belief in ‘purity’. Sex between women, it was reputedly believed among the women of \textit{Wandervogel} groups, was a matter of perversion; it was something for the big cities, not the rural sanctuaries of purity they sought to create for themselves.\textsuperscript{244} In “Furor sexualis” the sexual urges felt by these women – under the influence of a morally ambiguous ‘Teufel’ – are not acted upon overtly in the lines of the poem, but between the lines it is certainly implied. The eros in question does not read as particularly (if at all) ‘pedagogical’. In the likelihood that this evocation of the \textit{Wandervogelbewegung} was intended, Wolff was satirising these women’s claims of ‘purity’ and their moralising rejections of the possibility their strong bonds could ever contain an element of sexual attraction. In any case, Wolff’s small archive of unpublished poetry from the 1920s strongly reflects her engagement, in those years, with ideologies and vocabularies of sexuality.

\textsuperscript{242} The closest to a \textit{Wandervogel} experience detectable in Wolff’s life writing is a passage in \textit{Hindsight} where she describes a thrilling sense of gender egalitarianism on a hike through the woods with two young male classmates of hers during her student days in Freiburg (\textit{Hindsight}, 61-62). She describes them as having been former \textit{Wandervögel}.

\textsuperscript{243} Marion de Ras, \textit{Body, femininity and nationalism: girls in the German youth movement 1900-1934} (New York: Routledge, 2008), 49.

\textsuperscript{244} de Ras, \textit{Body, femininity and nationalism}, 34-35.
2.6 Wolff’s translations of *Les Fleurs du Mal*

2.6.1 Paris or Lesbos? A Context for the ‘Condemned Women’ of *Les Fleurs du Mal*

The “Feuerlilie” cycle was but one of two instances in which Wolff was published in *Vers und Prosa*: the other was a sequence of translations from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*. There her translations (“Der Balkon,” “Spleen” and “Die Seele des Weins”) appeared alongside those of Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel, in another volume published in 1924.245 Her engagement with *Les Fleurs du Mal* extended far further than those three poems, however: in amongst her own verse filed away in the Wellcome archives, many more pages of unpublished Baudelaire translations can be found. They do not represent a translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in its entirety, but still quite a significant undertaking: almost a fifth of the collection.246 Focus here will be placed upon on those published in *Vers und Prosa* as well as a small selection of unpublished translations which shed further light on our understanding of Wolff’s engagement through literature, as a young woman in Berlin in the 1920s, with thoughts relating to gender and sexuality.

Wolff’s translations of Baudelaire are adaptations in which, at times, the poetic voice is clearly that of a woman addressing other women. She alters the perspective and, in some cases, the message of the poetry. Several aspects of the act of translating Baudelaire in the context in which Wolff did so – and from her perspective – will be assessed here in order to give meaning to the selected excerpts from her re-workings. Firstly, what is *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and what did it mean to the young writers in Berlin in the twenties who sought to translate it? Who had translated it into German already, and why did Wolff and her friends feel the need to do it again? Most importantly, what was being said in her adaptations of Baudelaire’s work? As the following discussion will demonstrate, many of the answers to those questions will come back to that literary allusion that was in flux towards becoming a socially entrenched identity category: the lesbian. Love between women is a recurring trope in

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245 *Vers und Prosa* 8 (1924), 272-274.
Les Fleurs du Mal\textsuperscript{247} – paradoxically, Baudelaire’s poems offer empathy as well as issuing condemnation to the women he depicts. It does not seem Wolff’s translations were a subversion motivated by a sense of insult or even outrage in the face of this condemnation: to attribute such a stance to Wolff would be to read her 1920s self and its priorities “in terms of post-1968 lesbian-feminist consciousness”,\textsuperscript{248} a stance she never comfortably aligned herself with. Wolff even seems to agree with aspects of Baudelaire’s depiction of condemnation. Overall, however, it can be said that her translations deliberately offer these ‘condemned women’ a slightly different fate to Baudelaire’s original poems.

It is said that Charles Baudelaire wanted to call his whole collection of poems Les Lesbiennes at first, but he (or someone else) changed his mind before it was first published in 1857 as Les Fleurs du Mal.\textsuperscript{249} Certain poems within the collection saw Baudelaire face prosecution for ‘outrage to public decency’. Consisting of 101 poems in its original pressing (this was later expanded), Les Fleurs du Mal depicts vivid scenes of the city, evocations of angst, thoughts on death, and what would have been, at its time of publication, a startling attitude to sex and its relation to violence. Across the collection, there is often a sense one cannot discern where pleasure stops and horror starts.\textsuperscript{250}

The charges of ‘outrage to public decency’ saw six poems from the collection banned: four of them (ostensibly) for their sexual sadism, two of them for portraying love and sex between women.\textsuperscript{251} The ban was not officially lifted in France until 1949, but those banned poems nevertheless found plenty of readers. Lines of distribution would be difficult to trace, but it has been noted, for instance, that Stefan George was supplied with a copy of ‘Lesbos’ by a friend, the French poet Albert Saint-Paul\textsuperscript{252} – clearly the ban did not stop people accessing those poems, within and beyond France. Wolff and those around her certainly had access to the banned verses from Les Fleurs du Mal. Franz Hessel’s translation of ‘A celle qui est trop gaie’, one of the verses banned for its sadistic sexuality, was printed in Vers und Prosa, and while none of Wolff’s published efforts resulted from the banned verses, the

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\footnote{248} This phrasing comes from Elaine Marks’ description (1988, 182) of Gayle Rubin’s assessment of the poetry of Renée Vivien, who, around the turn of the twentieth century, engaged with Baudelaire’s ‘Lesbians’ on her own terms and is said to have bridged, in her own personal context, the gap between ‘lesbian’ as literary allusion and as a form of sexual identity. “‘Sapho 1900’: Imaginary Renée Viviens and the Rear of the belle époque,” Yale French Studies 75 (1988), 182.

\footnote{249} Culler, “Introduction,” xiii.

\footnote{250} Culler, “Introduction,” xviii-xix.

\footnote{251} The banned poems were ‘Lesbos,’ ‘Femmes Damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte,’ ‘Le Léthé,’ ‘Les Bijoux,’ ‘A celle qui est trop gaie’ and ‘Les Métamorphoses du vampire.’

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archives reveal she spent time drafting and re-drafting both of Baudelaire’s ostensibly banned ‘lesbian poems’: “Lesbos” and “Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte.”

A collection that almost came into the world titled Les Lesbiennes instead of Les Fleurs du Mal clearly must have had something to say about women who loved women. At times tragic and doomed, at times object of the poet’s empathy and respect, it has been said that the imagined, symbolised ‘Lesbian’ occurs in Baudelaire’s poetry as a strong symbol of desire’s stronghold on humanity in general. Of course, by writing about les lesbiennes in Les Fleurs du Mal, it does not follow that Baudelaire was writing about lesbians in any sense popularly understood today – a point already considered at length in Chapter One. That is not to say, as renowned Baudelaire scholar Claude Pichois did, that for Baudelaire’s contemporaries the name would have only implied ‘female inhabitants of Lesbos’ – as Culler has articulated, there is plenty of evidence to refute that. It is important to note, though, that in Baudelaire’s context ‘Lesbian’ was a literary allusion that was sometimes used to describe women who loved other women. It was not a firmly established sexual identity category. The poems of Baudelaire’s which evoke ‘Lesbians,’ “Lesbos” and “Femmes Damnées (I and II),” allude specifically to the capital-L Lesbian of Sappho’s time and place, or at least depict women with Greek names that remove them from Baudelaire’s place and likely also his time, basing them instead in an imagined Greek antiquity.

The first critic to raise the issue – and the implications – of how none of Baudelaire’s lesbiennes seemed to actually share his modern Parisian world was Walter Benjamin. He recognised them as part of Baudelaire’s intent to portray, through symbols and allegory, a modernity that rejected ‘the natural’: “Das Motiv der Androgyne [sic], der Lesbischen, der unfruchtbaren Frau ist im Zusammenhang mit der destruktiven Gewalt der allegorischen Intention zu behandeln. – Die Absage an das ‘Natürliche’ ist zuvor – im Zusammenhang mit der Großstadt als den Sujet des Dichters – zu behandeln.” More recently, Culler has discussed how Baudelaire (and others before him, such as Balzac and Gautier) made heavy use of ‘the lesbian’ as a symbol of androgynous, virile potential, as well as perhaps the

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253 Culler, “Introduction,” xvi-xvii.
254 Culler, “Introduction,” xiii.
255 Here Benjamin seeks to convey the notion of an androgynous person still identifiable as a woman, hence ‘die’ rather than ‘das Androgyne.’
256 Benjamin, “Zentralpark”, Gesammelte Schriften 1:2, 661. Jephcott and Eiland’s translation in The Writer in Modern Life, 139: “The motif of androgyne, the lesbian [as-adjective], the unfruitful woman, should be treated in connection with the destructive power of the allegorical intention. – The rejection of the ‘natural’ must be dealt with earlier – in connection with the city as the poet’s subject.” My own addition in brackets is to stress that Benjamin’s phrasing does not imply any concept of the lesbian as a noun and thus as a fixed entity.
ultimate futility of desire in general, but these tributes were ultimately little but symbolic. The centrality of the ‘Lesbians’ to the wider thematic resonance of Les Fleurs du Mal, according to Culler, can be explained so: “they are... embodiments of what in fact is the general character of passion in The Flowers of Evil: provoked by something intangible and intensified by the very impossibility of fulfilment.” In Baudelaire, it could be said, all sexual desire has an element of impossibility and futility.

It was with that in mind that Benjamin also wrote this, about Baudelaire’s transpositioning of Greek antiquity into modernity as the context for his ‘lesbian’ poems, in particular “Femmes Damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte”:


In the midst of those lines is one that is cited often in considerations of Baudelaire’s treatment of lesbianism in his poetry: “die Lesbierin ist die Heroine der modernité.” In the broader context of the excerpt quoted above, it is apparent that Benjamin’s use of Lesbierin, the noun, is directly in reference to Baudelaire’s women of Greek antiquity, transposed from Lesbos into the modern. That is not to say that Benjamin’s use of the noun is a mere evocation of location: the sexuality and androgyny of Baudelaire’s lesbiennes is also emphasized in that excerpt of Benjamin’s. When isolated from its context, Benjamin’s declaration – that the lesbian was, for Baudelaire, the heroine of modernity – can come across as uncomplicatedly meaning lesbian in today’s sense, whereas it actually seems that the clash of antiquity and modernity between Lesbierin and modernité was part of Benjamin’s point.

257 Culler, “Introduction,” xv.
258 Ibid.
259 Benjamin, “Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire,” Gesammelte Schriften I-2, 593-594. Harry Zohn’s translation, from The Writer of Modern Life, 119: “Greece supplies him with the image of the heroine which seemed to him worthy and capable of being carried over into modern times. In one of the greatest and most famous poems of Les Fleurs du mal, the women bear Greek names, Delphine and Hippolyte. The poem is devoted to lesbian love. The lesbian is the heroine of la modernité. In her, one of Baudelaire’s erotic ideals – the woman who signifies hardness and virility – has combined with a historical ideal, that of greatness in the ancient world. This makes the position of the lesbian woman in Fleurs du mal unmistakable. It explains why Baudelaire long considered using the title Les lesbiennes.”
260 Sigrid Weigel has discussed how Benjamin was interested in women’s voices, language and representation amongst themselves even in his earlier works: “Conversation,” written in 1913 when he was still involved with the Jugendbewegung,
Still, it is a useful and important line, whether that nuance is picked up in translation or not. Here, for example, is Elizabeth Ladenson in the introduction to a *GLQ* special issue on men’s representations of lesbianism, a topic with plenty of space for Baudelaire: “If ‘the lesbian is the heroine of modernity,’ as Walter Benjamin asserted, it is because of Baudelaire, and Benjamin made this statement in reference to Baudelaire’s lesbian poems, which are at the origin of modern representations of female homoeroticism[...]. As Benjamin observed of Baudelaire’s lesbians, if their depiction seems contradictory (both celebratory and literally damning), it is not just because Baudelaire, florist of evil, routinely celebrates and condemns in the same gesture but, above all, because his lesbians are *not real*. Instead, for Benjamin, they are figures of modernity[...].”

It is this statement of Benjamin’s – or its translation – that Ladenson would have had in mind:

 [...]wie Baudelaire die lesbische Frau nicht als Problem sah – weder als ein gesellschaftliches noch als eines der Veranlagung – so hatte er, als Prosaiker, könnte man sagen, auch keine Stellung zu ihr. Im Bilde der Moderne hatte er für sie Platz; in der Wirklichkeit erkannte er sie nicht wieder [.....] Es wäre abwegig anzunehmen, Baudelaire wäre je beigefallen, mit seinem Dichten in der Öffentlichkeit für die lesbische Frau sich einzusetzen [...] Die bürgerliche Ächtung ist für ihn von der heroischen Natur dieser Leidenschaft nicht zu trennen. Das “descendez, descendez, lamentables victims” ist das letzte Wort, das Baudelaire der lesbischen Frau nachruft. Er gibt sie dem Untergang preis. Sie ist unrettbar, weil die Verworrenheit in Baudelaires Konzeption von ihr unauflöslich ist.

It is significant that Wolff, through what remains of her translation work and what we are told in her later recollections on her friendship with Benjamin, can be seen to represent a connection between Walter Benjamin and the abstracted, but not abstract, *lesbische Liebe* he wrote about in regard to Baudelaire’s poetry. Through the citation above, Benjamin implicitly declared that, unlike Baudelaire, he cared about the experiences of women who loved other women in the real world: not just as tragic or damnable poetic symbols, nor as ancient Greek.
names on an island in an imagined ancient Greece. When he pointedly contrasted Baudelaire’s doomed dream-world of Lesbos-as-allegory with his own experience in a present-tense and real Berlin, he quite likely had friends like Charlotte Wolff in mind. Wolff’s stories of friendship and collegiality with Benjamin will now be considered, followed by an exploration of the context in which Benjamin, Hessel and Wolff’s Baudelaire translations took place.

2.6.2  **“We also read Baudelaire together, and we discussed our personal problems”: Charlotte Wolff and Walter Benjamin in the early 1920s**

We can only understand the friendship between Walter Benjamin and Charlotte Wolff from small fragments. Almost no trace of Benjamin’s connection to Wolff remains in his preserved and published diaries and letters – only one brief mention of her in a letter to Gershom Scholem. This one remaining fragment of Wolff in the life of Benjamin is of her as Baudelaire translator: “Heute neuere Baudelairiana,\(^{263}\) in Nachbarschaft von solchen der Lotte Wolff. Ich weiss nicht mehr, ob Du sie kennen gelernt hast.”\(^{264}\) In the context of the letter, it seems most likely Benjamin is referring to the poet herself, rather than specifically to her translations.

By Scholem’s own accounts, he had met Wolff in the summer of 1922. In the memoir of his own friendship with Benjamin, he recalls Wolff as “eine wenig attraktive, ausgesprochen männlich wirkende, sehr schlanke, überaus aufgeweckte und lebhafte Person,”\(^{265}\) a medical student and a close friend of Walter and especially of Dora Benjamin. Of course, the fact he found her attractiveness levels worth commenting on tells us more about Scholem’s approach to women than it does about Wolff – and serves as a rare but important reminder of how Wolff would have been judged by many in Weimar Berlin. Such concerns go unacknowledged in her autobiographies, positioned as irrelevant in descriptions of her years spent in a milieu so open-minded that she hardly noticed any negative judgement of her gender, her behaviour or her sexuality.\(^{266}\)

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\(^{263}\) It is worth noting that ‘Baudelairiana’ – like your average ‘poet’s-name-ana’ – suggests “work inspired by Baudelaire” more so than it suggests “attempted direct translations of Baudelaire.”


\(^{266}\) Wolff, *Hindsight*, 73-74. Her poetry on Old Testament figures, as well as “Die Juden” which she claimed in *On the Way to Myself* was written in 1925, also can be seen to reflect this: see page 51 for further details.
Scholem, who later became a prominent scholar of Jewish mysticism, remembered Wolff as someone who experienced “lebhafte jüdische Gefühle”267 and thus was keen to discuss his early studies with him. The pages of Hindsight in which she writes of a lack of faith in Judaism as it was practised in the community in which she grew up, contrasted with the inspiration she drew even at a young age from the Hebrew Bible,268 do suggest she and Scholem would certainly have had common interests which could have led to lively conversations. Wolff does not mention him at all in her own recollections of the era. One imagines the lack of attraction was mutual. Scholem’s brief portrait of Wolff credits her later life-writing as reflecting a clear vision and good understanding of Benjamin’s life and work, albeit perhaps distorted by the work of memory over time. He also acknowledges that her recollections of Benjamin’s work as a thinker and writer in the earliest were the only ones in print until the emergence of his own. Alongside this, one of the main things he recalls about Wolff is her work, in association with Benjamin, as a translator of Baudelaire.269

The literary work that seems to take centre stage in Wolff’s own recollections of her days knowing Benjamin is his essay ‘Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften.’ Here is how she recalled the friendship in a letter to Ilse Kokula in 1978: “Ja, Walter Benjamin und Dora waren intime Freunde. Besonders Walter: er hat mir Kapitel bei Kapitel seines essays [sic]270 ‘Die Wahlverwandtschaften’ vorgelesen. Und ich habe von Zeit zu Zeit in der Delbrückstrasse, bei den Benjamins gewohnt.”271 Noteworthy there, too, is the implication that she even lived with Walter and Dora for a time. Wolff’s memories in Hindsight of how Benjamin’s essay was a reflection of his own romantic complications at the time272 – in short, people were in love with people other than the ones they were meant to be in love with – have made it in to at least one popular overview of Benjamin’s life and work.273

Writing to Doris Rector a few years after that letter to Kokula, Wolff’s memories delve further into the more personal aspects of the friendship (and, again, the reading of ‘Die Wahlverwandtschaften’):

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267 Scholem, Walter Benjamin, 146.
268 Wolff, Hindsight, 239.
269 Scholem, Walter Benjamin, 146.
270 Wolff’s use of language in this letter reflects how her return to writing in German late in life often carried traces of English.
271 Wolff to Kokula, 8 January 1978, SLA. “Yes, Walter Benjamin and Dora were intimate friends of mine. Especially Walter: he read chapter after chapter of his essay ‘Die Wahlverwandtschaften’ out to me. And from time to time I lived on Delbrückstrasse with the Benjamins.”
272 Wolff, Hindsight, 69.
273 Howard Caygill and Alex Coles, Introducing Walter Benjamin (Duxford: Icon, 2000), 57.

That letter serves well as an introspective summary of all that Wolff tells her readers about her friendship with the Benjamins in her later autobiographies. Walter, as Wolff tells us in Hindsight, “was not just one of the greatest minds of the century, he was also a wonderful friend” and was at her side whenever she needed him throughout the two years of their friendship. Those years were, she told, among the most important of her life.275 As well as their intellectual exchanges and emotional closeness, Walter and Dora provided her with some much-needed practical assistance: as inflation worsened in 1924, her parents urged her to give up her expensive studies and leave Berlin, and it was Walter and Dora who accompanied her to Danzig to convince her parents that she must keep studying. Dora was, in Wolff’s words, a dea ex machina when she convinced a well-heeled Dutch doctor to give Wolff money for her studies.276 Her life may have taken a very different course were it not for the Benjamins. Her retellings in On the Way to Myself are brief and relatively detached, but they include a mention of how they would sometimes read Baudelaire together. “If one writes about the Past, one has to go there, and to be there,” she also writes. This is where she chooses to take us: “I see Walter Benjamin sitting behind a large table piled high with books and with his manuscripts, the walls of his room lined with books from floor to ceiling except for one small space where there hung a painting by Paul Klee, ‘The Angel.’277 To him the picture was a

274 Charlotte Wolff to Doris Rector, 18 February 1983, WC PSY/WOL/1/4. “It was a peculiar connection. An ACTIVE friendship, i.e. were we confidantes about each other’s emotional experiences. We read poetry together. He read me poems by his dead friend Heinle, who he loved very much, and the most unforgettable thing was that he read me his essay about the ‘Wahlverwandtschaften’ in instalments. Yes, you’d know that from my autobiography. And the activity of the friendship was his journey with me to my parents and also one other. He also accompanied me to Marburg, where I had to say goodbye to one of my (first) girlfriends. It was hard and he did not leave me by myself. And I hope that I helped him ‘detach’ himself from Dora, just in the sense that he did not feel alone and she was then freer, too, to pursue her own affections. And then I was a direct connection between him and Jula Cohn, who he loved and idolised, and who I also found absolutely charming. There you have it – a bit of personal history.”
275 Wolff, Hindsight, 67.
276 Wolff, Hindsight, 68.
277 Here she is referring to Klee’s 1920 painting named by Benjamin as ‘Angelus Novus,’ which became a prominent symbol in Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History.” Wolff’s encounter with ‘Angelus Novus’ will be revisited in the conclusion to this thesis.
living being, and he referred to it as if it were a person. The geometrical thin-lined design escaped the grasp of my imagination, but I accepted his valuation of it without question. For me Walter was authority.” Wolff was in thrall to Benjamin’s ideas at the time: this may have extended to his approach to translating Baudelaire. At the end of her description of Walter Benjamin in *On the Way to Myself*, she says this: “I have observed in him how great works of literature are germinated by personal involvements and problems, and we often discussed this when Walter read from his essay, ‘Die Wahlverwandtschaften’, because it had been so with him.” In relation to her own poetry, she hints at the same stance in *Hindsight*, particularly in regard to eroticism: “I wrote poem after poem fired by the sensations and emotions of erotic love.”

Clearly, a consideration of Wolff’s engagement with Baudelaire in light of Benjamin’s thoughts on his work would not be far-fetched. As far as the records have it, Benjamin did not write his essays and fragments on Baudelaire until a decade after his friendship with Wolff – nevertheless, the era in which he was intensely engaged with Baudelaire’s poetry as a translator would have surely been formative for the both of them. The story Wolff chose to tell her readers much later in the twentieth century was that Walter Benjamin was not only a good friend but an influence on her thoughts in the early 1920s, and a colleague for as long as they were both translators of Baudelaire. But what did she choose not to tell the world? Did she ever see herself as having influenced Benjamin, too? Consider this: in a notebook of early drafts of memories that eventually made it into *Hindsight*, in the margins of a description of the article she wrote for the French Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in the thirties, she scrawled “Walter Benjamin’s article – my ideas!”

She would have likely meant his article ‘Surrealismus: Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz’, which is mentioned in detail alongside the *Minotaure* article in the final, published version of *Hindsight*. It is possible all she sought to imply with that note in the margin was delight at recognising the similarity of her own thoughts and Benjamin’s, but the emphatic, exclamatory style of the note suggests mixed feelings: a

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280 Wolff, *Hindsight*, 74-75. This could be compared, for instance, to Thomas Mann’s instances of writing as a form of therapeutic catharsis in the face of unresolvable sexual tension: see, for instance, James N. Bade, “The Background to the ‘Liebestod’ Plot Pattern in the Works of Thomas Mann,” *The Germanic Review* 59 (1984), 15. Wolff’s later articulations of how eroticism was transformed into her own poetry, such as in the present quotation, do not imply her work confronted repression as such. As shown earlier, the heartbreak and loss narrated by the ‘Feuerlilie’ cycle is, however evident of how she did, at times, seek to make sense of the unattainable and the unresolvable through her poetry.
281 Charlotte Wolff. Notebook of *Hindsight* drafts. WC PSY/WOL/6/6/2
pleasure twisted by the sense that the ideas generated in lively conversations between her and Benjamin were formed into his essays, but had simply faded from her life and never earned her any recognition. Any desire Wolff may have felt at that moment to claim she had influenced Benjamin’s work never did manifest in a public statement to that effect. This is not surprising: she would not have been able to prove it, and any such claim would have risked being dismissed as vain or haughty. As later discussions of her presence and reception in the 1970s and 1980s will show, that was an accusation she faced more than once. It is unlikely there will ever be an archival discovery supporting the idea that Wolff influenced Walter Benjamin, but stranger things have happened in archives. In the meantime, one small declaration, quite literally in the margins – “Walter Benjamin’s article – my ideas!” – stands as a reminder of how much of the past cannot be ‘recovered’ for any purpose.

For now, those are all the fragments that can be gathered from Wolff’s friendship with Walter Benjamin. There are detailed stories in Hindsight that paint lively scenes of their time together: here they play roulette at the casino in Zoppot and marvel at the beautiful clutter of a second-hand bookstore in Danzig where they absorb the vivid colours in illustrated children’s books.283 In On the Way to Myself Wolff wrote that she could not remember at all why or how they had parted ways,284 but by the time she wrote Hindsight she had come up with a reason that made enough sense: they both got distracted by new romances. Walter Benjamin fell “madly” in love with a Russian woman; Wolff, too, found herself in a new relationship. She and Benjamin simply drifted apart. “Intimate friendships,” Wolff concluded, “unfortunately do not always hold fast when the preoccupations of love take priority over all else.”285

2.6.3 Translating Baudelaire after Stefan George

Walter Benjamin's translations of Baudelaire are widely understood as a reaction to those by Stefan George,286 which were then and still are recognised as one of the finest literary reworkings into German of Les Fleurs du Mal. What was Benjamin reacting against, and was Wolff also reacting similarly? Barbara Johnson has surmised it was likely that Benjamin “first turned to Baudelaire in order to make his break with George on George’s own

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283 Wolff, Hindsight, 68; 70. Here Wolff relates this memory to her experience, “fifty-five years after this event”, of reading Benjamin’s essay ‘Aussicht ins Kinderbuch’. The story in question dates to 1923 or 1924, suggesting Wolff was, at the time of writing Hindsight, reading many of Benjamin’s essays for the first time. That she revisited their times together through encountering his essayistic observations – on colour, on the Surrealists – is significant; it constitutes a reunion of sorts.
285 Wolff, Hindsight, 71.
turf.”287 What would making a break with George have meant? It has been said that George, as poet, critic and magnetic force at the centre of the George-Kreis, had been Benjamin’s hero. There was a time in his life, so the stories go, when he would sit and read for hours on a park bench in Heidelberg just to catch a glimpse of ‘the Master’ walking by.288 Over time, though, Benjamin no longer needed a hero: as Robert Norton wrote, “for more than two decades, Walter Benjamin had watched from a distance as George transformed himself from the plangent poet of ‘The Year of the Soul’ into the remorseless judge of ‘The Star of the Covenant’. Benjamin […] could not accept him, even from afar, as his own personal Master, or as the authentic leader of Germany.”289 Thomas Karlauf’s biography of George, in regard to his work and also its reception, makes an important case for caution and nuance when considering how closely George’s works and ideas relate to the appropriation of his messages of heroism, self-sacrifice, power and strength for the awful means of Nazi ideology.290 In any case, Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem in 1933 “if ever God has punished a prophet by fulfilling his prophecy, then that is the case with George.”291

By his own description, Stefan George’s version of Les Fleurs du mal, Die Blumen des Bösen, was a Verdeutschung. His introduction to Die Blumen des Bösen articulates his work as “ein deutsches denkmal” of Baudelaire’s collection, as opposed to “eine getreue nachbildung”.292 Verdeutschung, in George’s context, was not a nationalistic act: what he meant by ‘deutsches denkmal’ was simply a tribute, a monument to what he believed Baudelaire had achieved by writing Les Fleurs du Mal. As Barbara Johnson explains, Stefan George's adaptations tasked themselves with looking beyond the abject, seemingly repulsive aspects of the verse, working from a stance that 'serious' readers had since moved beyond any need to be shocked or repulsed. George's Blumen des Bösen was written with a conviction that all the bleak, the gory, the sadistic and the uninspiringly urban material in Baudelaire's collection depicted the world from which one sought escape, “not an indictment of the perversity of the will of the poet.”293

288 Robert Norton, Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 475. This same story is cited by Karlauf, who provides its context as having been part of a series in which Literarische Welt published writers’ and intellectuals’ own accounts of the role George had played in the development of their own thoughts and works: Stefan George: die Entdeckung des Charisma (Munich: Pantheon, 2008), 594-595.
289 Norton, Secret Germany, 672-673.
290 Karlauf, Stefan George.
291 Benjamin cited in Norton, Secret Germany, 742.
293 Johnson, Mother Tongues, 43.
Walter Benjamin did not share this conviction. Johnson has discussed how Benjamin’s Baudelaire translations can be seen as a response to George’s approach, an escape from escapism, outlining Benjamin’s issues with George’s work at a detailed level. He took issue with George’s German word choices for the section title “Spleen et ideal,” which he saw as overly simplistic and reductive. He disagreed with George’s discarding of “Au lecteur” as a prefacing verse: its direct address to a hypocritical reader, disgusting and yet able to be disgusted, no longer a match for a collection purged of much of its grittiness. “Au lecteur,” as “An den Leser,” was one of the verses Benjamin rewrote for Vers und Prosa. Line by line, word by word, Benjamin worked against the ethereal, transcendental ‘soft focus’ George had given to Baudelaire’s poetry, seeking instead to “solidif[y] the beings in it”\(^{294}\) – in some ways, as a return to the poetically unpoetic city worlds found in Baudelaire, and in other ways as something entirely new. In Schlossmann’s words, “vielleicht als Reaktion [against George’s approach] weicht bei Benjamin der Rausch einer Nüchternheit, deren Funktion es ist, die Notwendigkeit von Irren und Zerstören aufzudecken.”\(^{295}\)

Wolff’s translations of Baudelaire also possess this sobriety, this favouring of austere simplicity over florid imagery. This reflects a sense of collegiality with Benjamin – in keeping with her recollection that they read Baudelaire together, and the impression given by an older Wolff that, in the 1920s, she saw Benjamin’s ideas as authoritative. What did she think about Stefan George? We can only go from what she writes of him in Hindsight, interesting information of little consequence: her cousin Leo (of whom she was very fond – she even announces she was briefly in love with him at one point in the narrative where she painstakingly tries to avoid telling an uncomplicatedly ‘lesbian’ life story)\(^{296}\) was friends with poets in the George-Circle, reportedly, and she was introduced to them once. This was how she met Jula Cohn, who introduced her to Walter Benjamin. George himself is described only once in Hindsight, as “the great Stefan George.”\(^{297}\) His one appearance in On the Way to Myself is in a list of poets Wolff appreciated as a teenager.\(^{298}\)

Wolff’s sober, lyrically unadorned approach to translating Baudelaire’s verse is not only significant for its reflection of her and Walter Benjamin’s closeness as readers and writers in the early 1920s. Wolff used this stripped-down economy of imagery as a means by which to make the people and situations in Baudelaire’s poems seem closer to her own world.

\(^{294}\) Ibid.
\(^{295}\) Schlossmann, “Pariser Treiben,” 289.
\(^{296}\) Wolff, Hindsight, 60.
\(^{297}\) Wolff, Hindsight, 65.
\(^{298}\) Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 49.
What else could the point of re-sharpening Baudelaire’s edges be, except to bring the subject matter of each poem back into focus as a grounded, tangible part of the world, rather than some lofty idea or allegorical image? We can see Wolff’s adaptations as embracing the tangible over the ethereal and experience over allegory, in keeping with the sensibilities of the culture in which she was immersed: this sense of sobriety, of detachment and practicality and cynicism that was named Neue Sachlichkeit, and its valuing of concrete pragmatics over romanticism – much like how in the “Feuerlilie” cycle, after embarking upon a lyrical journey through symbols and forms more expressionist than modern, the narrator is eventually struck by, and succumbs to, the physicality of the city. Benjamin had observed of Baudelaire that his ‘lesbians’ were allegory, not a representation of – or a statement on his stance toward – anyone he recognised in his own world. Wolff put this criticism into practice through translation.

The translations of Baudelaire by Wolff, Benjamin and Hessel which were printed in Vers und Prosa were described as Übertragungen – literary translations. Übertragung was also the label assigned to Benjamin’s translations of Baudelaire’s ‘Tableaux Parisiens’, a section of Les Fleurs du Mal which was added to the collection in its second edition in 1861 and which engages in an “intense yet ironical engagement with urban life”.299 These translations of Benjamin’s were published by Richard Weissbach in Heidelberg in 1923, with his now very well-known essay “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (known to its English readership as “The Task of the Translator”) prefacing the edition. None of Wolff’s Baudelaire translations are of poems from the ‘Tableaux Parisiens’: clearly, she did not see any need to adapt those poems which Walter Benjamin had already translated. This suggests she saw her translations as part of a wider project together with Benjamin in some sense. Benjamin’s correspondence – more to the point, what remains of it – indicates that as early as 1921 he was interested in conducting a translation of Les Fleurs du Mal that would extend far beyond the “Tableaux Parisiens,” including most, if not all of the cycles within the collection.300

From what is known of Benjamin’s, Wolff’s and Hessel’s translations of Les Fleurs du Mal, there were no overlaps whatsoever between the verses they chose to translate. It is entirely possible, then, that they had at one stage planned to collaborate on a translation of the collection. Less than a year after their translations appeared in Vers und Prosa, however, Therese Robinson’s Blumen des Bösen was published. Credited as being the first (German)

300 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften IV, 894.
‘Gesamtübersetzung’ (full translation) of Les Fleurs du Mal, Robinson’s translation has been viewed by some critics as a copy of George’s approach and style.\textsuperscript{301} In any case, it would have made any collaborative translation of the collection by Wolff, Benjamin and Hessel far less appealing to any publisher who, ultimately, would have been trying to sell books to a readership not necessarily concerned as to whether the mind behind their Baudelaire Gesamtübersetzung was for or against the methods of Stefan George. That possible project was not pursued, in any case – Hessel and Benjamin soon turned to work together on their translation of Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu; Wolff soon immersed herself in her medical training.

In alignment with the idea that her translations, like Benjamin’s, represented a deliberate shift in approach away from Stefan George’s earlier versions, the following discussion will draw comparisons between Wolff’s translations and those by George, as well as identifying the points at which Wolff chose to take the sentiment of her own translations in a different direction to that found in Baudelaire’s original poems. This will take place with occasional recourse to James McGowan’s English-language translations. The inclusion of the latter is for the sake of clarity, assuming a readership not fluent in French. Like all other translations, McGowan’s has its biases and idiosyncrasies, as languages never overlap perfectly. The occasional inclusion of McGowan’s versions here is certainly not intended to serve as a ‘correct’ translation against which we can compare all others: it is simply a better translation from the French into English than any I could provide myself. Within the scope of this thesis, interested in the intersections between Wolff’s place in 1920s literary history and the later inclusion of her life stories in more sexuality-focused histories of the 1970s and 1980s, there is space to consider two groups within her Baudelaire translations: the work which was published in Vers und Prosa, and her approach to Baudelaire’s trio of ‘Lesbian poems’. What emerges in these translations is a voice intent on inventively adapting, but not entirely negating, Baudelaire’s depictions of women and their sexuality. Wolff’s translations of these poems are included in full as an appendix.\textsuperscript{302}


\textsuperscript{302} See Appendix B.
2.6.4 Wolff’s Baudelaire Translations in *Vers und Prosa*

2.6.4.a “Die Seele des Weins”

The poem Wolff translated as “Die Seele des Weins” was not Baudelaire’s “L’Âme du vin” (“The Soul of Wine”), but “Le Vin des amants” (“The Lovers’ Wine”). A mistake, perhaps – or something more intentional? In any case, it carried over from her manuscripts into its published form in *Vers und Prosa*. What is noteworthy in Wolff’s reworking of the poem, when compared to the earlier version by George, is its relatively grounded, sober treatment of the subject matter as per Baudelaire: two lovers getting drunk together.303

The first line of the second stanza compares the two lovers to angels undergoing some form of drastic mental transformation: in Baudelaire’s original, “Comme deux anges que torture / Une implacable calenture”. McGowan’s translation of this as “Like two angels gone insane / With delirium of the brain” certainly carries across the uneasy juxtaposition of angels with insanity, yet another of Baudelaire’s trademark couplings of the beautiful with the terrible. George chose to keep with the strength of this contrast, pushing it further by abandoning simile in favour of metaphor and writing this: “Engel für ewige dauer / Leidend im fieberschauer.” No longer people resembling angels for the moment, George created angels for all eternity. Wolff’s ‘angels’, in keeping with the simile as per Baudelaire, are still two human creatures just momentarily angel-like: “wie zwei Engel erregt / von einer Glut unentwegt”. This is quite dissimilar to George’s translation, but very much like the brief intoxication found in Baudelaire’s original.

In the final stanza, Baudelaire has his (presumably male) narrator address his lover as “Ma sœur.” This functions as little more than an aside: a term of endearment brought in to strengthen the poem’s sense of direct address from one lover to another. George treats it likewise – “Lass, schwester, uns brust an brust[...]” Wolff does something quite different with this fleeting moment of address: she reworks it into a line describing both lovers as “Wir beide Schwester.” Indeed, she takes it as an opportunity to present both the narrator and the addressee as women, in what is the most concrete example of her translations of Baudelaire as transformations of the poetry into something applicable to her own experiences. Here it is

303 Baudelaire’s “Le Vin des amants” can be found in its French original on page 224 of *The Flowers of Evil*, alongside McGowan’s translation. For George’s translation, “Der Wein der Liebenden,” see *Die Blumen des Bösen*, 129. Wolff’s translation was published in *Vers und Prosa* 8 (1924), 272. It is replicated here in Appendix B.
tempting to conclude there was intent behind the mistitling of Wolff’s adaptation of the poem, in publication and also by her own hand. The obvious eroticism granted to the verse by the title “Le Vin des amants,” “The Lovers’ Wine” or any other translation thereof, is revoked by titling it instead “Die Seele des Weins.” After all, nothing in the verse itself gives the two subjects away as lovers in any language: rather primly by Baudelaire’s standards, the closest he draws these two together is “côte à côte” (roughly, side by side: George translated it as “brust an brust”; Wolff opted for a less erotic “Seite an Seite”).

It does not follow, though, that we should see this alternate title as an act of self-censorship, of diluting the lovers’ wine with frustrating levels of ambiguity. This is still a possibility, but only one among several. After all, one recurring lesson in Wolff’s retelling of her 1920s in *Hindsight* was this: the line between ‘friends’ and ‘lovers’ is not always easy to draw. She stressed this in all the vignettes of friends she knew at the lesbian bars; she stressed this in her anecdotes about the Benjamins and about the dynamic between Helen Grund, Franz Hessel and Henri-Pierre Roché. Her translation of “Le vin des amants” into “Die Seele des Weins” is one of her most decisive reworkings of Baudelaire: away from the ethereal transcendence evoked by George, back towards the more mundane, grounded attempts at escapism mere mortals can sometimes find in bottles. Through the alteration of the narrative voice into one which is explicitly feminine, however, Wolff’s translation goes beyond being a ‘faithful’ re-enactment of the French poet’s words. The ‘sisterly’ connection between narrator and addressee is rendered vaguer by the chosen title. That may have been a mistake, or it may have been a conscious act intended to shift the focus from ‘lovers’ to something harder to define.

2.6.4.b “Der Balkon”

Baudelaire’s “Le Balcon” is a direct address to a former lover, in which the narrator implores her to recall their time together, mostly in terms of sex. With a wistful tone, he takes great solace in his own ability to recall those times, perhaps as much emotionally as erotically. Wolff’s translation of this verse into “Der Balkon” does not represent as much of a dramatic departure as her reworking of “Die Seele des Weins”: there is no re-gendering of subjects or shifting of emphasis. Nonetheless, compared to George’s translation, her choices

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304 See *The Flowers of Evil*, 72-75, for Baudelaire’s original and McGowan’s translation. For George’s translation, ‘Der Balkon,’ see *Die Blumen des Bösen*, 48-49. Wolff’s translation was published in *Vers und Prosa* 8 (1924), 273. It is also replicated here in Appendix B.
of word and phrase do still at times reflect a stance and perspective of her own. As already established, the portrayal of women in Baudelaire’s poetry is a complex topic: a parade of virgins, prostitutes, corpses and lesbian lovers is objectified, dissected, caressed, condemned and sometimes even commiserated with in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Of course, women are often idealised, too – beyond and within those categories. “Le Balcon” is an example of this.

The original poem starts with an address to this former lover which puts her on a pedestal away from the narrator’s own position: “Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses” (translated in the direct sense by McGowan as “Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses”). George maintains the ‘mother’ image: “O mutter der erinnrung · frau der frauen”, whereas Wolff’s treatment of the line opts for an echo of the mother, the womb: “Schoß des Gedenkens, Herrin unter den Frauen.” Of course, a ‘Schoß’ is not just a womb, it is also a lap, a fold (in the sense of ‘returning to the fold’), a place of origin. In terms of the second part of the line, George’s translation suggests an elevated ideal of womanhood, the ‘woman of women’ – or, perhaps, the ‘wife of wives’. It reads like an endorsement – with greater fervour than in Baudelaire’s original – of the conflation of womanhood with fertility that is often evoked in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. George opts not to cast this addressee as a mistress, be it in the sense of her mastery over others or in that other, well-established sense: as a lover with no designs on marriage. In contrast to this, Wolff’s translation turns the phrase away from describing an ultimate woman, wife or mistress – instead, a mistress among women. This tendency towards a different, less idealised feminine addressee is maintained throughout Wolff’s translation. In the third stanza Baudelaire’s narrator addresses his subject as “reine des adores,” adapted literally by George as “Königin der Wonne.” Wolff discards any sense of royalty in favour of addressing the subject as “Angebetete” – a still rosy and poetic but far less pedestal-like ‘beloved.’

In keeping with her approach to “Le vin des amants,” Wolff avoids language that elevates the poem’s subject towards the lofty or transcendental – in this case, even paring the imagery down to be less grand than Baudelaire’s own. Her recurring preference for simpler phrasing in this translation comes through most strongly in the poem’s final stanza, a summing-up of sorts, where the poet lists fragments of his sensual memories and describes their profound presence in his mind. The imagery he uses is of skies, oceans, canyons and light, but the original French lines need not be cited here – enough can be seen in how Wolff’s treatment of this stanza differs from George’s. In place of the canyon from whence the memories emerge, George tells of “unerspähte schlünden”. In Wolff’s’s translation, they
simply rise “aus dem Verborgenen auf” – no imagery whatsoever there, just a sense of the hidden. As the poem draws to a close, Baudelaire’s narrator depicts his memories as shining out like the sun over the sea on a new morning: George’s wording for this includes “wolkensaal” and “meeresgründen”. Wolff’s narrator does not discard the sun or the sea, but phrases them more mundanely: “wie die Sonne, die unsern Himmel verließ / aus dem Meere taucht zum Tages-Lauf.” In her translation, these sensual memories shine like an ordinary sunrise, phrased in everyday language, for an addressee who is cast neither as queen nor ideal.
2.6.5 Unpublished Translations

To look at poetry that was never published, and thus never reached the public in the broadest sense, is a task with inherently different possibilities and restrictions – but, as already mentioned in regards to the act of recovering forgotten poets, it is by no means an insignificant task. We cannot imagine this poetry in terms of a readership as such, nor in terms of critical reception, but we can still interrogate these translations to find out what they might reveal about the poet herself and her relation to the world around her. That, after all, is at the heart of all that is being investigated in this chapter: an attempt to understand the social and cultural contexts of Wolff in Berlin in the 1920s as best we can, at this point through her connections to literature, so as to better comprehend what she was trying to say so many decades later to an audience keen to write her into histories she felt wary of. One way we can do this is to investigate Wolff’s unpublished treatments of Baudelaire’s trio of ‘Lesbian’ poems, “Femmes Damnées,” “Lesbos” and “Delphine et Hippolyte.” As mentioned earlier, had timing and circumstances been different, these translations would have possibly seen publication in the 1920s as a collaboration between Wolff, Benjamin and Hessel. The story Wolff puts forth in Hindsight about these translations claims they had at least an audience of one: her lover Lisa, who would listen to her as she read them out each night, in the same era in which the “Feuerlilie” cycle was written.305

Baudelaire, as Benjamin argued, was a champion of women who loved women (on an imagined version of Lesbos, but not far beyond) at least insofar as they were useful allegorical symbols for the state of modern humanity in his poetry.306 Through Wolff’s rewriting of Baudelaire, it can be said that the woman who loved women shifted in position from symbolic muse to poetic voice. Of course, as Wolff stressed repeatedly to her audiences and readerships in the 1970s and 1980s, she swore sexual identity categories were a contested idea rather than an integral part of her experience as a young woman in Berlin in the 1920s, at least in the context of her own milieu and her own experience. For this reason, here I will make no attempt to argue Wolff’s translations constitute a full rejection of Baudelaire’s representations of lesbianism. At times, it seems she agreed with him, or at least saw no need to distance her own narrator’s stance from that of Baudelaire’s original verses. Her engagement with Baudelaire’s ‘Lesbians’ does not appear to have stemmed from a sense that these poems

305 Wolff, Hindsight, 80.
306 See page 85.
needed a rebuttal – more that they provided a useful template which she could expand upon. Whatever fights Wolff had to fight for love back then, whether these fights were political or romantic, intellectual or spiritual, they have left their traces in her unpublished translations of Baudelaire’s trio of ‘Lesbian poems’.

2.6.5.a “Verdammte Frauen”

“Femmes damnées,” a relatively short verse, was the only ‘lesbian’ poem of Baudelaire’s not to be banned. It consists of seven four-line stanzas which each describe a different type of condemned woman, each seemingly preoccupied with the love of another and caught up in the midst of it: some languid on a beach, some in a river valley, others among mountain rocks, some in a drunken party in a cave, and some who hide whips beneath their robes and sneak into the forest. This poem probably escaped censorship because it only alludes to, but does not actually describe any sexual encounters. Baudelaire’s narrator expresses a sense of sympathy and kinship with the erotically entwined ‘condemned women’ depicted in “Femmes damnées.”

In the history of critical thought on Baudelaire, the ‘lesbian’ status of Baudelaire’s condemned women has been debated. Above all else, this reflects the fluid, shifting nature of sexual identity categories across the course of the twentieth century and beyond. Anna Balakian, writing in the 1950s on both “Femmes damnées” and “Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte” (from now on referred to as “Delphine et Hippolyte”), believed “a close scrutiny of the two poems reveals that Baudelaire's ‘poor sisters’ were actually suffering from narcissism and fear of sex. These delicate, alluring creatures cling to each other because they are wary of the realities of love and prefer to them the transparent pleasures of the illusion. They sense the touch of man to be brutal and satisfy themselves with the lighter touch of woman. Their wrong is that they thus deviate from nature – which implies that they are basically normal. Theirs is the song of regret, apprehension and frustration – a far cry from both nineteenth-century literary comprehension of Lesbianism and twentieth-century physiological explanations of inversion.”

307 For Baudelaire’s original and McGowan’s translation, see The Flowers of Evil, 245-247. For George’s translation, “Verdammt Frauen,” see Die Blumen des Bösen, 135-136. Wolff’s unpublished translation, sourced from WC PSY/WOL/7, is replicated in Appendix B.
308 Culler, “Introduction,” xviii.
If Balakian’s intent in this passage is to cast doubt on the presumption that Baudelaire was writing about lesbians at all, then past her diagnostic tone, beyond her apparent confidence in the legacy of sexology, and far from her assertions that there is such a thing as nature from which to deviate, her essay still points towards a useful reading of the women in “Femmes damnées”: a reading that emphasises how Baudelaire’s subjects do not easily translate into the fixed and often pathologised sexual identity categories that were relatively entrenched in Western social thought by the time Balakian wrote that article. In any case, her reading of “Femmes damnées” seems to depend entirely on one line where Baudelaire’s narrator describes the condemned women as “de la réalité grands esprits contempeuteurs”: in McGowan’s translation, “spirits disdainful of reality”. The reality is this: in this poem, disdain for reality is not portrayed negatively. “Femmes damnées,” in its tone and its content, celebrates the notion ‘reality’ can be held in contempt.

It is in the final two stanzas of this poem, where the narrator declares his sympathy and unity with the women he has just described, that Wolff’s translation deviates from the content and the message of Baudelaire’s original and George’s translation. “Ô vierges, ô démons, ô monstres, ô martyres,” is how Baudelaire’s narrator begins this direct address to the condemned women: all words that need very little in the way of translation into English. ‘Vierges’ means ‘virgins’, if read literally. George addresses them instead as “Ihr mädchen weiber · dulder oder sunder,” emphasising their perceived femininity over their perceived monstrosity and casting no decisive verdict as to whether they are victims or sinners. In any case, they are no longer monsters or demons. Wolff did not seem to think the notion of virginity was relevant at all. Her address is to “Frauen Dämonen Ungeheuer Märtyrer.” This is all in keeping with Baudelaire’s wording, with the very significant exception being that she did not call them virgins like Baudelaire, or emphasise their femininity like George. She simply and briefly called them women, lessening any pressure on readers to see the gender of the people in this poem as somehow juxtaposed with their ‘monstrous’ ways.

In the next line, her determination to address the condemned women on terms other than those set out in Baudelaire’s verse comes through even more strongly. Virgins, monsters, martyrs, whoever these women are: in the French original (as focused upon by Balakian in the excerpt above), they are accused of spurning reality through their love for each other. This accusation is carried across into George’s translation: “Beherzte spötter ihr der wirklichkeit.” Significantly, Wolff’s translation makes no comment whatsoever on the notion of reality: instead, “Euer starker Geist bezwingt diese Welt” – “your strong spirit defeats this world.”
Wolff may not have had a sense of ‘sexual identity,’ as such, but the way she chose to rework this stanza strongly suggests an identification with the condemned women of this poem, and a desire to respond to the accusation that their love is a spurning of ‘reality.’ By shifting the poem’s message to one that credits the women of “Femmes damnées” with strength of spirit, Wolff’s translation spurned the notion that ‘reality’ was something that could be spurned by their love for each other.

2.6.5.b “Lesbos”

As already discussed in regard to “Le Balcon,” the notion of womanhood, as intrinsically linked to motherhood and fertility, is a recurring theme in Les Fleurs du Mal – and typical of the worldview surrounding Baudelaire as he wrote it. 310 A recurring theme is not necessarily the same thing as an endorsement: after all, it has been argued by Walter Benjamin, among others, that Baudelaire sought to trouble people’s notions of femininity as harmoniously synonymous with maternity with his frequent recourse to lesbians and prostitutes. 311 The modern was a departure from nature in Baudelaire’s verse, as Benjamin explained, and sex without the ‘fruit’ of reproduction was one of the allegories he found useful when addressing that idea. There is a general consensus Baudelaire was not simply reiterating an idea that women’s worth lies only in their reproductive capacity – even if his last words to the Lesbians, in “Delphine et Hippolyte,” are effectively damning them to hell.

Regardless of whether we believe Baudelaire’s verse enforces or troubles the notion of womanhood as intrinsically bound to motherhood, Wolff’s translation takes the ripe fruit imagery in “Lesbos” and reworks it into something perhaps more erotic and comparatively devoid of evocations of (obligatory) fertility. This adaptation is another in which she strips the verse of its imagery and poetic language at certain points. In a similar vein to the effect this had on “Der Balkon,” what happens here is that a space is created in the poem for women and

310 For an interesting discussion of this, with occasional mention also of the trope of ripe fruit as symbol of fertility, see Susanne Schmid, “‘Black Venus’: Jeanne Duval and Charles Baudelaire Revisited by Angela Carter,” Erfurt Electronic Studies in English 2 (1997). http://webdoc.gwdg.de/edoc/ia/cese/artic97/schmid/2_97.html. In her 1985 short story “Black Venus,” Angela Carter wrote about Baudelaire from the perspective of Jeanne Duval, a woman cited often as a muse of his. Granting her a voice through fiction, Carter’s Duval is more bemused than muse, more critic than inspiration. Angela Carter, in Schmid’s words, is a “mythomaniac and demythologiser, rewriter of the Western canon, [who] focusses on the shattering of male myths about femininity.”

their sexuality to exist beyond their idealised state in the original, be it as muse-on-pedestal or as natural mother. They are not entirely liberated from it in this translation, but there is certainly a grander gesture towards this liberation than in Baudelaire’s or George’s versions. George could even stand accused of choosing to amplify the woman-as-ripe-fruit trope in his translation of the poem. In the first stanza Baudelaire’s comparison of a kiss to a melon, unadorned by adjective, is written by George as “frisch wie die reifen pasteken”. Wolff’s maintains the sparseness of the original: “frisch wie Melonen.” This might not seem significant at first, but appears more so when ripe fruit comes back into focus in the fourth stanza, arguably in the interest of depicting these women’s eroticism as pointless.

In this stanza, Baudelaire’s narrator describes how on Lesbos girls will touch themselves in front of their mirrors. Even that is rendered moot in translation – McGowan’s version sees them “make love alone”, but aloneness is not part of the French original, nor any of the German translations, allowing for the ‘mirror’ to be read as meaning another girl, a mirror-image of the first. Whether the girls in this stanza are alone or not, here the descriptions matter most. Baudelaire evokes “stérile volupté!” (‘sterile desires’), which he then rhymes with “caressent les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité!” The intended contrast is obvious – whether their mirrors are of glass or flesh, these girls are portrayed as doing something profoundly sterile with something so potentially fertile. The contrast set up by that rhyme, in effect, invites us to see the situation as a deliberate waste of good fruit.

Wolff does not incorporate that suggestion into her translation at all, choosing to reduce the prominence of the fruit imagery in that segment of verse. In place of sterility comes senselessness: “vor ihren Spiegeln, unsinnige Lust.” In place of nubile fruits, Wolff’s translation places focus on the splendours of the body in their own right, not as the swollen sum of so many seeds: “die Mädchen[…] des Körpers Prächtte / Liebkosen, die reifende Frucht ihrer Brust.” The fruit is still there, still ripe, but is used to evoke a breast rather than the broader concept of ‘womanhood.’ This seems all the more striking when compared to Stefan George’s translation. In place of ‘stérile volupté’ he wrote of a “heillose sucht.” ‘Nubilité’ does not translate so easily into German, and so George grants the ripening fruit the full force of all it might have otherwise more subtly implied: he writes of the girls’ “Spielen mit ihres frauenums reifender frucht.” In George’s version, the fruit no longer symbolises fertility and the woman’s capacity to reproduce, it is that. This loads a sense of betrayed

312 For Baudelaire’s original and McGowan’s translation, see The Flowers of Evil, 233-239. George’s translation: Die Blumen des Bösen, 137-139. Wolff’s unpublished translation can be found in Appendix B.
313 This reading is affirmed as the most accurate, grammatically and otherwise, by Fisher: “The Silent Erotic/Rhetoric,” 51.
obligation onto the stanza’s subject matter – a sentiment that is not perpetuated in Wolff’s version, where the ripe fruit needed not stand in, at least directly, for anything more than some youthful breasts.

Turning momentarily to Wolff’s writing on sexuality in the 1970s, we can find it reveals aspects of her thoughts in that era were similar, in some ways, to these Baudelairian depictions of desire between women as never entirely fulfillable. That same sentiment appears in Love between Women: “An element of unavoidable frustration, greater than in male homosexuality, gives lesbianism a tinge of tragedy. It results from the impossibility of complete sexual fulfilment, and particularly from childlessness.”314 Such an excerpt reminds us just how problematic Wolff’s arguments in Love Between Women were in their time, and how, even in moments in Wolff’s translations where she appears to subvert the message of Baudelaire’s narrator, we cannot assume this equates to a complete rejection of the ideologies present in Les Fleurs du Mal.

The poet Sappho is described in the fourth-to-last stanza as “la mâle Sapho” in Baudelaire’s original: a pointed mix of the feminine definite article with the adjective ‘male.’ George also makes use of this quick contrast – “Sappho · die männliche.” Wolff, however, hesitates to write of ‘the male Sappho’ and instead translates this phrasing as “Sappho von männlicher Art, die Liebende, der Dichter”. The androgyny found in Baudelaire’s and George’s phrasings comes through in Wolff’s translation, too, with the description of Sappho as ‘Liebende’ (a feminine noun) and ‘Dichter’ (a masculine noun). This would have been thoroughly intentional, as the genders of nouns which describe people can be changed very easily in German to match the gender of the person being described. Wolff’s translation deliberately casts Sappho as a feminine lover and a masculine poet. This is in line with Baudelaire and George, but the rather different – and clumsier – phrasing suggests a greater level of care to emphasise the dead poet and icon as androgynous rather than especially masculine.

314 Wolff, Love Between Women, 18.
“Verdammte Frauen: Delphine und Hippolyta”

“Delphine et Hippolyte” has been said to be the harshest of Baudelaire’s three ‘lesbian poems.’ Here, a narrator tells of the heated exchange of words between a woman named Delphine and her (female) lover, Hippolyte. Hippolyte has chosen to reject Delphine in favour of a more conventional life with a male lover, prompting words of incensed outrage from Delphine. Eventually, the narrator interjects to affirm doubtful, repentant Hippolyte’s notion that her love for Delphine had her hell-bound. This is the poem Walter Benjamin was referring to when he observed Baudelaire’s last words to the doomed ‘Lesbians’ in his poetry were “descendez, descendez, lamentables victims,” leaving these ‘heroes of modernity’ to face their demise. Stefan George did not include this verse in his Blumen des Bösen. If we can read Wolff’s work as in part a reaction to George, in this instance, it would be as a reaction to his omission of the poem. In the absence of any translation by George, we can look at Therese Robinson’s work as a useful point of comparison: her Blumen des Bösen included a translation of “Delphine et Hippolyte” which, dense with imagery and lyrical evocations of hellfire and damnation, does serve well as evidence that her Baudelaire translations were cast from the same mould as those of Stefan George. Occasionally there is a telling difference in word choice when comparing Wolff’s translation to Robinson’s.

At one point, Delphine tries to convince Hippolyte to stay with her since her kisses are different and superior to those of Hippolyte’s male lover. Hers are gentle, his are, according to Delphine, comparable to the hooves of an ox or the biting course of a plough. In Baudelaire’s verse, this rival lover Delphine speaks about is an ‘amant’: something that carries over to English quite simply as a lover. In Robinson’s version, he is a ‘Freund’: a boyfriend. How does Wolff cast the man competing for the affections of Hippolyte? In her translation, he is a ‘Gatte’: a spouse. Labelling the man in terms of a marital connection to Hippolyte, rather than to any notion of a loving relationship, casts the stanza and its sentiment in a different light. Of course, a marriage can be a loving relationship, but that is beside the point: ‘amant’ and ‘Freund’ suggest love and romance in a way that ‘Gatte’ does not.

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316 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften I-1, 596-597.
When Hippolyte eventually speaks in the poem, it is to explain her uneasiness by comparing it to the sensation of having had “une nocturne et terrible repas.” Robinson writes this as “als ware ich geschändet/ von einem nächtlich wüsten Freudenmahl.” Wolff’s version tells of a smaller, more mundane night-time snacking experience: “mir ist unruhig und schwach / wie nach einem zu schweren Nachtgericht.” The lightness of the regret felt by Wolff’s Hippolyte compared to Robinson’s comes through again in the question she poses two stanzas later. Robinson’s Hippolyte asks “Ist, was wir tun, nicht doch ein fremd Verbrechen?” while Wolff’s simply asks “Haben wir denn so seltsames getan?” There is no suggestion of crime or transgression in that phrasing, rather of a slight strangeness. Soon after this, Hippolyte makes a statement that infuriates Delphine: the declaration that, though she will always love her, Delphine was, to her (as per Baudelaire), a hidden ambush and the start of her perdition. Robinson’s Hippolyte phrases it so: “Du nur Verlockung meiner Triebe, Nur Anfang von Verdammnis, Hölle, Qual!” Wolff minimises any suggestion of damnation or hell. Her Hippolyte says, instead: “wenn Du wärest ein verhüllter Satan / Und der erste Schritt zu meiner Qual.” Hell is still there via its ambassador, Satan: but, importantly, only through Hippolyte’s insinuation that Delphine herself could secretly be him. Wolff’s decision to have Hippolyte speak not of the ungodly sinfulness of an abstract concept, but instead of the idea one could see one’s lover as a Satan of sorts, stresses the absurdity of the stance and emphasises Delphine’s humanity.

That sense of absurdity is expressed further in Delphine’s next speech: “qui donc devant l’amour ose parler d’enfer?” – by McGowan’s translation, “who dares in the face of love to speak to me of Hell!” She continues along those lines for another seven stanzas, explaining (much like Baudelaire’s narrator and moraliser in ‘Lesbos’ and ‘Femmes Damnées’) the pointlessness and heartlessness of even putting love in the same sentence as ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ Once she has made her point, she makes a declaration that she will never change, by saying she’d readily die with no love other than Hippolyte’s. And with that death foretold, the poem’s narrator interjects with his “Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes!”

Robinson’s translation of the ‘Descendez’ line is a close enough replication of those words, but Wolff’s version is less grandiose: “Ihr Beklagenswerte, wandert hinab […]” Her reworking of the stanzas which follow, where the narrator continues with his many bleak reasons these women should descend into hell, are a continuation of her tendency to downplay

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318 Neither Robinson nor Wolff depart from that sentiment.
the imagery and thus convey something more grounded. This softens the overtones of damnation. Baudelaire’s description of “le vent furibond de la concupiscence” carries over into Robinson’s German as “böser Lüste fürchterliche Plage” but is rendered as something else entirely by Wolff – “der wütende Wind in Eurem Kuß”. More than once in this translation, Wolff replaces the demonic with the human. The strongest example of this can be seen in the final line of the poem. Baudelaire’s narrator farewells Delphine and Hippolyte with the imperative to “fuyez l’infini que vous portez en vous!” (by McGowan’s translation: “flee the infinite you carry within yourselves!”) In its most literal translation into English, ‘l’infini’ is the infinite, and thus the eternal. Some translators, including Robinson, choose to conflate this with the idea of Hell – Robinson translates it as “die Hölle” – presumably to carry the damning tone of the rest of the narrator’s closing diatribe right through to the end, unshaken. Wolff chose not to translate “l’infini” as anything directly corresponding to the idea of Hell, instead opting for one of the several German words which can convey the infinite: “das Grenzenlose.”

‘Grenzen’ are borders; ‘grenzenlos’ can be taken to mean ‘borderless’ just as easily as ‘infinite.’ Therese Robinson’s Delphine might be fleeing a typical enough Hell within herself, but Wolff’s Delphine faces hell in the form of a total absence of boundaries. Recent decades of exile studies and queer studies – and, pointedly, their overlaps – have taken great interest in borderlessness as a creative situation. 319 Toni Brennan’s work on Charlotte Wolff, as the most direct example, often focuses on her ways of working around and beyond ‘borders’: those of nation, of gender, of professional expectations. 320 Being borderless was already on Charlotte Wolff’s mind in 1924, in a different but relevant way, as the essence of the situation faced by Delphine and Hippolyte.

319 Stephan, Exile and Otherness.
320 The clearest example of this is Brennan’s article with Peter Hegarty, “Charlotte Wolff and Lesbian History: Reconfiguring Liminality in Exile,” Journal of Lesbian Studies 14, no. 4 (2010), 338-358.
2.7 The Worlds of Else Lasker-Schüler, Helen Grund and Franz Hessel: social and cultural contexts for Charlotte Wolff’s 1920s poetry

2.7.1 Everyday Modernism

To think seriously about the desires, hopes and actions of [perceivably marginalised groups] in the making of the modern world was to open the door to alternative ways of thinking about history. Now peopled by previously invisible figures, by suffragettes and shoppers, actresses and rap artists, Indian cricketers and gay flâneurs, the landscape of modernity is a more interesting and less familiar place.

Rita Felski

Many questions being asked today of modernism, a word which paints the cultural context of Charlotte Wolff’s Weimar Berlin years with a very broad brush, can be applied directly to her poetry: questions about sexuality, gender, science, creative writing and their overlaps. Felski’s brief mention above of “gay flâneurs,” as just one example, will soon cross paths with the traces that remain of Wolff’s life in Weimar Berlin. The concepts of flânerie and Neue Sachlichkeit describe areas where histories of literature and histories of the street and popular cultures of Wolff’s 1920s intersect. As such, they can further illuminate what we understand of her poetry by adding to what we know of its context. This is reciprocal: her poetry itself and also her recorded experiences, even when written so far in retrospect in the form of autobiography, broaden what we are able to imagine when we think about flânerie, Neue Sachlichkeit and the varied significances of gender, sexuality and their social configurations in a ‘modernist’ setting such as Weimar Berlin. This section explores such concepts as they relate to Wolff’s later recollections of that time and place, particularly through portrayals of her friendships with Else Lasker-Schüler, Helen Grund and Franz Hessel, with consideration of how these ideas are also reflected in her 1920s translations and poems which have already been discussed throughout this chapter.

It is important to remember that ‘modernism’ is not just a word which emerged for use in retrospect to classify ideas, creations and cultures of the past: it was a notion in flux, debated and redefined within its own time. “To read the 1920s and 1930s through the sanitised veil of post-Second World War definitions of the modern and modernism,” wrote

Felski, Doing Time, 57.
Marsha Meskimmon, “is to reduce the complex and multiple discourses and debates of the day into a falsely unified whole.”\(^{322}\) Wolff, after all, was a translator of Baudelaire and a friend of Walter Benjamin, who by 1938 had come to the conclusion that, at least in Baudelaire’s work, “die Lesbierin ist die Heroine der modernité.”\(^{323}\) It has already been established, earlier in this chapter, how uncertain and complex the meanings of each of those terms were – Lesbierin, Heroine and modernité – when Benjamin wrote that.

Many a volume on modernism has been written with, at its heart and in its introductory lines, the difficulty of defining the term. Take Richard Sheppard, for instance, in “The Problematics of European Modernism”: “In one of the earliest attempts to come to terms with modernism as a total phenomenon, the Czech Formalist, Jan Mukařovský, began by stating that ‘the notion of “modernism” is very indefinite.’ Thirty-five years later, Monroe K. Spears echoed that sentiment when he prefaced an important book on the same subject by observing that ‘Modernism is, of course, an impossible subject’.”\(^{324}\) Sheppard follows those examples with many more: words like ‘unclear,’ ‘difficult,’ ‘multiplicity’ and ‘impossible’ dot the page. Kniesche and Brockmann also describe a “loosely defined but nevertheless vital concept of ‘modernity’” surrounding studies of the Weimar Republic, at least by the 1980s.\(^{325}\) It does not take long to see why Wolff’s experiences and writings still have not been looked at very closely with a modernist context in mind. The word seems easy to evoke, but difficult to define.

Peter Gay’s recent book on modernism starts out on a similar note to those histories of hesitancies outlined above. “Modernism,” he writes, “is far easier to exemplify than define.” With a hint of condescension, or at least a determination to rise above, he goes on to describe the pluralistic approach – namely, to write instead of ‘modernisms’ – as a prudential ‘refuge’ taken by some cultural historians, daunted by “the chaotic, steadily evolving panorama they are trying in retrospect to reduce to order.”\(^{326}\) Gay is willing to credit such an approach as a ‘compliment’ to the complexities of this thing we might call modernism, but only in the process of addressing his own certainty that there are certain cultural moments – in music, in architecture, in the visual arts, in writing – that we can think of, with certainty, as constituting

\(^{322}\) Marsha Meskimmon, We Weren’t Modern Enough: Women Artists and the Limits of German Modernism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 2.

\(^{323}\) Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften I-1, 593-594. See page 85 of this chapter.


\(^{326}\) Gay, Modernism, 1-2. As Claire Colebrook points out, the pluralising of a historical term to indicate doubt in its ability to convey much in the singular is not particularly new: Lovejoy’s 1924 essay on Romanticism spoke of ‘Romanticisms’. New literary histories: new historicism and contemporary criticism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 3.
(or perhaps even defining) modernism. As promised, he then proceeds to exemplify. It is always good to have something to cling to, and Gay’s proffered examples of the works of Kafka, Picasso and Rimbaud as things which allow us to say that is modernism at least gives us somewhere to start – and somewhere to depart from.

Gay’s primer on what should be seen as decidedly modernist has this very important line underpinning it: “[...] over all these classics broods the saturnine, trimly bearded face of Sigmund Freud.” Gay, Modernism, 2. What he means is that over all those cultural productions in the usual sense (of literature, art and the like) looms psychoanalysis and, by extension, a lot of deeply influential thinking about sex and the mind. Those 1930s dictionary definitions of sexual terminologies which were discussed earlier in terms of their usage in Wolff’s poetry reflect a moment in time when the popularity and influence of psychoanalysis, Freudian or otherwise, had not yet eclipsed the biological and endocrine fixations of sexology, at least to the extent it later would in many spheres. Over all those classics (incidentally – and tellingly – all Gay’s prime exemplifiers of modernism are men), and over all the poetry and prose that never found its way into a canon, also peeked the gentle, thickly moustached face of the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. Some writers have already proclaimed, to varying intensities, that “modernism was [...] a culture defined by sexology.” We can also see the same idea come across more cautiously in Rita Felski’s work: “[S]exology, sociology, and psychology have played an influential role in shaping our understanding of what counts as modern. They do not simply describe modern culture, they have also helped to create it.”

Felski’s book Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture offers a lucid and enlightening explanation of what it means to talk about modernism in relation to cultural history. “Until recently,” writes Felski, “the most influential ways of thinking about modernity came out of two main intellectual traditions: sociology and criticism of literature and art. Each of these traditions has given us a specific picture of what it means to be modern.” She goes on to describe these two main traditions. Within sociology, there has been a tendency to view modernity as a situation in which people found themselves “dwarfed by institutional structures and systems of power, subject to ever greater forms of surveillance

327 Gay, Modernism, 2.
329 Felski, Doing Time, 59.
330 Felski, Doing Time, 57.
and control,” thus allowing space for women and people of colour “only as its silent victims and others.” The aesthetic tradition, on the other hand, is that which Gay was writing about: the canons of art and literature. “To equate the experience of the modern with the aesthetics of high modernism,” Felski concludes, “is to leave out much that has been historically important in modern life [...] and here, too, while an occasional black or female modernist artist has been allowed into the canon, they remain exceptional figures, defined in terms of their marginal status.”

Describing those two traditions, the sociological and the aesthetic, Felski provides a context for the departure that has since been taken from them: a departure towards looking at modernism in terms of cultural history beyond galleries and canons. “There is,” she argues, “a crucial link between the turn to cultural theories of modernity and the desire to write the histories of those traditionally absent from history.” While in the context of recent times there is nothing inaccurate about phrasing this as a ‘turn’, Felski acknowledges that “[o]f course, approaching the modern through the concept of culture is not a completely new idea. Important and influential predecessors that come to mind include Walter Benjamin.” This is strikingly apt in relation to the forgotten connections between Wolff and Walter Benjamin which have been explored in this chapter.

As this chapter has shown so far, examining the traces of Wolff’s thoughts in the 1920s through her poetry – so as to later consider these in terms of the concerns she had later in life about sexuality’s writing into history – involves an investigation into what we can and cannot assume about how sexuality, gender concepts, cultural context and literature intertwined in her particular experience of the 1920s – those times often simply described as the era of modernism. Doan and Garrity’s edited collection *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture* is an important landmark in these terms: chapters on literary figures often associated with overlaps of ‘sapphic’ and ‘modernity,’ such as Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall, sit alongside chapters on a well-respected all-women’s motor mechanic workshop and chauffeur service in post-World War 1 Melbourne, the meaning of women’s cigarette smoking in 1920s England, and the lives of some inter-war interior designers. There is nothing about Germany, however, so the book gestures towards but does not directly apply to Wolff’s life and worldview in her pre-exile days in Berlin.

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331 Ibid.
332 Felski, *Doing Time*, 58.
333 Ibid.
335 Doan and Garrity, *Sapphic Modernities*.
One similar work which does address such ideas in the context of Wolff’s Berlin is Cristanne Miller’s *Cultures of Modernism: Marianne Moore, Mina Loy and Else Lasker-Schüler*.336 Comparing the experiences of these three poets, each in their own city with its own cultural context, Miller argues that “modernist cultures take distinctive and distinctively gendered forms from one place to another, and that the degree that one recognizes women as significantly engaged in its writing and art, modernism appears less conservative, antithetical to religion, and divorced from personal life constructs than it has been portrayed,” revealing the narrowness of any approach that claims a specific time or place could ‘represent’ modernism as a whole.337 Looking at Loy’s, Moore’s and Lasker-Schüler’s individual situations and cultural contexts through Miller’s work, it becomes apparent very quickly that any ‘universal’ discussion of modernism would have to be rather superficial in regard to gender, as well as to local specifics.

Miller’s thoughtful considerations of Lasker-Schüler’s gendered experiences of cultures of modernism in Weimar Berlin do not include any of Charlotte Wolff’s writings on the poet, however. In both her autobiographies, Wolff reflected on her younger self’s encounters with Else Lasker-Schüler in a manner which could add depth even to a nuanced work like Miller’s. Miller’s investigations into Lasker-Schüler’s life cast her as a lonely and marginalised figure in a male-dominated culture; Wolff’s recollections deliberately construct a past in which, while she certainly faced oppression on a larger scale, Lasker-Schüler was a quietly heroic and dignified figure in daily life. At odds with preconceived histories of literary culture in Weimar Berlin, Wolff’s recollections of meeting Lasker-Schüler convey a situation in which two women meeting by chance, on their own terms, at a public literary haunt was not something worth commenting on in terms of gender.

Such things were and still are immensely in need of discussion in terms of gender: the intent here is not to conclude that if Charlotte Wolff wrote narratives of the past in which gender was irrelevant then so it was. Rather, in accordance with the discussions of Chapter 1, this section will demonstrate how Wolff’s life writing sought to stress a past in which, in certain times and in certain milieux, whether for a decade or a pleasant café afternoon, oppressions and marginalisations could momentarily be forgotten, ignored or otherwise unacknowledged – and thus were not necessarily the omnipresent burdens which anyone

337 Miller, *Cultures of Modernism*, 2.
writing histories in the 1970s, or more recently, might assume. Such an assumption only facilitates the writing of histories which perpetuate the notion of linear progress, which in terms of histories of gender and sexuality, tends to enforce an idea that things only ever ‘get better’ and oppression only ever decreases over time. Of course, one wishes oppression was something that only ever decreased over time, but as Wolff’s ‘small histories’ can attest, this is a dangerous assumption to make.

2.7.2 Else Lasker-Schüler, Charlotte Wolff and ‘Cultures of Modernism’

One example of Wolff’s complication, through her later life-writing, of contemporary understandings of gender dynamics in one small corner of the Modernist past is the way she chose to write of her memories of the poet Else Lasker-Schüler. “Else Lasker-Schüler ist hinter der Legende verschwunden,”338 as Sigrid Bauschinger wrote when she explained how depictions of the poet as an outsider or an eccentric can detract from engagement with her poetry. Wolff’s depictions of Lasker-Schüler take issue with some aspects of this legend-making. By the time their paths crossed in Berlin, Lasker-Schüler, her work and her legends were a well-established part of Berlin’s bohemia.

It appears the first way Else Lasker-Schüler spoke to Wolff was poetically, through her published works which Wolff claimed to have read as a teenager. On an escapade to Berlin in her late teens,339 she made Lasker-Schüler’s acquaintance: “One day,” Wolff wrote in Hindsight, “Raja and I were joined at our round marble table [at the Café des Westens] by an older woman in trousers. She had a sensitive face, which was lined but still beautiful, and her black hair was cut in an Eton crop. I had seen her face, drawn by herself, inside her book of poems. She was Else Lasker-Schüler. I found her glamorous and strange, and though I was flattered that she spoke to me, I felt no shyness with her. I told her how much I liked her poetry. Had she heard what I said, I wondered?”340 Wolff reports that they wrote to each other for a while after that, but nothing remains or has been recorded from this correspondence.

339 On page 38 of Hindsight Wolff declares this took place in 1917, but this can not be right: in 1917 she was twenty, and the Café des Westens had closed down. 1914 seems a more likely year for the story of awkward, intense teenage romance Wolff depicts as such. Such instances of imprecision are not particularly important: as Saunders has argued, factual accuracy as an autobiography’s strongest promise to its readers would constitute “an inappropriate and superficial reflection of the modern consciousness.” Contemporary German Autobiography, 3.
340 Wolff, Hindsight, 40-41.
The Café des Westens is said to have been one of Weimar Berlin’s most significant meeting places for writers, artists and other characters of ‘bohemia’: one of its nicknames was Café Größenwahn (‘Café Delusions of Grandeur’), which has been attributed to the intrigue it held for less bohemian types keen to peek and judge.\textsuperscript{341} Miller has pointed out that men far outnumbered women in cafés like this, and that Lasker-Schüler is the only woman that recurs in descriptions of the crowds here as a presence in her own right rather than as an accompanying wife or girlfriend.\textsuperscript{342} Wolff’s story of meeting Lasker-Schüler at this café makes no mention of it being a space in which women were marginalised, in keeping with her intent on depicting a time and place in her life where “we never thought of being second-class citizens.”\textsuperscript{343} In her account it is taken for granted and treated as entirely normal that she was sitting there with her friend, another young woman. The “modernist misogyny” discussed by Miller was certainly a real thing with many facets:\textsuperscript{344} it is possible that Lasker-Schüler’s immediate friendliness towards young Charlotte Wolff and Raja was because fresh-faced, independent women did not appear at the Café des Westens every day. Even so, Wolff’s depiction in \textit{Hindsight} of her first encounter with Lasker-Schüler, in which two young women chat to a well-known female poet at the Café des Westens and gender issues are not even raised for consideration, opens up a space in which we can imagine Berlin’s bohemian scenes beyond being entirely the domain of men.

Recording her past in her autobiographies, Wolff seemed intent on depicting the attitude she took towards Lasker-Schüler in the 1920s as relaxed and non-judgmental: by Wolff’s accounts, everything the poet did made sense or was at least understandable. This is significant when considering how much has been written about this poet’s eccentric and often unpopular ways among the scenes of Berlin – especially about the times she was not really Else Lasker-Schüler at all, but rather Jussuf, the Prince of Thebes. It has been said she held a “marginal and basically misunderstood place in contemporary literature.”\textsuperscript{345} At one point a newspaper review that dismissed her work as the product of “brain-softening” was upheld by the courts.\textsuperscript{346} As a presence in the cafés and on the streets of Berlin, among the avant-garde, she has been portrayed as an often unpopular presence: “one could draw up a list, beginning with Walter Benjamin, of people who couldn’t stand to be around [Lasker-Schüler], because

\textsuperscript{341} Miller, \textit{Cultures of Modernism}, 33.
\textsuperscript{342} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{343} Wolff, \textit{Hindsight}, 106.
\textsuperscript{344} Miller, \textit{Cultures of Modernism}, 3.
\textsuperscript{345} Calvin Jones, \textit{The Literary Reputation of Else Lasker-Schüler: criticism, 1901-1993} (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1994), 36.
they found her either overbearing, silly or hysterical, but who freely acknowledged her genius as a poet.” At odds with this, Wolff’s retrospective depictions of Lasker-Schüler’s way in the world are almost entirely positive.

The difficulties Lasker-Schüler faced in Berlin in this time have been summed up by Sieg as follows: she faced increasingly harsh marginalisation “as a Jew in an increasingly anti-Semitic Germany...; as a poor person in a class society; as a bohemian in an art market dominated by middle-class values and institutions; as a twice-divorced, cross-dressing lover of young men in a heterosexist and ageist culture; and as a politically unaligned social critic.”

As Sieg explains, Lasker-Schüler’s transformations into ‘Oriental’ regal figures such as the Prince of Thebes have been “interpreted as escapism, or even as a symptom of her delusions of grandeur.” Klaus and Erika Mann describe Lasker-Schüler’s transformation into the Prince of Thebes as “nur eine ihrer kleinen Seltsamkeiten”, before describing a few more, having first established their great admiration for her poetry – not quite as harsh as the treatment described in the paragraph above, where it seems many people did their best to avoid her.

Gentler yet is what Wolff has written. The figure of Else Lasker-Schüler which emerges in On the Way to Myself, in an account briefer than Klaus and Erika Mann’s and also written much later, is portrayed with respect and admiration. The only strange thing the Lasker-Schüler of Wolff’s stories does is try to arrange for Wolff to befriend her son Paul. Everything else this character does – dressing, talking, living and writing as Jussuf, Prince of Thebes, among other things – comes across as perfectly normal, if not noble:

She might have walked into the twentieth century right from one of the Egyptian tombs in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, the treasures of which I had been admiring. This garçonnière with the looks of an ancient Egyptian lived and wrote as if the world of the day did not exist. She called herself ‘Prince of Thebes’, and this was neither a pose nor a mental aberration. This self-styled elevation, together with a transfer to the other sex, had been her conscious decision at a difficult time in order to make life possible.

348 Sieg, Exiles, Eccentrics, Activists, 90.
349 Ibid.
351 Ibid.
352 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 56.
This idea has been expressed more recently, in terms of cultural concerns as well as gender, by Klaus Martens. “[Orientalism and die Frauenfrage – the issue of women’s liberation – were closely allied. The oriental costume, the oriental ornament, and the oriental name made a defiant statement. The bearer begged to differ, and not at all humbly. A woman in oriental costume proclaimed her independence of the ruling, paternally structured, culture. Her allegiance was to [the] realm of the imagination, transcending drab everyday reality and the limits imposed on the female sex. It was a way of going to extremes in order to carve out a place for themselves.” It is also significant, then, that Lasker-Schüler was Jewish: “To be precise,” argues Martens, ‘Orientalism’ was increasingly the preferred and pointedly ambivalent mode of public commitment to their heritage on the part of writers and artists of Jewish descent.” More broadly, in Sieg’s words: “the poet used her personal life as material and model to address, and change, reality.” That was also Wolff’s point, years earlier. While Wolff’s retrospective accounts from 1969 and 1980 cannot be said to reflect things the same way a diary or letter from the time of her encounters with the poet would have, her writing does offer a thoughtful reflection on Lasker-Schüler’s presence in Berlin in those times, offering different insights to the depictions typical of recent biographies and critical discussions of the poet.

In the same year as Hindsight, Sigrid Bauschinger’s Else Lasker-Schüler: Ihr Werk und ihre Zeit was published. Its final section, “Die Lasker-Schüler-Leser,” focuses on reception of the poet’s work and ways this has shifted throughout the twentieth century. There is a gentle irony to this book’s synchronicity with Wolff’s:

Unter Leser sind hier diejenigen zu verstehen, deren Reaktionen auf Else Lasker-Schülers Dichtungen uns bekannt sind, also zunächst die Kritiker und vereinzelt auch Freunde, die ihre Eindrücke in Briefen oder Tagebüchern festgehalten haben... Diese Leser [...] waren ausnahmlos Männer [...].

It is possible that a certain level of purity was being aimed for there: only documents from the time would suffice, not later memories altered by retrospect. This is a common and understandable line to draw with research of that kind, but it has its limits. When consideration is given to the social values and priorities, the ideologically driven plans and

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354 Martens, “Orientalism.”

355 Sieg, Exiles, Eccentrics, Activists, 90.

356 Bauschinger, Else Lasker-Schüler, 311. “Understood as ‘readers’ here are those whose reactions to Else Lasker-Schüler’s poetry are known to us, therefore alongside the critics friends are also included, who had preserved their impressions in letters or diaries... these readers were, without exception, men.”
decisions that go into securing anything in archives, the value of other forms of memory and evidence in historical research is immediately obvious. After all, as Chapter One’s discussion of sexuality’s historiographies demonstrated, that was the motivation behind the numerous oral history projects that begun when research into the history of homosexuality began in earnest in the 1970s. Unsurprisingly, much of the material those researchers hoped to find was not catalogued in state archives. They often had to make their own archives instead. Those aspects of the past which were not boxed away in climate-controlled spaces were often stored in the memories of older people, and in their own personal archives. Conversations out loud, or conversations through letters, could still offer glimpses into otherwise unknown pasts and near-irretrievable histories that might have only made it onto paper long since reduced to dust – such as the letters Wolff and Else Lasker-Schüler once exchanged.

If we fixate upon the sense of authenticity that can be gleaned from using only primary documents and excluding retrospective accounts, whether published as autobiography or sent privately as letters, the result may not be one of authenticity so much as another form of prioritising of the same voices and stances already prioritised by earlier circumstances and archives. While certainly reflection rather than ‘evidence’, and of course shaped by her own priorities at the time of writing, Wolff’s descriptions of her connection with Else Lasker-Schüler and their encounters in public space certainly offer a new perspective on gendered cultures of modernity in Berlin’s 1920s. Such milieu-specific petits écrits certainly illuminate: not by negating pre-existing concepts of the past, but by coexisting with them in a way that reflects the complexities of any era and the inevitable incompleteness of the past in our present-day understandings.

2.7.3 Helen Grund, Neue Sachlichkeit and ‘Sexual Cynicism’

Else Lasker-Schüler was not the only friend Wolff could evoke when trying to explain how her past (and that of others) could not be thought of simply in terms of the sexual identity categories, configurations of relationships and approaches to gender that were often taken for granted later in the twentieth century. To illustrate any point she might wish to make about an attitude that has been described more recently as “Weimar sexual cynicism,”357 an erotic footnote to the wider cultural tendency towards the no-nonsense anti-sentimentality of Neue

Sachlichkeit prevalent in 1920s Berlin, all Charlotte Wolff needed to do was recall memories of her friend Helen Grund.358

Their connection was very close: the stories told in Hindsight involve years of carefree nights out in Berlin and the occasional trip away together, just the two of them in Helen’s car, or otherwise with Franz Hessel and Henri-Pierre Roché in tow – Grund’s husband and lover, respectively. The open-minded polyamory practised among this trio endures in Wolff’s recollections as an ideal love, free of jealousy and possessiveness.359 Indeed, Roché’s novel360 about this trio’s entanglements was adapted by François Truffaut as the film Jules et Jim.361

Robert Stam’s research into the lives of Franz Hessel, Helen Grund and Henri-Pierre Roché compares their lives as they were lived – often through such fine detail as vividly diarised sexual encounters which blur the line between friendship and ‘beyond’ – with their depictions as the complex threesome at the centre of Roché’s novel and its later adaptation into film. In Stam’s own words, his project offers insights into “one small instance of the gendered nature of modernism as it was lived differently by men and by women, giving us insights into how gender and sexuality were experienced and reflected on at a specific point in history.”362 He explores the context in which Grund found it possible to live as freely and experimentally as her diaries suggest “within the rather sexist and even misogynistic environment of the avant-garde.”363

Wolff casts Helen Grund as a rather heroic figure in Hindsight: “A perfect example of a liberated avant-gardist was Helen [...]. She could turn her hand to anything – a worker on the land in the First World War and a fashion writer in the twenties and thirties, she was a lover of many and the wife of one. She bewitched men and women alike. Her blue eyes, clear and cold as a frosty spring, her elegance and self-assurance, made her the epitome of the seductive female of the twenties.”364 By the time Wolff had decided to flee Berlin for Paris, Grund was living there. She took Wolff under her wing, sharing with her the glamorous fashion world she belonged to through her work as a journalist and essayist. Wolff soon

358 In Wolff’s life writing she is referred to as Helen Hessel, but for the sake of differentiation between her and her husband Franz Hessel when it comes to referring to either by their surname alone, I have opted to refer to her by her unmarried name, as also occurs in discussions of her in the work of Ganeva. Gleber calls her Helen Hessel, Stam opted for Helen Grund Hessel. Each is valid.
359 Wolff, Hindsight, 108. “The triangular situation appeared to be a happy one where love and friendship neither clashed nor wavered […]. Freedom from jealousy means freedom from possessiveness. Jealousy, envy, competitiveness, are all part and parcel of the capitalistic mentality with which the power struggle of male domination has infected society.”
363 Stam, François Truffaut and Friends, xi-xii.
moved in to Grund’s apartment. One of the few notes that remains in Wolff’s archives from the 1930s is one which was written for Grund by the notable cosmetics magnate, salonnière and hostess Helena Titus Rubinstein, inviting her to come to another dinner party and “bring [her] friend the German doctor!” Letters written to Wolff in that same era and still preserved at the Wellcome Collection often include greetings to Helen Grund.365

Clearly, the two formed a tight unit: their closeness in Hindsight’s depictions alone have (understandably) encouraged at least one historian to surmise they may have been lovers as well as friends,366 but the question that must be asked in regard to that is not “were they lovers?” so much as “whether they were lovers or not, are we actually in a position to draw any conclusions from that?” Stam’s readings of Grund’s diaries suggest her attitude to sexuality included “a blasé, unprogrammatic lesbianism [in which] she makes love to women […] but unenthusiastically” – in her own words, “only to make them happy.”367 This project, like Stam’s, is not concerned with who may or may not have slept with whom. What is important here is how Stam’s findings suggest Helen’s diarised life represents a disregard for the concept of sexual identity categories, a flexible and sceptical attitude towards aspects of gender, and, most of all, an indifference towards the idea that sex is intrinsically bound with romance.368

This has a broader context: the notion that Weimar Berlin was wholly cynical in regard to sex. Stephen Brockmann’s articulation of “Weimar sexual cynicism” suggests a culture in which the physical satisfactions of sex were separated from – and elevated above – the notion of romantic love, which was coming to be regarded as a fiction, debunked by men’s wartime experiences.369 His discussion only addresses dynamics between men and women, but Jost Hermand includes “the largely free satisfaction of sexual needs in the homosexual and lesbian scene”370 as one of Neue Sachlichkeit’s cultural facets, thus conflating it with a sense of sexual cynicism, as per Brockmann, that eschews notions of romantic love and emotional attachment in favour of a mechanistic, even transactional view of sexual intercourse: “a sober eroticism carried out with sportsmanlike fairness.”371

365 Wolff’s 1930s correspondence, including the note from Helena Titus Rubinstein, is held at the Wellcome Collection under PSY/WOL/1/3/2.
367 Stam, François Truffaut and Friends, 115.
368 On the same page, Stam makes reference to another diary entry of Helen Grund Hessel’s presenting “an imaginative transgender and gender-bending twist.”
371 Ibid.
What remains of Weimar Berlin cultural production goes a long way towards endorsing this notion of detached, emotionless sexual encounters as typical of Weimar Berlin culture: the drawings and paintings of George Grosz, for instance, are seen to depict “the degradation of life and culture occurring in the metropolis[…], a city of artifice that is without soul or humanity [and] crowded with vacant characters united only by their desire to profit.”\textsuperscript{372} Discussions of Weimar Berlin sexual cultures, especially through the lens of art history, often suggest a bleak city in which men are irreparably cynical and women are prostitutes, murder victims or both: arguments which reduce a vast metropolis of divergent cultures into a divide between embittered, shell-shocked, cynical men as potential mass murderers and hyper-sexualised, objectified women as their potential victims are common.\textsuperscript{373} Brockmann argues the prostitute became a symbol for all Weimar womanhood, and the murderous rapist Macheath (‘Mackie Messer’) in Brecht’s \textit{Dreigroschenoper} is presented as a typical figure of Weimar sexual cynicism.\textsuperscript{374}

Much like her translations of Baudelaire can be seen to displace woman’s role as symbol to one of subject while still echoing some of Baudelaire’s original sentiments, Charlotte Wolff’s recollections in \textit{Hindsight} add another dimension to what can be discussed when considering the lives of prostitutes in a sexually cynical Weimar Berlin. It seems she too found the prostitute-as-symbol useful in her writing: in \textit{On the Way to Myself} she describes the Berlin of her student days as “everything to everybody, a beautiful prostitute.”\textsuperscript{375} Walter Benjamin’s writings on modernity, cities and \textit{flânerie} often allude to the prostitute as symbol or allegorical figure,\textsuperscript{376} but never as a real person, as such. Wolff’s retrospective writing, then, provides a significant departure from such a stance from within that same milieu, as her accounts do not only employ prostitutes as symbols and analogies. She makes an effort to convey that in her life they were not a ‘they’ so much as part of her ‘we.’ In Wolff’s world, prostitutes were not allegorical murder victims in pictures by George Grosz, they were friends who visited her at home and dreamt of – and at times succeeded in – running away to join the circus. Many of these women loved women as well as (if not instead of) men, regardless of

\textsuperscript{373} Maria Tatar’s work on sexual murders in Weimar Berlin also comes to mind: Lustmord: sexual murder in Weimar Germany (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
what they might do in working hours. Consider this anecdote of Wolff’s in light of the notion of ‘sexual cynicism’:

The women who danced [at a certain bar] in front of many men, oblivious of everybody but their partners, were mostly prostitutes. These lesbian ‘habituées’ earned their livelihood on the streets, but loved women at home. One could have no doubt that this love was their life when one saw them gyrating with one another, cheek to cheek, as if in a trance… One of them visited me once in my bed-sitter. She had been a circus acrobat and wanted to get back to her former job. ‘I’m sick of being a prostitute,’ she said to me, adding: ‘I can’t stand always the same idiotic movements.’

The anecdote ends with Wolff receiving a happy postcard from the woman, now back on the road as a circus performer after Wolff had pulled a few strings to find her a job with a Russian circus.

The attitude of the dissatisfied prostitute in this anecdote seems to bear the typical hallmarks of Neue Sachlichkeit sexual cynicism: sex as “always the same idiotic movements.” But that was just her job at the time: Wolff’s anecdote still allows room for romance, eroticism and a rounded character in depicting the lives of her friends who worked as prostitutes. Importantly, she includes this story in amongst pages where she reflects on attitudes towards sex amongst her milieu in the early 1920s: “Sex was not a dirty word for my companions or myself. But we must have realised that sex per se is a dead thing, which no technical acrobatics can bring to life.”378 ‘Sexual cynicism’, in Wolff’s versions of events, was certainly a popular notion, but not one that defined all erotic encounters: it was simply the realisation that sex and romance were not the same thing.

In Wolff’s 1920s as depicted in Hindsight, it was impossible to draw a distinct line between who was and was not a sex worker: as another anecdote demonstrates, in one of the bars she frequented she was approached by a man who offered her a plush inner-city apartment on the condition he would be bound and whipped by her once a week. She laughed “unceremoniously” in his face, according to her anecdote in Hindsight – but, all the same, he had considered the question to be worth asking.379 We can also see this blurred distinction in the at least marginal inclusion of the androgynous ‘Puppe’ amongst the ‘wir’ depicted in Wolff’s poem ‘Café.’ In Wolff’s poetry and in her later autobiographical writing, these people were not an Other to be murdered in hotel rooms or in paintings, useful only as allegorical

377 Wolff, Hindsight, 76.
378 Wolff, Hindsight, 75.
379 Wolff, Hindsight, 78.
symbols. Rather, they were people whose situations were not that easily differentiated from her own. Reflecting in *Hindsight* on her early years in London as a vulnerable refugee, war on the horizon, she commented on the reality of facing unexpected sexual advances from benefactors she saw as friends: “I didn’t demur because I couldn’t afford to lose support [… and] one form of prostitution is as good as another, I told myself.”

Her perception in the 1920s that the culture of friendship and eroticism around her included people who could, at some points in their life, be considered prostitutes carried over into her 1970s study of bisexuality, which included detailed short ‘biographies’, as Wolff called them, of the experiences of people who did occasionally exchange sex for money. It would have been due to the inclusion of these biographies that one British lesbian-feminist journal called for its readers to boycott *Bisexuality* for its pornographic content – a point which will be considered further in Chapter 4. In that time and place, sex had perhaps become a dirty word for some: this can be placed in a broader context of the ‘sex wars’ between anti-pornography and ‘pro-sex’ feminists in the 1980s. The experience of sex workers in Weimar Berlin from their own perspective is something that was considered worth asking about at the time – the Großstadt-Dokumente series included a volume titled *Zehn Lebensläufe Berliner Kontrollmädchen* (those were state-regulated sex workers), whereas retrospective discussions of Weimar sexual cynicism, overall, do not allow space for the prostitute to appear as anything but a symbol or a victim. Charlotte Wolff’s autobiographies provide a point of departure from this approach.

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382 Charlotte Wolff to Doris Rector, 16 October 1982. WC PSY/WOL/1/4.
383 For a thorough archive of debates relating to this, see Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex wars: sexual dissent and political culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
2.7.4 Flâneurs and Flâneuses: Charlotte Wolff, Franz Hessel and “the art of taking a walk”

“Open[ing] a parenthesis” on Wolff in his discussions of Helen Grund, Stam describes her as a “free-spirited flâneuse.”\(^{385}\) He is not the only writer to declare Wolff’s place in literary history is amongst the flâneurs: this has been argued in convincing and impressive detail by Anke Gleber\(^{386}\) and also, in passing, by the art writer and historian Francis McKee in the course of describing Wolff as one third of a trio who could tell “the secret history of the twentieth century.”\(^{387}\) Flânerie has been conceived of as “the art of taking a walk”;\(^{388}\) it is a word which suggests the creative mindset made possible by a slow and observant approach to public life, usually made manifest in the act of walking for the sake of it, reflecting and commenting on the city as a text.

Gleber theorises flânerie as “precursor of a particular form of inquiry that seeks to read the history of culture from its public spaces.”\(^{389}\) Charles Baudelaire had declared the flâneur an integral character of the modern world, as an unhurried, detached observer amongst urban crowds.\(^{390}\) As will soon be demonstrated, the concept of the flâneur had a renaissance in Weimar Berlin through the works of two of that city’s keenest Baudelairians: Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel. As Gleber has argued, Wolff has a noteworthy place in this history as a rare but very real example of a female flâneur. Building upon Gleber’s findings, we can establish aspects of Wolff’s poetry as flâneuristic as well as recognising, once more, the potential that studies of Wolff’s place in literary history can have in making our sense of histories – be they of modernity, flânerie, Neue Sachlichkeit or its subset, ‘sexual cynicism’ – “more interesting and less familiar,” to use Rita Felski’s phrase once more.\(^{391}\)

\(^{385}\) Stam, François Truffaut and Friends, xi.
\(^{388}\) This is the title of Gleber’s book, an adaptation of Franz Hessel’s important 1932 essay on flânerie, “Von der schwierigen Kunst, spazieren zu gehen.” Sämtliche Werke V, 68-72.
\(^{389}\) Gleber, The Art of Taking a Walk, 4.
\(^{391}\) Felski, Doing Time, 57.
Writing in 1985 on the sociological impossibility of the female flâneur in the time and place of either Baudelaire or Benjamin, Janet Wolff concluded her article ‘The Invisible Flâneuse’ with an acknowledgement of what was then still missing from historical and sociological understandings of those men’s societies and cultures: documentation of not-so-public ‘modern’ life and of the markedly different experiences women would have had of the public realm. Such documentation, she imagines, could come in the form of “a poem written by ‘la femme passante’ about her encounter with Baudelaire, perhaps.” Interestingly, that declaration was made in the same year Angela Carter’s short story “Black Venus” was published, in which Baudelaire was no longer a subject but the object of the detached, bemused scorn of Jeanne Duval, who was no longer muse but protagonist. It is a shame, in that regard, that neither Janet Wolff nor Angela Carter got to exchange ideas with Charlotte Wolff, who at the time was still alive and deeply engaged in reflections on writing and her past: she could have shared her experiences of translating Baudelaire’s poetry – including his ‘lesbian poems’ – from her own perspective in the 1920s. A conversation with either of those women may have also elicited some thoughts from Charlotte Wolff on the broader concept of flânerie, and her relationship to it.

Walter Benjamin engaged with the concept of flânerie when he wrote about Baudelaire’s work, time and place, and also sensed a revival of the concept’s importance in the work of Franz Hessel. He even titled his 1929 review of Hessel’s short prose collection Spazieren in Berlin ‘Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs’. The significance of flânerie – taken broadly to mean this slow reading of the city and its people, on foot – in Hessel’s writing is not hard to detect: alongside Spazieren in Berlin he pursued an ongoing project of imploring readers to conduct their lives with a greater sense of flânerie. In “Von der schwierigen Kunst, spazieren zu gehen” he described the flâneur as someone who “liest die Straße wie ein Buch” and issued this imperative to his readers: “Mach Minutenferien des Alltags aus solcher

394 Jeanne Duval was named the ‘Black Venus’ and declared the ‘muse’ of a certain cycle within Les Fleurs du Mal by literary critics, an approach which Jonathan Culler has taken issue with (“Introduction”, xx – xxi) for its wilful simplicity. Duval’s representation, as a mixed-race woman who is said to have sometimes worked as a prostitute, was understandably important ground for feminist critics and historians to work with.
395 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften III, 194-199.
396 Hessel, “Von der schwierigen Kunst,” 70.
What Hessel was calling for was a slow, quiet resistance to the aspects of modern life that reduced one to a relentlessly efficient piece of machinery.

The flâneur of that essay was coded quite specifically as male, and much has been made of the gendered distinctions of the act of flânerie. Mila Ganeva casts Hessel as decidedly sexist in his attitude to the possibility of female flâneurs: “Hessel’s flâneur established a notion of modernity divided along gender lines. His protagonists and narrators persistently and emphatically render the reflective and detached mode of experience as male.”

To Ganeva, Hessel’s Vogue editorial “An die Berlinerin,” in which he requests if not demands of this ladylike readership that they embrace flânerie in their busy lives, is proof that “Hessel became the most explicit proponent of the view that women were not flâneurs, hence could not be regarded as exemplary figures of modern consciousness and modern perception.” Ganeva’s comments on Hessel’s consistent casting, through his prose, of the male as reflective and detached in opposition to less pensive female figures are valid – though by no means does this render Hessel atypical in the context of the entire history of men’s writing. Her conclusions on Hessel’s attitude towards the possibility of female flânerie and all it connotes (female creative consciousness and female critical engagement, most of all) are comparatively unfair when considering how the ‘general’ (that is to say, male) readership of “Von der schwierigen Kunst, spazieren zu gehen” is also implored to take up the ‘difficult art’ of walking. The imperative, overall, functions as imperatives usually do in essays which seek to compel their readers to try something new. Hessel issued such imperatives to the men as well as the women of his imagined readership.

That is not to say that “An die Berlinerin” is merely a re-write of “Von der schwierigen Kunst, spazieren zu gehen,” with appropriately altered grammatical genders and a token reference here and there to the worlds of make-up and fashion that would have interested Vogue’s readership: it is a wholly different essay. Both do carry the same message, ultimately – slow down and embrace flânerie. Vogue is

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397 Hessel, “Von der schwierigen Kunst,” 68.
399 Ganeva, Women in Weimar Fashion, 33.
shown here to be a relatively diverse magazine, one where an interest in fashion and cosmetics is assumed (as makes sense in a fashion magazine) but is considered in terms of the cities and streets of the readers’ world as well as the distant runways and boutiques they might like to visit. This is how Hessel addressed the potential flâneuses amongst the readership of Vogue:

Bitte flaniere! Das ist ein Fremdwort und wird ein fremder Begriff bleiben, bis du dich so bewegst, daß ein neues Wort von deinem schönen Gange redet [...]. Berlinerin, schaff’ ein neues Wort. Mach’ einen Korso aus deinem westlichen Boulevard Tauentzienstraße-Kurfürstendamm. Noch ist er Stockung und Häufung, noch ist er voreilig. Schöne Berlinerin, sei gelassen!400

Perhaps the phrasing is more condescending than in “Von den schwierigen Kunst, spazieren zu gehen,” but “An die Berlinerin” does not reveal Hessel to doubt the capacity of women to be flâneurs (or flâneuses, if one does prefer the feminine variant) any more than “Von den schwierigen Kunst” expresses a doubt in the flâneuristic capabilities of most men.

Returning to Janet Wolff’s conviction (much stronger than Hessel’s) that the social configurations of Benjamin’s and Baudelaire’s times simply did not allow women to roam the city without fear of harassment (or worse), and thus there could be no such thing as a female flâneur, her sociological approach does strengthen this point: women are just less likely to have the time or the sense of security required to stroll their way around town fearlessly, whether in Baudelaire’s Paris, Benjamin’s and Wolff’s Berlin or the Auckland in which I write today (albeit to different extents). Importantly, Ganeva has stressed the problem with Janet Wolff’s “reductive statement,” namely that it “conflates the concept of flâneur as a fleeting social phenomenon of the mid-nineteenth century period with flâneur as a metaphor for the modern artist. [...] More recent studies,” she explains, “take into account the transmutations of the flâneur concept from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, so the search for alternative, female forms of flânerie have [sic] been more productive.”401 She cites Gleber as one example of this recent scholarship that has succeeded in demonstrating the (if not equal, still real) ways women could and did occupy public space on their own terms in urban settings of the early twentieth century.

401 Ganeva, Women in Weimar Fashion, 34.
Anke Gleber does not just identify “alternative, female forms of flânerie,” though: she declares she has detected the approach and the sensitivity of the *flâneur* in the writing of women in Weimar Berlin. Such writing, says Gleber, constitutes “a hidden history of literary writings on the city, documents of female creativity that suggest the beginnings of female flânerie. [...] Like male flâneurs, these women drift along the metropolitan streets of their time, and with their own eyes study the images of the society within which they move, within which they are seen, and in which they see.” 402 Of course they do: the implied necessity of proving this through, among other methods, the rediscovery of a hidden literary history of female *flânerie* speaks volumes about the complacency with which cultures can accept the notion that prior to some late twentieth century moment – perhaps a hazily imagined bra-burning ceremony in the late sixties? – women across the world lacked the agency required to perceive public spaces on their own terms, let alone write about the experience. It is this idea that Wolff herself spoke against, repeatedly, in her autobiographies. For this reason, one of Gleber’s main examples of women’s agency as *flâneurs*, made manifest in literature, is Charlotte Wolff and her explorations of the city in *Hindsight*.

Like Atina Grossmann, Gleber finds great significance in Wolff’s declaration that “we had no need to be helped to freedom from male domination. We were free, nearly forty years before the Women’s Liberation Movement started in America. We never thought of being second-class citizens.” 403 For Grossmann that declaration of Wolff’s served as a reminder of all the work yet to be done in the historiography of gender and sexuality in Germany’s past – a call to which this thesis responds. 404 Similarly, for Gleber, those lines stand out as symptomatic of a “gendered nonsynchronicity” between social expectations for women’s lives and what women themselves hoped for and expected from their own lives: basically, that it would be a great mistake to assume texts reflecting women’s autonomy could only be found in more recent times. She stresses that Wolff spoke not on behalf of all women, but of

404 In the context of viewing Gleber and Grossmann’s use of Wolff’s remembered sense of freedom alongside discussions of Weimar Berlin *flânerie* and gender, the concept of the *Neue Frau* should be mentioned: the sexually, economically and socially liberated woman was a popularly understood concept in that time and place, even if her attributed freedoms were only ever a work in progress. See Kristine von Soden and Maruta Schmidt (eds.), *Neue Frauen: die Zwanziger Jahre* (Berlin: Elefanten Press, 1988). Wolff’s mode of remembering this freedom goes beyond documenting the *Neue Frau*: she never uses the term and does not locate herself within any such concept.
herself as part of an “international avant-garde” of “privileged, educated bourgeois women.” In Gleber’s work, Wolff is thus recognised not as a representative of Weimar Berlin womanhood as a whole, but as someone who “frequented the circles of Berlin intellectuals and artists [...] and strolled the streets of Berlin as a female flaneur [sic] along with her male contemporaries.”

Gleber’s “hidden history” of female flânerie is written in response to a general assumption that social and legal oppression of women at the level of law and social expectation echoed in a total absence of autonomous women on the streets. Wolff’s writing is brought in as evidence, alongside the writing of Irmgard Keun and the visual documentation of women’s public lives in Walter Ruttman’s film *Berlin: Symphonie einer Großstadt*. Gleber does not, however, try to claim Wolff perceived herself as a flâneur (or that Keun, for instance, saw her characters as flâneurs).

*Hindsight* makes use of the word flâneur just once: to describe the composer Ernst Schoen and his presence in Wolff’s life as a friend who occasionally accompanied her and Dora Benjamin to a bar where Dora, going by Wolff’s anecdote, liked to watch the ‘authentic’ women dance together. Wolff, presumably, liked to join in. Ernst, for his part, enjoyed himself: as Wolff stressed numerous times in *Hindsight*, men were welcome at these bars. Wolff makes no attempt to cast herself, in her autobiographies or elsewhere, as a flâneur in her own right through use of the word itself. This does not detract from Gleber’s argument that, at least in her chosen examples, the creative, reflective engagement with public space so often discussed as flânerie (a concept in itself so often discussed as the domain of men) is present in women’s writing in Weimar Berlin, and that Wolff’s *Hindsight* serves well as a retrospective example of this. Looking at the poetry Wolff wrote in the 1920s, this relatively unhindered engagement with public space is still present: the lamp-post stanza in the “Feuerlilie” cycle and the specific public setting of “Café” are small fragments of this. Considering the difficulty scholars have had in placing female authors within the notion of flânerie, a tradition of being in public spaces and writing about the experience, these poems are significant.

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406 Ibid.
408 Wolff, *Hindsight*, 75.
As well as working on his own books and imploring his readers – male and female – to take up the difficult art of walking, Franz Hessel took a great interest in the literary talents of others. Although his literary journal, *Vers und Prosa*, had not been a commercial success, in the same year as its launch and its demise he was officially appointed as an editor for Rowohlt. Later, in the early 1930s, he was instrumental in bringing Mascha Kaléko’s poetry, often cited as a prime example of *Neue Sachlichkeit* women’s verse for its deceptively light treatment of modern worlds of office work and sex, from newspaper publication across to book form.\(^{409}\) In light of this, Wolff’s claims in *Hindsight* that Hessel “encouraged [her] literary gift” suggests that, had the course of events run differently, she may have eventually had a book of poetry published through Rowohlt.

Instead, though, 1924 remained her golden year of recognition as a poet: she was published twice in the course of that year in Hessel’s *Vers und Prosa*. Once, this was her own original verse: the “Feuerlilie” cycle, presenting a narrative of heartbreak and loss in the form of a waver ing journey through symbolism and lofty didacticism towards a very modern conclusion of concrete shock. The second time, it was her Baudelaire adaptations which were published: these included “Die Seele der Weins” with its overt shift from a male to a female narrator, and “Der Balkon” with its typically *neusachlich* and certainly un-George-like rejection of beauty and imagery in favour of erotic but not romantic representation of the female addressee. Her Baudelaire translations which remained unpublished, but may have once been intended for a collaborative project with Benjamin and Hessel, included thorough and at times pointedly altered re-workings of his trio of ‘lesbian poems.’ Her own poems which remained unprinted, like “Café” and “Furor Sexualis,” portrayed a world where detached, scientific terminologies for sexuality and gender existed awkwardly if not absurdly alongside the eroticism of a culture in which sex was not a dirty word. ‘Weimar sexual cynicism’ was but one superficial layer of this: sex had certainly been established as a notion apart from romance, but romance was not dead.

Those poems may have never been published, but they are still relevant to us today as they profoundly reflect the importance of broadening our approach to the

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\(^{409}\) Sigrid Bauschinger, “‘It Will Never Be Again as It Once Was’: Mascha Kaléko’s Berlin and What was Left of It.” In *Not an Essence but a Positioning: German-Jewish Women Writers (1900-1938)*, eds. Andrea Hammel and Godela Weiss-Sussex (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2009), 201.
past. Through Wolff’s poetry, and through assessing selections of what she later recalled about the time and place and situation in which she wrote, the past certainly does become “more interesting and less familiar.”410 No area of history is an island, of course: Wolff’s poetry and its literary-historical contexts are of importance far beyond our understanding of literature and its cultural contexts. When this study later embarks upon an exploration of Wolff’s experiences in the 1970s and 1980s not only as a writer but primarily as a reluctant, critical ‘relic’ of Weimar Berlin lesbian culture (in the words of those later years), all that has been considered in these discussions of Wolff’s friendships in the 1920s and their cultural context – from Helen Grund’s “blasé, unprogrammatic lesbianism”411 to Else Lasker-Schüler’s princely transformations – and all that has been discovered through Wolff’s poetry – whether rephrasings of Baudelaire or original verse satirising sexology – will be of utmost relevance. Most writers and readers in the later decades of the twentieth century tried to make sense of Charlotte Wolff ‘as a lesbian’ – and her history as lesbian history. As should be clear by now, her interactions with, and contributions to, worlds of literature reflect how the reality was much more complicated than that. This goes a long way towards explaining Wolff’s attempts in the later part of the twentieth century at steering histories of her life towards her past engagement with literature.

During the time in which Helen Grund shared an apartment with Wolff in Paris, her and Franz Hessel’s teenage son Stéphane would occasionally come to visit. He grew up to be a renowned diplomat – just last year, at the age of ninety-five, he was listed as a top global thinker by Foreign Policy magazine for his essay, “Indignez-vous!,” imploring the French public to feel and express outrage at local and global injustice.412 His mother’s intrigue was not lost on Foreign Policy, where he was described as having “a fair claim to being the world's most interesting man [as] the son of the real-life model for the woman in Jules et Jim,” an accolade listed alongside his past experience as “a French Resistance fighter during World War II who survived torture in Buchenwald, and a concentration-camp escapee who later helped Eleanor Roosevelt edit the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”413 In his

410 Felski, Doing Time, 57.
411 Stam, François Truffaut and Friends, 115.
412 This has been republished in English as Time for Outrage! (London: Quartet Books, 2011).
1997 autobiography, he shared his memories of Wolff, who he met in the early 1930s – I cite them here in translation:

[Helen Grund] has taken in a most remarkable person, Charlotte Wolff, doctor of medicine, Jewish, escaping Hitler's Germany, friend of Franz and Walter Benjamin, who was her rival in the translation of Baudelaire's poems into German. Charlotte discovered a real science behind reading the lines of the palm, chiromancy, which she made her source of income. A militant lesbian, she developed a platonic passion for Helen [...]. During my brief stays in Paris between two terms, I discovered this passionate and strong personality, a svelte creature, very masculine in her tone of voice and the dark down gracing her determined chin, confident in her science, fascinating her partners with a radiant look. I knowingly allowed myself to be captivated and initiated into the works of Freud, Marx and Claude Bernard. Precisely because she treated the interpretation of palm lines as a science, she represented for me the assured victory of reason.414

Stéphane Hessel’s recollections serve as an illuminating point of departure from this chapter into the next: in Paris, Wolff’s Berlin friendships and her involvement with literary worlds were still part of her reputation. Going by the younger Hessel’s memories, though, while Wolff was very much engaged with literature, psychoanalytical theories and politics, it was her research into the human hand that preoccupied her once she reached Paris. While this thesis takes later twentieth century depictions of Wolff and her social world in the 1920s as its main focus, it is still necessary to travel there via an overview of her life and work in the decades in between: they provide a background for her later life-writing, and their relative absence in her later representation as a public figure is certainly worth discussing in its own right. These years are, after all, the gulf in between her mythologized 1920s and those later years in which she argued with the writing of history. Between her poetic peak in 1924 and the release of her first autobiography in 1969, there was not silence – there was science.

414 Hessel, Danse avec le siècle, 32-34. I am grateful to Damian McVeigh for translating this page for me.
3. “Zwiespältige Ahninnen”: understanding the significant omission of Wolff’s mid-career work from later portrayals of her past

3.1 What do Wolff’s books about hands have to do with her later interactions with history?

Nothing is easier than to apportion praise and blame, writing many years after the events: some historians find the temptation irresistible. [...] It is very easy to claim that everyone should have known what would happen once Fascism came to power. But such an approach is ahistorical.

Walter Laqueur 415

Es fällt mir sehr schwer, einer Jüdin, die von den Nazis verfolgt emigrieren mußte und die zudem eine offen lebende Lesbe und linke, progressive Frau war, rassistisches Denken vorzuwerfen. Anders aber kann ich die Vorstellungen, die sie in ihrer psychologischen Deutung der Hand […] nicht benennen.

Ulrike Janz 416

Change of ideas and mistakes are unavoidable in any pioneer study, and both my theory and method altered considerably in the course of time.

Charlotte Wolff 417

In his reflections quoted at the end of the last chapter, Stéphane Hessel remembered Wolff’s presence in his life in 1930s Paris as symbolic of his belief, shared by many in that era, that it was possible to discover rational, scientific explanations for everything. ‘Everything’ included the psychology of sexuality, as made evident by his association of Wolff with the work of Freud. It even extended as far as the potential connection between the physiology of human hands and the mental attributes of the people attached to them. That was Wolff’s work in the middle years of the twentieth century: her investigations in this field yielded many publications between 1936 and 1952. This work first saw Wolff make a living and gain a reputation through her analyses of the hands of many well-known artists and writers,

416 Janz, “(K)eine von uns?,” 30-31.
417 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 80. She makes that comment in regard to her earliest hand-reading work – and it is the only statement she makes in On the Way to Myself distancing herself from any of her past approaches.
a situation which kept her alive but came to depress her, she would later recall, with its air of charlatanry.\textsuperscript{418}

Eventually, Wolff had the opportunity to develop this research with the support of established scientific researchers in London. She turned her attentions to the hands of apes at the zoo and – simultaneously – to young people housed in mental institutions. Her project there was to see whether the conditions by which those people had been categorised – with nowadays cruel-sounding labels such as ‘idiot,’ ‘mongol’ and ‘feeble-minded’ – could in fact be diagnosed from the form and, most specifically, the lines of their hands. The connection between such an approach to taxonomising people and certain aspects of the concept of eugenics is not hard to trace.\textsuperscript{419} As this chapter will demonstrate, this connection manifests itself in aspects of Wolff’s hand research work conducted in exile in the 1930s and 1940s, and, differently (reflecting the sometimes tenuous link with the plethora of ideas which have been grouped together as ‘eugenics’ across time and space), even in the one piece of written work that remains from her years as a doctor in Berlin: her 1928 medical school dissertation. At one point in Wolff’s 1942 book \textit{The Human Hand}, it even appears Wolff is endorsing racist and, at the time of that book’s writing, already dated beliefs which had been expressed by a Swiss anthropologist in the twenties.\textsuperscript{420}

This chapter explores the meaning of these challenging and discomforting aspects of Wolff’s career in their own time, as well as how they were approached by Wolff and her audiences later in the twentieth century.

This chapter also acknowledges how Charlotte Wolff’s encounters with the writing of history in the 1970s and 1980s were about much more than a clash of views on the concept of sexual identity and its place in the writing of histories. In the 1970s and 1980s, on her return visits to Germany, Charlotte Wolff spoke in public as a Jew.

\textsuperscript{418} The most frank articulation of this can be found in sound-bites of Wolff included in a lengthy radio feature about her which was broadcast on Sender Freies Berlin in 1981: “Ich bin ich,” transcribed in \textit{Liebe und ein starker Geist kennen keinen Alter}, 36.

\textsuperscript{419} For an articulation of this in the context of the British medical sector within which Wolff researched and was eventually employed, see Mathew Thomson, \textit{The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy and Social Policy in Britain, c. 1870-1939} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). For a broader contextualisation of the same issue, see Patrick McDonagh, \textit{Idiocy: A Cultural History} (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{420} Wolff, \textit{The Human Hand}, 17-18. The anthropologist in question, Rudolf Martin, has only recently come to the attention of historians of science in terms of the questions and challenges which arise when assessing the context and influence of his work: see Amos Morris-Reich, “Anthropology, standardization and measurement: Rudolf Martin and anthropometric photography”, \textit{British Journal for the History of Science} online preview (2012). Accessed 31 October 2012. http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S000708741200012X.
who had been forced to flee, and who had sworn many times she would never return. That she returned at all was remarkable; even when her German audiences in the 1970s held her views on sexuality in low regard, they at least appreciated her presence.\footnote{See, for instance, the 1979 Wolff/Kokula exchange in \textit{Courage} which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter: at its core, the situation was one in which Kokula had publicly declared Wolff’s main purpose for younger German lesbian-feminists was as a comforting, elderly presence. Between the lines, Wolff’s Jewishness was arguably part of this: her presence as an act of reconciliation between the past and the present. The clearest articulation of Wolff’s meaning, as a Jewish person, to these young Germans can be found in Doris Rector’s “Charlotte Wolff und wir”, \textit{die tageszeitung} (3 July 1981).} Wolff’s occasional visits to Germany from 1978 onwards, even when she was invited to places ostensibly to discuss sexuality or ‘lesbian history,’ made many young Germans confront the horror of their country’s recent history on a personal level. The question of whether these audiences were necessarily well prepared for such an encounter – and willing to engage with Wolff’s direct challenges on these terms – will be explored throughout the course of this chapter as well as the next one. It is difficult to imagine anyone anywhere, but especially in Germany, feeling it was a priority or even a possibility to challenge Wolff on such heavy and, by then, challenging incongruously aspects of her past, when her very presence in Germany in the wake of Nazism was already an act of good grace on her part.

It is significant, and not a coincidence, that the traceable connection between Wolff’s mid-century research work and racist and eugenic ideology was first highlighted by a writer whose primary concern was the historiography of sexuality. This was Ulrike Janz, who wrote in 1991 that she was beginning to doubt the relentlessly feel-good nature of the lesbian histories that she, as a self-described lesbian, enjoyed reading in her spare time. This positivity was hard to detect at times: lesbian characters in these histories\footnote{“These histories” – I phrase this generally, albeit at the risk of being read as if I wished to construct the historiographical equivalent of a ‘straw man.’ Janz only cites one particular work in her critique: Alexandra Busch’s \textit{Ladies of Fashion: Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney und das Paris der 20er Jahre} (Bielefeld: C. Haux, 1989). Janz seems more intent on interrogating a perceivable tendency rather than any specific historical work. Context for the tendencies she described and criticised has already been established in the discussion chapter.} were, of course, victims of social and cultural if not also systematic political oppression. The positive affect for readers like Janz lay in the subtext: in any history she encountered, lesbians were, wherever possible, the heroes – lamentably often the victims – but never the villains. For Janz, this felt doubtful at times, which led to a sense of curiosity as to what lesbians (like anyone else) actually want and hope for from the histories they read, and, thus, also how their wishes shape their research.
This curiosity resulted in her article “(K)eine von Uns? Vom schwierigen Umgang mit ,zwiespältige Ahninnen.” Here, Janz cited Natalie Barney, Radclyffe Hall and Charlotte Wolff as symptomatic of a tendency she had perceived: that of popular lesbian histories to create heroic characters and narratives at the expense of difficult or negative details in their subjects’ lives. The Paris-based American salonnière Barney and the wealthy, reclusive British novelist Hall both have their recorded moments of pro-fascist sentiment exposed with confusion and dismay, but for Janz, Wolff’s story was the hardest of all three to comprehend. Her understanding of Wolff was of her as a Jewish woman who was persecuted by the Nazis (which is true), was a left-leaning, progressive thinker (this has been true at times), and was “eine offen lebende Lesbe” – which, as earlier discussions in this thesis have shown, is an ahistorical transference of a historically and culturally contingent concept onto Wolff’s sense of self across all times and places in which she had lived. The version of Wolff which lived on in 1991 as a leftist lesbian character in collective historical memory – as found in Janz’s article – was the product of the histories that had begun to be written within Wolff’s lifetime. This version of Wolff, defined by later standards of what it meant to be left-wing and to be lesbian, was very difficult to reconcile with the traces of racism and support for (pre-Nazi variations upon) the concept of eugenics which Janz had detected in Wolff’s writing.

The significance of this one article is remarkable – almost twenty-five years later, current English-language scholarly discussions of how sexual identities are written into history still pose much the same questions as Janz did in that article: how much does the writing of history reflect the desire of its writers and imagined readers? Even today, why is it so difficult to articulate a sense of the past in which same-sex-attracted people could serve as anything but victims (at worst) and icons (at best)? Consider, for instance, the ideas of the gender theorist Judith Halberstam, writing in

423 Janz, “(K)eine von uns?,” 30-31.
424 Ibid.
425 See, for instance, Love, Feeling Backward, 32. Interestingly, an article almost identical to Janz’s in its examples and its argument, minus any awareness of Wolff and the added complexity of the example she provides, was written by Andrea Dworkin in 1997: “Shadowy corners in the Hall of fame”, Times Higher Education (12 September 1997). http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=159886&sectioncode=6. Dworkin was a prominent and divisive figure in twentieth-century feminist thought. Her article reviewed Sally Cline’s Radclyffe Hall: A Woman Called John (New York: Overlook Press, 1998), expressing discomfort with what Dworkin felt was flippant dismissal of Hall’s evident fascist leanings in favour of portraying her as a lesbian icon. The review closes thus: “Pro-fascism is not just a weird tic or an odd hobby or a slightly bizarre attitude. It goes to the heart of one's conception of humanity; and therefore one must ask - why is lesbian liberation so comfortable with fascism? Or, put more optimistically, why was it?”
“In a disloyal historiography, homosexuality is not so much an identity shifting across time as a shifting set of relations between politics, eros and power. To capture the complexity of these shifting relations we cannot afford to settle on linear connections between radical desires and radical politics; we have to prepare to be unsettled by the politically problematic connections that history throws our way.”⁴²⁶

In 1991, Ulrike Janz had already touched on the discomfort and the importance of ‘disloyal historiography.’ Her research had troubled her: here it is important to stress that her declaration that Wolff’s early medical and scientific work embraced racist and eugenic thought does not seem to have been written with a character assassination of Wolff as its motive. Janz had cast herself as a reluctant but necessary iconoclast, asking the painful question of how these aspects of Wolff’s career could have been so silently ignored by both Wolff and her audiences in the 1970s and 1980s. It has been said that Gertrude Stein’s dying words included the observation that “the answer is in the question”. Whether she did say those words or not as she approached death is hardly an issue; ‘famous last words’ are more often than not a matter of legend. Wolff quoted that legend of Stein in *Hindsight* in the course of happily subverting it in favour of an agnostic outlook: “many questions remain, to my delight, unanswered.”⁴²⁷ The focal question of Janz’s iconoclastic and, in its time, brave article – at its essence, how could a lesbian be on the wrong side of history? – very much contains its own answer: when, with the privilege of hindsight, we divide the past up into two static teams, the perpetrators and the victims, and eschew troubling nuance in favour of continuous narrative simplicity, the complexities of situations are left unacknowledged.

One such situation was the residue of racism and eugenics in Charlotte Wolff’s medical work and research which spanned decades in the middle of the twentieth century. This chapter assesses their context: first in their own time, and then as potentially known but never discussed aspects of her past in the years in which she was a public figure, historical ‘relic’ and active writer. This task is not pursued out of any desire to tarnish Wolff’s reputation – this is a study of the meaning of her public reputation, as it developed in the 1970s and 1980s. This task is in absolutely no way

allied with the interests of individuals who seek to endorse eugenics – by any
definition – by highlighting the support shown for various shades of the concept by
some Jewish people at various points in time;\textsuperscript{428} likewise, I must stress that this
chapter has been researched and written in a spirit of utmost contempt for the
ahistorical, blinkered and ugly idea that evidence of support for eugenics or racism in
the writings of any non-Nazi somehow detracts from or, worse yet, softens what the
Nazis did.\textsuperscript{429} Rather, this chapter is a cautious but necessary continuation of the
discussion Janz sought to make possible in her 1991 article. No other studies of
Wolff’s works and their context have approached this aspect of her life and its impact
on her works and words. Of course, not every question can be answered here – some
aspects of the past will always be difficult to discuss, let alone reconcile. One thing
which the findings of this chapter certainly demonstrate is the extent to which this
aspect of Wolff’s career continued to be relevant in the course of her later life as a
writer, as a public figure and as a critic of how the past was being written into history.

Wolff’s work on the human hand has mostly, but not entirely, faded into
obscurity: one reason for this is that the idea of typecasting people based on physical
attributes thankfully decreased in popularity among the medical and scientific
communities Wolff was involved with. Within these same communities, psychiatric
care of people classed in the parlance of that time as ‘mentally deficient’ developed
beyond the approach which had been reflected in its vocabulary of ‘idiots,’
‘imbeciles’ and the even vaguer ‘feeble-minded’ which peppers Wolff’s research
reports. Institutionalisation gradually ceased to be regarded as the default ‘treatment’
for people in similar situations to those faced by the subjects of Wolff’s 1940s and
1950s work.\textsuperscript{430} None of this is to say that the approach to science underpinning
Wolff’s hand research now founders in the rubbish bins of medical history, however.
In a thesis intent on historicising words and ideas, it is necessary to observe which

\textsuperscript{428} In the time and place in which I write this, any internet search to see what has been written about Jewish
scientists’ and doctors’ involvement with eugenics across the twentieth century yields a swathe of information
about John Glad’s \textit{Jewish Eugenics} (Washington, DC: Wooden Shore, 2011). This is a book fitting the description
attached to this footnote; this is a book which receives glowing reviews from websites about ‘white pride and
culture’ and anti-Semitic conspiracy theory websites, which I refuse to cite and which I wish my browser would
not cache. It received a timidly repulsed student review in the \textit{Quarterly Review of Biology}: Axel Carlson, “\textit{Jewish
Eugenics} by John Glad [review]”, \textit{Quarterly Review of Biology} 86, no.4 (2011), 332-334. It was soundly and
[review]}”, \textit{The Journal of Religion} 92, no. 2 (2012), 302-305. This book is thoroughly and rightly ignored
everywhere else.

\textsuperscript{429} This minimisation and detraction tactic is addressed by Laqueur, who locates an early instance of it in a speech
made by Goebbels (\textit{The Terrible Secret}, 27-28).

\textsuperscript{430} Thomson, \textit{The Problem of Mental Deficiency}. 137
concepts stand as popularly accepted science and thus as truths in any given time, place and social context. In that spirit, it is necessary to acknowledge that the form of the hand is still used in some areas of medical science as a possible mirror of one’s inner endocrinological workings. Since this was part of Wolff’s research, she does deserve recognition for that achievement, including the status of ‘pioneer’ with which she is sometimes bestowed.431

Interestingly and aptly, a more recent manifestation of this line of inquiry can be observed in an article in the sexological journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. Here, researchers sought to discover whether a certain finger length ratio (said to reflect prenatal androgen levels) differed between supposedly self-described ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ lesbians who had their hands measured at a Californian gay pride parade in 2000.432 The aspects of the research which address the chemicals understood to course through our bodies appear harmonious with Wolff’s own approach in *Bisexuality*. One imagines the societal, language-level approach of the methodology, however, would have enraged Wolff: the findings of the study were anchored around participants’ answers to the question “If I had to describe myself as one of the two types below, I would consider my overall outlook to be (circle one),” followed by two (and only two) options, ‘butch’ and ‘femme.’433 The sly duress and cultural obligation implied in the question’s phrasing – “if I had to” – has been interrogated and criticised in Wolff’s later twentieth century writings, whereas in the 2002 study described here, it is treated as a non-issue. To pioneer, it seems, is not necessarily to pave the way for more advanced, nuanced approaches. In any case, that study reflects how Wolff’s mid-century work, which at times included reference to the hand forms of “born homosexuals,”434 should not be viewed today as wholly obsolete, a station on one of science’s discontinued lines of enquiry.

431 The most eager positioning of Wolff’s hand analysis work upon this particular pedestal takes place in Anthony Masters’ *Mind Map* (London: Methuen, 1980).
The question of whether this area of research in which Wolff has been recognised as a leader and pioneer\textsuperscript{435} deserves more credit than it tends to receive has been addressed in more detail elsewhere,\textsuperscript{436} as has the question of whether we should think of this work as ‘science’ or something that encroaches upon its borders, challenging the notion of there being any definitive border between objective science and interpretive creativity.\textsuperscript{437} The meaning of ‘science’ obviously changes over time. In regard to Wolff’s years working with and around medical science in the earlier parts of the twentieth century, however, several important questions still remain unexamined: how was Wolff’s hand analysis work received in its own time by its intended audiences and what does this say about its relation to science? Beyond its own time, how has this work – and its broader context, including its eugenic connotations – been perceived and portrayed? Such questions are immensely relevant to this project’s investigation into the achievements made and challenges posed by Wolff as a writer, a subject and a critic of history.

\textsuperscript{435} She is not only described as such in her own accounts: for acknowledgement of Wolff as a pioneer in the field at a time when the work was still fresh see, for example, Henryk Misiak and George Franghiadi, “The Thumb and Personality,” \textit{The Journal of General Psychology} 48 (1953): 242. To forge new paths is perhaps a value-neutral achievement in its own right: Misiak and Franghiadi’s recognition that Wolff’s work is the most significant on that topic comes in the course of their own attempt to cast doubt upon it.

\textsuperscript{436} Rappold, “Die Handdiagnose,” 30.

\textsuperscript{437} Brennan, “Charlotte Wolff’s Contribution to Psychology,” 113.
3.2 *Studies in Hand-Reading* as a moment in the meaning and potential of science

Erstmal sah ich mir natürlich die Hände an, und dann erzählte ich den Leuten, was ich aus deren Händen für eine konstitutionelle Diagnose stellen konnte, das heißt, was ihr allgemeiner Gesundheitszustand war […] Aber das Wichtigste war, das ich dort von ihrer Persönlichkeit sprach. Und dann, dies war das Furchtbarste für mich, ich hatte, und ich kann es heute noch nicht verstehen, eine unglaubliche Begabung, wie ich es nicht anders bezeichnen kann. 438

Medical appraisal blended with an unsettling, seemingly psychic personality assessment: that is how Charlotte Wolff described her work reading hands during her early years in exile in Paris and London in one radio interview in 1981. A friend of Wolff’s is quoted as having insisted that inexplicable ‘gift’ was indeed a prescient sixth sense of sorts, and that Wolff forced herself to part ways with this ‘gift’, overwhelmed by her knowledge of too many bleak futures sneaking up on her clients. 439 A thesis about Wolff’s role in the creation of cultural histories is hardly the venue for an appraisal of whether she did or did not possess paranormal powers – but the two descriptions just cited are exemplary of an important point: the earliest stages of Wolff’s career in hand analysis were aligned much more closely with intuitions than with institutions.

It is at this stage that Wolff researched and wrote her 1936 monograph on hand analysis, *Studies in Hand-Reading*. Aldous Huxley provided a preface, in which he declared no client of Wolff’s could “doubt her power to specify past events and date them correctly to within a few months,” 440 suggesting Wolff’s hand-readings likely did involve an element of something which, when accurate, would have struck her clients as being telepathic insight. Wolff’s own introduction to the same volume makes no promises of conclusive scientific findings, but also seeks to differentiate “hand-reading,” as an experimental science, from palmistry as such: “I should like to call the book ‘A glimpse of the Science of Hand Reading.’ It does not seek to defend any theories: it is a voyage of discovery into the province of the Science of Human

438 Wolff, “Ich bin ich,” Liebe und ein starker Geist kennen kein Alter, 37. “First, of course, I looked at their hands, and then I told people what kind of constitutional diagnosis I could make, that is to say, what their general state of health was. […] But the most important thing was that I would then speak about their personality. This was the worst part for me, and I still cannot understand it today: I had an unbelievable gift, which I cannot describe otherwise.”


Huxley also sees Wolff’s work as a beginning rather than a conclusion to any attempt at bridging unexplainable intuition and empirical science, and suggests “it would be interesting, for example, to have an examination made of the hands of some thousands of lunatics.”\textsuperscript{442} That is what happened next: her later works sought to move closer to ‘science’ and further from ‘intuition’ with extensive studies conducted in institutions.

Many who were drawn to Wolff’s early hand-readings over time became recognisable figures in canons of twentieth century European culture: this survival work, then, through the fame of its clientele, later became a prominent reference point for anyone describing Wolff’s past. Her past, as a story to be told, became crowded with the artists and poets who grace the pages of \textit{Studies in Hand Reading}. Less is known about Wolff’s interactions with the subjects of the hand analysis research which followed \textit{Studies in Hand Reading}: the ‘mongols’, ‘idiots’ or ‘difficult and high-grade boys’ who were integral to this later work. This will be addressed later in the chapter: in advance of that, this present discussion seeks to gauge what Wolff’s earliest hand-readings meant to people in their time and place, and also to briefly consider how Wolff sought to have this work represented later in the twentieth century. This work, exemplified by \textit{Studies in Hand-Reading}, was rich in cultural reference points, revered beyond strictly scientific circles and still removed from the racist and eugenic connotations evident in her later efforts.

Bereft of any opportunity to work as a doctor due to her refugee status in Paris and in London, Wolff had turned her attention to researching the possibility of using physical attributes of the human hand as an aid to medical and psychological diagnosis. This research was, in itself, not enough to provide Wolff with a living in such a precarious time. By all later accounts, it was only for money that she built up a reputation for herself in this era as a reader of hands, offering personal assessments of a person’s physicality, mentality and personality based solely on the form of their hands and the lines on their palms: in one interview, Wolff described her life as a reader of hands in exile as “das doch sehr zweifelhafte und nicht angenehme Leben,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{441} Wolff, \textit{Studies in Hand Reading}, 1.}\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{442} Huxley, “Preface,” xii.}
das mir mein Geld einbrachte.” She had learnt of the fledgling science of chirology while still in Berlin, reminiscing in *Hindsight* that she and her girlfriend Katherine had decided to attend lessons on the matter from Julius Spier, who saw himself as the inventor of the field.

A vivid depiction of Spier as teacher – intense, mystical, passionate and heedless of such restrictive notions as ‘science’ or ‘professionalism’ – can be found in Etty Hillesum’s diaries, and to a lesser extent, this same emotional intensity is still visible in the two letters from Spier which Wolff chose to archive: letters in which, basically, he asks why she has stopped writing to him, and implores her to keep up their correspondence. It seems she never did, and probably did not want to, either. The dynamic between Wolff and Spier is the stuff of minute biographical detail: for the purposes of this project, what matters about it is how it reflects in Wolff’s attitude towards the word ‘chirology.’ To all but very few today, if the word means anything at all it means an obsolete dead-end of science, resigned to the same wastepaper basket of dangerous, wrong ideas as phrenology. The situation would have been the same in the 1980s, by which point she was imploring an interviewer to never use the word chirology and instead refer to her work from that era, if at all, as ‘hand psychology.’ By then, ‘chirology’ had become a redundant concept: no longer used in scientific circles and associated with discredited physiognomic ‘sciences’ like phrenology, it seemed decidedly obsolete, if not offensive. Wolff, in later life, was keen to distance herself from chirology for both those reasons; this was complicated, however, by her feeling that her work done in that name had yielded some useful results. Hence: ‘hand psychology’.

With this in mind, it is unsurprising to discover the consistency and frequency with which she stressed, in later portrayals of her Paris years and her arrival in London, that her services as a reader of hands were conducted solely as a means by which to make a living – and entirely within the bounds of science. Another example of this involves Wolff encountering herself in the (actual, not metaphorical) footnotes

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446 Spier to Wolff, 9 March 1932. WC PSY/WOL/1/3/3.
of literary history. In two editions of Virginia Woolf’s correspondence which were published in 1979 and 1980, the series editor Nigel Nicolson opted to footnote the infrequent mentions of “Lotte Wolff” (as she was still known during her encounters with Woolf) with a description of her as a “palmist.” Given that each time Woolf writes about Wolff it is in relation to her hand readings alone, this is understandable. Wolff’s discomfort with how aspects of the past had come to be interpreted in later years – and her perhaps impossible wish to alter this at a level of fine detail, not just in relation to sexual identity categories but here concerning how her 1930s professional self was represented in later texts – is embodied in a letter she wrote to Nicolson in response to the phrasing of his footnotes. She chastised him for his choice of word, ‘palmist,’ stressing she had been nothing of the sort – rather, a disciplined scientist working on an unexplored frontier.

It was not just in that one edition of Virginia Woolf’s diaries that Wolff received a mention: she also appeared from time to time in the letters which were published as part of the same series. One volume in this series was titled Leave the Letters Till We’re Dead: obviously, by the time of that publication, Woolf was, but Wolff was not. Her letter to Nicolson demonstrates the dismay she felt towards her inevitable situation of having the long duration of her life portrayed with words and concepts that did not match up to how she had seen things at the time. Charlotte Wolff had a chance, much later in life, to read seemingly everything Virginia Woolf had once written about her in the privacy of her personal diary and the letters she wrote to others.

Virginia Woolf had been one of Wolff’s most well-known clients (and there were many), and unknowingly also the most devout documenter of the impression made by Wolff, as a Jewish refugee with a puzzling intuitive gift and the support of the Huxleys, upon the ‘Bloomsbury’ circle and surrounding communities – in the intellectual rather than the geographical sense. The first appearance Wolff makes in the private (but later, public) writing of Virginia Woolf is in a letter where she reflects...

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449 Wolff to Nigel Nicolson, 17 October 1980. WC PSY/WOL/1/11.
not so much on her encounter with the refugee hand-reader as with its conduciveness to dinner-party debate:

I was glad to find that we could still argue with some heat the question of palmistry. Aldous Huxley asked me to have my hand told by his friend – Maria’s rather – Lotte Wolff; so I did; with the result that some things she got hopelessly wrong; others she guessed amazingly right. And for two hours poured forth a flood of connected and intense discourse. Leonard said it was all humbug; disgusting humbug; Clive said That’s not the scientific spirit, you must try things. Nessa was on L’s side. I kept my distance, having the idea that after all some kind of communion is possible between beings, that can’t be accounted for; or what about my dive into them in fiction? But why marks on the hand? Why should deaths and other events indent the palm of the hand?  

Virginia Woolf’s cautiously agnostic stance towards Wolff’s hand-reading work crystallises into grounded scepticism in a letter where she confides to Ottoline Morrell:

I’m sceptical – but don’t say this aloud – about Lotte Wolff. It’s true she made some very wonderful shots, but still more wonderful misses. But I’m not a fair test, because I only lent my hand because Maria [Huxley] asked me to, and was much more curious to investigate her than to have her analyse me. And I thought she flattered one too much. All the same she’s got a great scent for a character – only isn’t it merely that and nothing to do with marks on one’s palm, and shouldn’t we all – all that have a nose for character – know as much if we chose and had to make a living by it? But I liked her.

Less than a fortnight later, though, Woolf writes about Wolff to Ethel Smyth in a tone of scorn softened by pity:

[…]could I ask of you a very great kindness[…] that is to scribble down roughly a translation of the enclosed maundering? As you see, the woman begs me to get it translated by a German scholar – Aldous Huxley who is dabbling in psychology and so on, asked me to let this according to him inspired palmist read my hand: which I did very reluctantly; still more reluctantly paid her 2 guineas (but she’s driven out of Germany – a Jewess) and now finds that she wants to include what I suspect is sheer and mere drivel in a book of hands.

The shifting attitude traceable through this writing of Virginia Woolf’s reflects the simple reality that we will express our thoughts differently – sometimes
sharpened, sometimes softened, sometimes even contradicted – depending on the audience and the context. Writing to Smyth, Woolf was in a position where she was asking a favour on someone else’s behalf: a favour relating to research which the above excerpts demonstrate she felt curious about, at best. Perhaps, too, Ethel Smyth was someone Woolf thought might consider the subject “sheer and mere drivel” – not to discount, of course, the likelihood that Woolf herself had come to think that. The comparative harshness of her phrasing when writing to Smyth compared to the stance she took in the previous two letters did not escape editor Nicolson’s attention: he footnoted her mention of “the enclosed maundering” with the recognition that it was Wolff’s *Studies in Hand Reading* up for discussion, and cited selectively from Wolff’s assessment of Virginia Woolf’s hands as it stood within those pages: “The hand is full of real and apparent contradictions[…] a desire to escape reality[…] This over-stress of the imagination forces her to adopt a defensive attitude.” It is left to the reader to decide how much of the stance on display in that letter – the dismissal of Wolff’s work expressed in tandem with sympathy for her situation – is defensiveness. In any case, Smyth declined to translate *Studies in Hand Reading*.

The contents page of that book serves very well as a roll-call of the artists and thinkers with whom Wolff was able to come into contact in Paris and London: among others, André Breton, Romola Nijinsky, Paul Eluard, Aldous Huxley, Bernard Shaw, Max Ernst, Cecil Beaton, Man Ray, Anna May Wong, John Gielgud and Antonin Artaud. While no other subject of *Studies in Hand-Reading* appears to have documented their thoughts and feelings on Wolff and her work to the same extent Virginia Woolf did, Wolff’s archives do contain brief traces of what her interactions with some of these people were like. Ray, Nijinsky and Eluard all wrote to her in French expressing their satisfaction with – and demonstrating a genuine belief in – the work she had done. The actress Anna May Wong did much the same, but in English. The English writer Osbert Sitwell was so taken by his experience with Wolff as hand-reader that his autobiography, *Left Hand, Right Hand*, uses Wolff’s prints of his hands as its frontispieces.

453 All these letters are located in WC PSY/WOL/1/3/2.
It seems that, at least during her Paris years, Wolff was curious to find connections between her chirological practice and the artistic and literary practices taking place in the city around her. One letter from Wolff has been preserved among the papers of the well-known poet and publisher Adrienne Monnier, who also ran a bookstore, La Maison des Amis des Livres. This letter from Wolff illustrates her situation as a refugee in exile from a land and a language in which she had once been a poet and a doctor, having to improvise a new life in which language and legalities deprived her of both those aspects of her identity and livelihood. The letter is brief, and its sole purpose is to praise Monnier’s collection of stories, Fableaux. She does so with a stalling self-deprecation and meekness which reads at odds with the usually forthright and unflappable persona she showed to the public eye through her autobiographies and her interviews later in life: first she explains she usually struggles to read books, and, in closing, apologises for her mistreatment of the French language. In between, she explains that one particular appeal the book had for her was its reflection of the overlaps between poetic intuition and ‘chiropsychological’ intuition. That letter would not have been the only one they exchanged: Monnier was featured in Wolff’s Studies in Hand Reading, where she was classified as a ‘spiritualist.’ “I do a little palmistry,” Monnier explains in one of her works, before providing a very detailed assessment of Collette’s inner self according to the lines of her hand.

In this era, Wolff was also published in the Surrealist journal Minotaure: in Hindsight she tells of her delight at spotting a copy of Minotaure, opened to that very page, under glass in a room mostly devoted to Picasso’s works in the exhibition ‘Hommage à Tériade’ at London’s Royal Academy in 1975. She took that to reflect how her work had been highly regarded, outside of science as such, in 1930s Paris. That was not necessarily wishful thinking. The timing had been right for Wolff’s hand-analysis work: what started out as a curious continuation of Spier’s intuitive ‘chirology’ pursued in the interests of financial survival merged well with the open-minded approach to science and knowledge favoured by the Paris Surrealists, among other milieux of that time and place. Hands, Kirsten Powell explains, were recurring

455 Wolff to Adrienne Monnier, MS 8851, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet. I am very grateful to my French-speaking friends Anne-Sophie Close and Anna Robinson for helping me understand this letter.
458 Wolff, Hindsight, 143.
tropes in photography, painting and poetry (among other forms of expression) in and around Surrealist circles. Wolff’s article in *Minotaure* is brought into Powell’s discussion as evident of the enthusiasm that had been felt towards the notion of “the hand as a text to be read,” offering a symbol and sign of one’s inner psyche.459 This echoes Stéphane Hessel’s recollections of Wolff herself as a symbol of the faith held by many at the time that scientific reasoning, stretched far enough, could one day explain anything.

*Studies in Hand Reading* represents a frozen moment in which science, art and mysticism coexisted and combined,460 a moment which would have felt difficult to explain later in Wolff’s lifetime. The incongruity between how Wolff wrote to Monnier in the 1930s and to Nicolson in the 1970s on ostensibly the same topic, as a minute but illuminating example, reminds us that the strictly scientific approach Wolff attributed to her hand research work in retrospect tells a very selective, strategic story. Science seemed a pursuit befitting the person she had become; inexplicable intuitive powers did not. The following section addresses the direction taken by Wolff’s hand-analysis research after *Studies in Hand-Reading*, particularly regarding the question of racism in Wolff’s next work, *The Human Hand*, published in 1942. As the twentieth century took its course, science was revealed to be as fragile and subjective as any other discipline, and only capable of being stretched so far.

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460 For more on the cultural climate which allowed for such overlaps in the time and place of Wolff’s hand-readings, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, “Editor’s Statement: Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art,” *Art Journal* 46, no. 1 (1987), 5-8.
3.3 Racism in *The Human Hand* in the context of its time – and the problem of its re-issues

Here is the extract from *Die Hand als Spiegel der Seele*, the 1988 edition of Ursula von Mangoldt’s translation of Wolff’s *The Human Hand*, which sparked the shock and curiosity prompting Ulrike Janz’s article:

*Der deutsche Anthropologe Rudolf Martin machte die Beobachtung, daß Daumen und Zeigefinger eines neugeborenen Negerkindes beträchtlich kürzer sind als die eines noch nicht geborenen europäischen Kindes. Ebenso stellte er fest, daß erwachsene Neger schmälere Daumen haben als Weiße. Nachdem die Bewußteinskraft bei den Europäern stärker entwickelt ist als bei den Negern, stimmt die anatomische Unterscheidung mit der Bedeutung des Daumens überein.*

Janz was hardly taking an extreme stance with her astonishment that a book which uncritically made use of Rudolf Martin’s words, as above, was being touted by Rowohlt in the late 1980s as a “Standardwerk der Handdeutung”, of worldwide acclaim in the present tense. Unabridged and unaltered, was it possible that this aspect of *The Human Hand* could have gone unnoticed prior to Janz’s critique? It seems at least one translator and the editors of numerous publishing companies (Rowohlt was not the first to publish von Mangoldt’s translation) had felt the issue was not worth raising, or, in any case, to raise it would have been too difficult – and not necessarily fair on Wolff. This is understandable. In this section, however, I present a case for the limitations of simply overlooking the spectre of racism in Wolff’s hand-analysis research as if it were enough to say it was a product of its time. This is not to suggest editors, historians, readers and critics in the past ‘should have’ spoken out if they had picked up on the Rudolf Martin endorsement in Wolff’s work: cultural history is neither a pick-a-path adventure nor an exercise in script editing, and the fact that Janz’s 1991 article stands out as the first public (and published) utterance of this knowledge is telling in its own right.

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> The German anthropologist Rudolf Martin observed that the thumb and index finger of an unborn Negro child are considerably shorter than those of a European unborn child, and also that adult Negroes have smaller thumbs than white men. As power of consciousness is more highly developed in Europeans than in Negroes, the anatomical difference tallies with the psychological significance of the thumb.

463 Janz, “(K)eine von uns?,” 32. Janz does not refer to the ‘worldwide’ aspect of the back-cover promotional blurb of that edition, but it is noteworthy.
It should be obvious by now that this thesis is founded upon the premise that, in trying to make sense of history, how various people have written about it and why, it is generally productive to avoid assuming that any beliefs held in the present were necessarily held in the past. This should not, however, leave us complacently accepting that ‘historical context’ is a one-size-fits-all explanation for stances and statements which strike present-day readers as offensive through seeming, for instance, racist or sexist. Without sufficient research, it might seem biased towards present-day beliefs, and thus ahistorical, to declare Wolff’s endorsement of Rudolf Martin to be racist: if the concept of racism, as understood today, had not yet been invented, how is it fair to say that about *The Human Hand*? This is why: dismissing it, unexamined, as a product of its time – Brennan described this as “patronising contextualization”464 – would ignore certain aspects of the cultural context of Wolff’s hand research, and we would then miss out on the chance to investigate, with nuance and detail, what had been happening in this context.

The 1930s and 1940s were not all that long ago. While institutionally enforced and socially sanctioned forms of racism endured (and, in some ways, still endure) across societies far beyond those years, the culture in which Wolff wrote and worked at the time had its share of writers and thinkers who, to a large extent, recognised racism as a dangerous, flawed and ugly concept. The word *racism* had been invented. Importantly, it was in use, with a meaning analogous to its meaning today, in milieus within Wolff’s capacity for awareness. The most telling example of this is the fact that Wolff’s 1936 book *Studies in Hand-Reading* featured a foreword by Aldous Huxley, who also contributed a foreword to Ashley Montagu’s *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*.465 This book, published in 1942 (indeed, the same year as Wolff’s *The Human Hand*, in which the English-language original of Wolff’s most racist published utterance appears), is strongly aware of racism as a concept, and decidedly against it.

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464 Brennan, “Charlotte Wolff’s Contribution to Psychology,” 39. Brennan’s point is that leaping too quickly to historical-relativistic conclusions that assume all was a certain way in a certain era does not do justice to the complexities of any given historical moment. What this means in this instance is that, even though notions of white supremacy were relatively and unfortunately prevalent in white cultures in the 1940s, this does not render Wolff’s unquestioning endorsement of Rudolf Martin’s ‘findings’ unremarkable.

Huxley himself was no patron-saint of anti-racism, despite his contribution to Montagu’s volume, in which he addressed “the fallacies underlying the propaganda of racial hatred” as the sad product of a base desire to act aggressively, for which “the members of other ethnic groups are convenient victims.” The casual anti-Semitic remarks made in his 1930s diaries, during the period in which he resided in the French seaside town and sometime ‘exile colony’ of Sanary-sur-Mer, could well have been targeted, in part, towards Wolff herself: she spent a period of time there with Helen Hessel shortly after fleeing Berlin for Paris, and it is there that her financial sustenance through hand analysis began in earnest. The most enthusiastic supporter and promoter of Wolff’s new line of work was Maria Nys Huxley, who was married to Aldous. Aside from his notes on Sanary, in which he generally portrays the Jewish exile populace there as a mass entity, typecasting them and lambasting them as a nuisance, comments made in his letters – describing Tunisian Arabs as “monsters,” for instance – have made it into recent biography of Huxley as exemplary of his racial prejudices. Wolff’s connection to Aldous Huxley is clearly not a sufficient argument in its own right that she had access to thoughts beyond racist typecasting – but the indirect connection he forges between her world and Ashley Montagu’s work is a reminder that racism was not inevitable in her milieu.

Importantly, the very concept of racism, going by that exact word, has been traced back earlier than Montagu’s work – to that of Magnus Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld wrote *Racism* in exile, shortly before his death: a book which declared (in translation) that “race is a feeling, not a reality.” There is no evidence Wolff was aware of the book at the time of its publication: she claimed in *Hindsight* to have been aware of a small amount of his work in Berlin, but the section in which she describes receiving a weighty parcel of his publications from a reader of hers much later in the twentieth century, which she read with curiosity, demonstrates that she had not known of *Racism* prior to the 1970s. There is no surmising how this ideological ‘missed connection’ must have felt to Wolff: in any case, she devoted the final years of her life to broadening her horizons and expanding her understanding of the world around her.

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467 “Sanary is full of exiled German litterateurs, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, selected Hebrews of varying awfulness, such as Feuchtwanger (God help us). A nest of singing birds. One is very sorry for them: but wishes they could go and sing somewhere else!” Aldous Huxley to Robert Nichols, 22 August 1933, in *Selected Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. James Sexton (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 287.

468 John Gray, “Back to the future. Aldous Huxley was very much a product of his time: racist, snobbish and superior. But he was also a visionary, a chronicler of our disturbed modernity.” *New Statesman* (8 April 2002). http://www.newstatesman.com/node/142702.


life to writing and researching a lengthy biography of the man, in which her own experiences and memories were woven into the discussion wherever she felt it was appropriate. This biography told of her own history as well as Hirschfeld’s. Later in this chapter, it will be shown that this biography was the closest Wolff’s writing ever came to confronting the discomforting traces of racism and eugenics in her early career in hand-reading.

*The Human Hand* was, in effect, Wolff’s attempt to wrest her hand research away from all connotations of clairvoyance and charlatanry: she states this plainly in the introduction, going as far as to stress the difference between scientifically workable “intuition” and an easily dismissable notion of the “supernatural”. Her insistence in later years on seeing her work described in more scientific terms than “palmistry” was actually justified: as has been shown in passing here, and also in Rappold’s work, *The Human Hand*’s suggestions that the form and lines of the hand can reflect inner endocrinological workings have not been dismissed but, rather, embraced by later science. Most of the book, however, communicates a strong belief in a notion of “degeneracy” which can be detected in people’s hands. The course of history has shown the book to have scientific merit at times, but also to be deeply problematic at a general level. In its own time and place, its moments of scientific value were rarely recognised – but its ideological dangers were.

With Hirschfeld and Montagu on side as reminders that Wolff’s milieu in the 1930s and 1940s was not inevitably racist by default, let us move on to an assessment of critical reception of Wolff’s *The Human Hand* at the time of its publication to see how frequently it was read as racist – and, indeed, as science. *The Human Hand* received far more critical attention in the United States than in Britain, where its publication passed without mention in prominent journals like *Nature*, *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*. The only British periodical that appears to have paid any attention to *The Human Hand* was the Sunday newspaper *The Observer*, which ran a review of the book under the headline “On the Fringes of Science.” This review

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472 See pages 140-142.
473 Rappold, “Die Handdiagnose.”
474 See, for instance, Wolff’s attempt at insisting left-handedness is a form of “degeneracy”: *The Human Hand*, 112-115.
presented an attitude fairly typical of the book’s mainstream reception worldwide: a hesitant but ultimately contented acceptance of Wolff’s approach as ‘scientific’, combined with a sense of amusement at the notion there could be anything to read into the palms of the great apes: “Charlotte Wolff is well known for her scientific treatment of palmistry […] There is much fascinating information, including the hands of a male idiot and of a gorilla, over whose broad impulsive palm many a ‘you can be led but not driven’ has surely been muttered.”

This was not the first time British mainstream press had imagined the prospect of a monkey having its hands read would have been of greater interest to readers than insights into the aims of Wolff’s research: a 1937 *Listener* article on a research visit Wolff made to the London Zoo mostly focused on how various simian residents of the zoo reacted to Wolff’s attempts to ink their palms and press them onto paper. (They seemed to trust her, overall.) Going by mainstream British depictions of her early research work, while the objects of her research were seen as a source of light-hearted humour, Wolff herself seemed to be taken seriously as a scientist – as she attested to in her life writing, alongside insisting her gender and sexuality had never been an issue. The complete lack of acknowledgement of *The Human Hand* in Britain’s most reputable scientific and medical journals at the time does, however, suggest that at that stage in her career her work was not held to as high a level of regard within scientific establishments as she would have liked. There was interest in her work at the level of popular media, but this had a lot to do with the rare opportunity to combine entertaining coverage of palmistry and animals with notions of ‘modernity’ and ‘science.’

In this regard, while the proliferation of reviews of *The Human Hand* in American scientific and medical journals exposed Wolff to harsher criticism than the mostly curiosity-tinged nature of her work’s public reception in Britain, this at once reflected a greater level of willingness for scientific communities in the United States to take her work seriously in the first place. Not all critical responses were negative,

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476 “You can be led but not driven” appears to have been a commonplace line in the language of popular palmistry and horoscopes in the earlier parts of the twentieth century: searching for it online yields, in the first page of results, a horoscope column from a 1924 issue of *The Miami News* and a section in Max Beerbohm’s short story ‘A. V. Laider’, published as part of the collection *Seven Men* (London: Heinemann, 1919), which describes “five foolish virgins” with an interest in palmistry. Clearly, Cyril Connolly’s *Observer* review was written to entertain as well as to inform.

anyway: the *American Journal of Psychiatry* saw the book as a “stimulating presentation of a subject definitely meriting further and intensive study, with possibility of really significant results[...], decidedly worth reading[...],”\(^{478}\) while the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* went no further than subtly implying the book was founded on wishful thinking by declaring it “presents in its treatment of a small part of the human body, the psychologist’s dream of a physical index to the personality of the individual.”\(^ {479}\) While the *Scientific Monthly* saw reason to describe Wolff as “a modern and sincere apostle of a new version of palmistry, or as it is now called, ‘hand psychology,’” it saw *The Human Hand* as “unconvincing” in its approach and its findings.\(^ {480}\) Similarly, a review in the *American Journal of Psychology* viewed the entire book as having been written to appeal to the ‘layman,’ whereas “the critical reader will find statements that he is bound to challenge.”\(^ {481}\)

Statements along those lines could be read as an insinuation that readers found the casual inclusion of racist ideology in *The Human Hand* objectionable. Significantly, though, one United States reviewer in the field of biology felt no need to insinuate. In a 1944 issue of the *Quarterly Review of Biology* the book was described as “a curious mixture of fact, theory, hypothesis and conjecture,” with the reviewer then choosing to elaborate on exactly what some of this objectionable conjecture entailed: “Such assertions as those to the effect that ‘power of consciousness is more highly developed in Europeans than in Negroes’ and that left-handedness is a sign of degeneration, scarcely need comment.”\(^ {482}\)

This anonymous writer for the *Quarterly Review of Biology* helpfully demonstrates that, within mainstream scientific establishments, endorsement in *The Human Hand* of notions that white skin (or, indeed, right-handedness) carries with it any notion of superiority could be found repugnant at the time of the book’s publication. This significantly weakens any argument that Wolff’s engagement with racist or otherwise physiologically discriminatory ideas is a non-issue due to simply being ‘of its time.’ It was an issue in Wolff’s time, and, as Wolff’s potential closeness to the ideas of Hirschfeld and Montagu in the late 1930s and early 1940s suggest, it

\(^{479}\) Charles Midlo, “Reviews,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 1, no. 3 (1943), 305.
\(^{482}\) “New Biological Books,” *Quarterly Review of Biology* 18, no. 4 (1943), 386.
was an issue in her milieu. Reviews, both subtly and directly, indicate it was also an issue for established scientists.

It is possible to question the fairness of equating, on the one hand, the words of a text which was written with assistance in a language Wolff had at that time hardly mastered, with, on the other hand, the genuine beliefs of that text’s nominal author. By all accounts, Wolff no longer wanted anything to do with the German language in the 1940s, but she was still in the process of learning English. The acknowledgements page in the front matter of *The Human Hand* extends much gratitude to Alan White, the managing director of Methuen, for his assistance with the conversion of Wolff’s research into an English-language book: with this in mind, “did Wolff even write that part of the book?” becomes a more valid question than “had she even heard of racism at the time?” Let us assume she did write it – in any case, it is irrelevant when remembering Janz’ crucial point: at no later moment in her life did Wolff address this aspect of her work, even when it was still being republished and redistributed in German translation in the 1970s. Until Janz’s article in 1991, the problem posed by the racist section of *The Human Hand* (and, more to the point, its replication in German translation so much later in the century) was left unaddressed by all concerned: the writer, her publishers and her readers.

There is one particularly strong example of the case for this being the result of deliberate omission rather than remarkable oversight on the part of both Wolff and her readership. In a 1981 interview with Wolff for *Psychologie Heute*, the psychologist Michaela Huber made an effort to illustrate flaws in Wolff’s early hand research in great detail – this in an era in which such work of Wolff’s was being reclaimed as an entirely positive aspect of her professional identity.⁴⁸³ Huber openly stated her own doubts about the work, having clearly read the published products of Wolff’s hand research well and found the work unconvincing, and yet opted to avoid raising the deeply difficult matter of Wolff’s connection to ‘scientific’ racism. Wolff, for her part, describes sitting down shortly prior to the interview to read *The Human Hand* and thinking to herself, at certain points, “Donnerwetter, das ist gar nicht schlecht!” What is implied there is that she had assumed she would see little quality to the work – a faint suggestion that, for Wolff, it contained aspects she did not wish to revisit. It

is noteworthy that she read the English original, not the German translation: when the translation comes up for discussion, Huber describes it as unfortunate, to which Wolff responds it was “eine schreckliche Geschichte” in which the end result, in her opinion, bore no resemblance to her original text. For what it is worth, Ursula von Mangoldt did not take any liberties in translating Wolff’s citation of Rudolf Martin into German: it is what it is in either language.

Concerning the entire book, however, Wolff tells Huber that there had been only one thing preventing her from taking the publishers to court for allowing that translation to go to press: her “emotionaler eiserner Vorhang gegenüber Deutschland.” This feeling of horror at The Human Hand’s availability, in (allegedly bad) translation, to later twentieth century German readers extends far beyond the moment of that interview. In 1983, another paperback re-issue of the German translation was published, seemingly without any approval from Wolff.484 This upset her greatly – it would have made the feelings expressed in that interview two years prior raw and new again. She wrote to a representative of Methuen (who had published and thus still held the rights to The Human Hand) explaining one significant reason for her anger and sadness at the re-issue was “that [her] position in Germany [was] now completely different from what it was in 1973” – the year in which von Mangoldt’s translation was first published in Germany by Kindler485 – and that her more recent work as a writer (and as a theorist of sexuality) had become “very well-known and highly acclaimed there, as well as in many other countries.”486 In another letter: “In 1973 I not only felt very hostile towards [Germany], but was not well known there as a writer.”487

Remembering all that has been considered here, it seems unlikely that Wolff’s embarrassment, regret and anger in the face of the multiple German-language re-issues of The Human Hand really were entirely due to her dislike of the translation. After the Barth edition came the Rowohlt one – and after that came Ulrike Janz’s article. Wolff died in 1986, though: we can only imagine what her response to Janz’s

486 Wolff to Glenys Thorniley of Methuen, 11 November 1983. WC PSY/WOL/1/7.
487 Wolff to Glenys Thorniley of Methuen, 8 November 1983. WC PSY/WOL/1/7.
article may have been. Whether the straight-faced endorsement of racist ideology in *The Human Hand* was the product of Wolff’s own beliefs at the time or the confusion of translating at a time when Wolff was, in effect, between languages can never be known. It would be too generous to attribute it wholly to the latter situation, but it would also be remiss and unfair to discount that possibility. Through writing *Hindsight* (the title of which certainly keeps its promise) and actively participating in reflective public discussions in person and in print, in the 1970s and 1980s Charlotte Wolff was arguably devoted to describing, understanding and contextualising her past. She was presented with, and presented herself with, numerous opportunities to address complex issues in regards to her past. But, in terms of the question of racism in *The Human Hand*, she did not, and perhaps she could not. This issue has been explored here not as an invitation to judge, but as an invitation to remember how the writing of histories – of sexuality, of science, of individuals and of selves – is a task undertaken by humans who, at any given time, can only handle so much.
3.4 Where the Twenties Never Met the Seventies: Charlotte Wolff on Eugenics

In his introduction to *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Paul Rabinow paraphrases Ricoeur’s thoughts on phenomenology – as “a process in which each step is abolished and retained in the following one” – in order to explain his own book as one in which “the meaning of each chapter depends on what comes after it.”\(^{488}\) Just as phenomenology followed existentialism, Rabinow’s words echo Kierkegaard’s thoughts which are often punchily paraphrased as “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.”\(^{489}\) All philosophical details aside, at the heart of those ideas as phrased above lies the concept of hindsight: as a necessarily distorted or at least altered understanding of the past ‘as it was.’ When hindsight is employed, each chapter in one’s life (or in any smaller narrative within that larger one) has its meaning altered by what comes after it. The discoveries and observations of this chapter can attest to how true that certainly is for Wolff’s titling of her second autobiography. The previous section has shown how a perspective of hindsight, for Wolff and those who sought to write her into history, did not equate to an openness to discussing all the most difficult and irreconcilable aspects of her past. This section, however, seeks to illustrate an instance in which it can be said she tried to do exactly that – and partially, but imperfectly, succeeded.

As with any other concept, the meaning of eugenics in history, to anyone reading or writing today, is shaped by what became of it. ‘Eugenics’ became shorthand for the systematic violence which masqueraded itself as science in Nazi Germany. Because of that, anyone post-Nazism who tries to declare the concept started out with good intentions in earlier times, at least in certain contexts, would need to take care to pitch a very convincing, thorough and cautious argument. Because of that, too, there is still a great capacity for shock in reading a declaration such as this, made by Donald Childs in his study of the connection between some modernist literatures and some eugenic concepts: forced sterilisation policies were in


\(^{489}\) In Hannay’s translation of Kierkegaard’s journals, this was expressed so: “It is quite true what philosophy says; that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with the thought that temporal life can never properly be understood precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest in which to adopt a position: backwards.” *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1996), 161. The paraphrased version mentioned above has no traceable origin, it has become a popular quote – my grandmother even did a cross-stitch of it once.
place, often overtly in the name of eugenics, in nation-states and historical eras far removed from Nazi Germany – Canada, until 1972; Sweden, until 1976; France, until late in the twentieth century. Histories of twentieth century science – and, by extension, popular understandings of the topic – are still in the process of confronting the extent of state-sanctioned eugenics beyond Nazism. It is unsurprising and understandable, then, that Charlotte Wolff’s connections to eugenic concepts have barely been discussed. We are still in the process of comprehending what ‘eugenics’ has meant – and what it has done – in so many different times and places.

Wolff attempted to explain this in her 1986 biography of Magnus Hirschfeld. Like so many other facets of Weimar Berlin’s histories of sexuality (including Wolff’s own memories), Hirschfeld was, at that point in time, in the complicated process of being ‘rediscovered’. Hirschfeld’s early twentieth century work, mostly done in the name of sexology, encompassed empathetic counselling and legal activism alongside the now mostly obsolete variations of science he practised. He was instrumental in campaigns against Paragraph 175, the German law which made sex between men a crime. As has recently been articulated by Norman Domeier, rediscovery of Hirschfeld began in the 1960s and 1970s with sceptical curiosity – how could there have been gay rights activism back then? – followed by a period of intense criticism, seemingly of the ways in which his work did not match up to the ideologies expected in that era of either a gay rights activist or a hero in gay history: he had overseen dangerous experimental sex-change operations, his work was conducted with an underlying belief that one’s sexual preference is biologically predetermined (and was thus essentialist), and he had some ideas that could be described as eugenic. Domeier credits Wolff’s biography of Hirschfeld as still being, in 2012, the best source for considerations of how Hirschfeld’s works – and the man himself, as a figure and symbol – have been appropriated, reinterpreted and retrospectively interpreted after 1945. Her explanations of Hirschfeld’s connection to eugenic ideas would have been, at least in part, what Domeier had in mind.

491 For a frank assessment of this within the field of genetics (in the USA), see J. Marks, “Historiography of eugenics,” American Journal of Human Genetics 52, no. 3 (1993), 650-652.
Clearly, by the time she started writing Hirschfeld’s biography in the early 1980s, Charlotte Wolff knew the book’s audience would need a good explanation regarding what eugenics meant in his time and place. The explanation she came up with was not sourced so much from the usual creative speculation that is the biographer’s prerogative, but from her own remembered observations and experiences. The context within which Hirschfeld’s work could have been described as eugenic was, after all, the same context as that which applied to Wolff’s. By explaining Hirschfeld’s situation, she was also explaining her own. How did she attempt this explanation? Eugenics, according to Wolff’s articulation aimed at a 1980s audience, started out as “a branch of preventive and social medicine, aimed at raising the health and morale of the people.” She quickly acknowledges the concept’s usage changed, over time, for the very worst. At once in defence of earlier scientists and in condemnation of all that was perpetrated in the name of ‘science’ under Nazism, she writes: “None of the scientists and physicians who practised it [in the manner of Hirschfeld and, plausibly, herself] would have foreseen that one day it would be used as a poison, ruining a whole nation.”

Much like Donald Childs’ evocations of the disturbing extent of eugenic policy beyond Germany and beyond the mid-twentieth century, Wolff continued by delivering a similar shock tactic in reverse, stating “not only German, but also French and English scientists wrote about eugenics in a racial and discriminatory spirit,” denouncing them thus as “propagandists for the Nazis before the Third Reich was even born.”

Wolff concluded her defence of Hirschfeld (and, by extension, herself) by crediting him, alongside an unnamed “considerable number of other German physicians,” with having “criticized the false prophets [of eugenics as a starting point for ‘scientific racism’] for what they were in their writings,” as well as noting that “Hirschfeld pointed out in his Sexology that the greatest saints and geniuses had always come from different races. He also wrote that no nation consisted of one race. It was always a community of hybrids.” Her biography of Hirschfeld strove to at once portray him as far from racist and also describe his connections to eugenics, in a book designated for a 1980s readership which would have been – as demonstrated by

493 Wolff, Magnus Hirschfeld, 249.
494 Wolff, Magnus Hirschfeld, 251.
495 Ibid.
496 Wolff, Magnus Hirschfeld, 251.
the genuine sadness and puzzlement expressed in Ulrike Janz’s 1991 article – accustomed to the direct linkage of all forms of eugenics with racism. This task, clearly, would have required a very careful articulation of where the differences lay between how sexual reformers and ‘Aryan’ supremacists made use of the dangerously multi-purpose concept of eugenics. The need for such precision has been expressed recently by Laurie Marhoefer in her thesis on sexual politics in Weimar Germany, where at one point she explains how eugenics, “in a progressive context like sex reform, was so different from [eugenics which believed in race and racism] that it is only with great caution that the two can be categorized together.”497

It is not difficult to see how a reader could find Wolff’s mode of explanation startling, though: it was not as careful as it could have been. She had never been shy about declaring her own fondness for the concept of elitism – in one memorably unsettling and thorny passage in Hindsight she had declared “The word élite had not yet become a term of abuse. At the apex of the élitist hierarchy were poets and philosophers, and those who venerated them had a claim to be accepted into their magic circle. The inequality of man cannot be brushed aside by wishful thinking.”498 That was Wolff on elitism in 1980. Not much later, writing Magnus Hirschfeld, her assessment of Hirschfeld’s connection to eugenics again embraces the concept of elitism. She offers no criticism of Francis Galton, the Englishman credited with inventing eugenics, instead placing him upon a pedestal. Describing his overarching project as “the creation of an elitist society which would have the best chance of producing geniuses,”499 she does not pause to critique his methods or assumptions in attempting this: the description is wholly positive and intended as an explanation in its own right. Even with hindsight granting as much distance between his work and her own that she could wish to take, she chooses to frame him purely as a “brilliant scientist.”500 One gets the impression she found the idea of an elitist society quite appealing. It is challenging, but not impossible, to reconcile this with what Wolff was trying to do in that section of Magnus Hirschfeld.

498 Wolff, Hindsight, 65.
499 Wolff, Magnus Hirschfeld, 250.
500 Ibid.
Here is a relevant and rather extreme example of the difficulties scholars face in trying to make sense of where (any variety upon) the concept of eugenics fits in to the world of whichever writer, artist or other seemingly well-intentioned figure they might be discussing: as described by Childs, Virginia Woolf’s biographer Hermione Lee seemed to find herself in a position reminiscent of Ulrike Janz’s encounter with Charlotte Wolff. Lee struggled to reconcile her own understanding of her biographical subject with the knowledge that Virginia Woolf had once expressed the opinion that the institutionalised “imbeciles” she one day happened to encounter “should certainly be killed.”

Childs identifies a perhaps inevitable inconsistency between Lee’s promise, elsewhere in the biography, to “swallow [Woolf] whole, not spit out the bits of her which [she] might find distasteful” and her understandable need to rationalise, and indeed excuse, such a distasteful (at best) statement of Woolf’s. Lee attempts this by acknowledging the “reprehensible and cruel” resonance of a word like ‘imbecile’ before explaining it was in common usage at the time it seeped from Woolf’s pen (a cursory glance through Charlotte Wolff’s work from this same period would also testify to this) — and then by declaring Virginia Woolf’s “violent endorsement of an extreme theory of eugenics” was “written between two very severe breakdowns” and thus “must be understood as expressing her dread and horror of what she thought of as her own loss of control.”

This is possibly so – ‘must,’ however, exchanges the caution of ‘could’ for a mirage of authoritative certainty, and as Childs gently phrases it, Lee’s reasoning “shows how hard it is for [her] not to spit out this distasteful bit of Woolf.”

Virginia Woolf was not the only writer in Charlotte Wolff’s life who has been linked to eugenic concepts, and Hermione Lee is certainly not the only scholar stumped by the challenge of making sense of such unsettling moments in the archives of a valued artist or public figure. Consider the following observation made by Robert Stam, regarding the conversion from diary to film (via novel) of the adventures of Wolff’s friend Helen Grund Hessel and her lover Henri-Pierre Roché, both of whom we have already encountered in the previous chapter:

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501 Virginia Woolf cited in Childs, Modernism and Eugenics, 16.
502 Hermione Lee cited in Childs, Modernism and Eugenics, 16.
503 Ibid.
504 Childs, Modernism and Eugenics, 16.
Many features prominent in the journals of [Roché and Grund Hessel] leave only minor traces in both novel and film. For example, the journals reveal a certain obsession with eugenics. Even though the prototypes were generally on the left and even flirted briefly with communism (while at the same time being naive and relatively apolitical), they shared a eugenic concern with “perfecting the race”, an idea often associated, ironically, with the “scientific racism” of the Nazis.505

Stam does not elaborate or provide any examples of the “eugenic concern” detectable among these friends of Wolff’s, but his concisely phrased findings echo Childs’ research within a time-frame and a geography closer to Wolff’s Berlin than Woolf’s London. Lee’s encounter with Woolf, and Stam’s with Roché and Grund Hessel, show us that Janz’s problem with Wolff’s hazy past connections to eugenics is similar (but not identical) to what other scholars have experienced.

Perhaps because she lived to a considerably old age, and perhaps because she engaged herself right up until her death in 1986 with the concerns of how the past she had lived in was being described, Charlotte Wolff found herself in a situation where she could partially explain this problem by extending her own subjective memories of pre-Nazi science to her Hirschfeld project. She tried to protect the idea of Magnus Hirschfeld – and, less overtly, herself – from an association with a conceptualisation of ‘eugenics’ which lacked the nuanced historical context required for any such criticism to be helpful to our ongoing attempts to make sense of the past. Her discomforting and repellent pro-elitist stance, expressed on the pages of more than one of her 1980s publications, did obscure her message. Nonetheless, her attempted contextualisation of eugenics in Magnus Hirschfeld can be recognised as a gesture towards reconciling herself and the world she lived in by the 1980s with what had become, in hindsight (but not in Hindsight) one very difficult aspect of her own past.

Investigating how Weimar-era German sex reform movements viewed their own work in terms of eugenics, Marhoefer cites Wolff’s definition, in an earlier section of the Hirschfeld biography, of eugenics simply as “the science concerned with sexual relationships which should be individually satisfying, and best suited to produce children healthy in body and mind.”506 That was another component to Wolff’s portrayal of early twentieth century eugenics as a socio-scientific pursuit not

505 Stam, François Truffaut and Friends, 117.
necessarily entwined with racism. Indeed, it has been repeatedly shown that eugenics-as-sex-reform and eugenics-as-racism were, like Marhoefer argues, barely connected. The call for caution in differentiating the two should certainly be heeded. But that by no means renders those two versions of eugenics mutually exclusive. Wolff’s 1928 doctoral dissertation, in brief but startling instances, reflects the potential that did exist for the ‘eugenics’ of progressive sex reform to overlap with more sinister uses of the term. It is also the only document that remains of Wolff’s medical career pre-exile.

In this dissertation, Wolff identifies herself as a “sozialinteressierte” doctor: concerned not only with the immediate physical health of any given patient, but with their social situation and the wellbeing of wider society. Most of the dissertation is an account of the holistic care provided to families in the context of women’s health and pregnancy; the entire dissertation rests on the quite commendable assertion that a pregnancy should never have to be seen as an unwelcome burden on a woman and her family. Women’s right to birth control is treated as a given; abortion is not discussed, but nor is it condemned. Her approach comes across as very progressive: for instance, she argues that the treatment of a “psychopathic” child must include ensuring the social welfare of his or her entire family. Her emphasis on the importance of mental health as part of one’s general wellbeing (conceptualised in the dissertation as the remediating of “ungelöste psychische Konflikte” – unresolved psychic conflicts) shows an early glimmer of her later style as a psychiatrist later in the century. The health services Wolff was involved with in Berlin before her forced exile and which she outlines in her dissertation extend as far as to include marriage counselling; women were helped to escape abusive marriages, men were taught to be more understanding towards the pregnant women in their lives.

In Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950, Atina Grossmann argues against there being anything as simple as a ‘slippery slope’ (and certainly no seamless path) to explain the connection

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between ‘eugenics’ as per the interests of socially progressive sexual health care – as had been Wolff’s professional field – and ‘eugenics’ as per Nazism. “In order for the National Socialists to appropriate the language both of maternalism and scientific eugenics and make it useful for their own coercive, hierarchical, and terroristic aims,” writes Grossmann, “there first had to be a dramatic break.”

This, she elaborates, came in the form of the “elimination” of the people who staffed the clinics and centres, and their replacement with Nazis adept at utilising the same vocabularies for very different ends. Wolff had lost her job when Hitler came to power, and her recollections of her days working in a sexual health clinic include the realisation she and many left-wing, activist colleagues had been spied on and perhaps even denounced by a nondescript workmate: a chilling story of mundane Nazism.

It is worth remembering that, and Grossmann’s insistence against an excessive reliance on ‘slippery slope’ explanations, when approaching the instances in Charlotte Wolff’s dissertation where her vocabulary and ideology could be mistaken for the writing of someone aligned with Nazi eugenic ‘science’. She used the word ‘asocial’ frequently, applying it to entire families (across generations). Being ‘asocial’ was not defined in any specific terms in Wolff’s dissertation. Grossmann’s research explains how the term was used in Wolff’s branch of social medicine to describe the notion of an irreparably ‘degenerate’ underclass portrayed in contrast to “respectable and hardworking” members of the working class.

This corresponds well to the ‘asocial’ as discussed in Wolff’s dissertation, where the word offers a noncommittal and vague notion of a somehow inheritable social outcast status. Consider this excerpt in which Wolff describes the social situation of “the gypsies”:

Ein besonders markantes Beispiel für ein auf Generationen hin fortgesetztes asoziales Verhalten bilden die Zigeuner, die von keinem Land gern gesehen, von vielen Ländern heftig verfolgt und bekämpft, bis auf den heutigen Tag ihr lichtscheues Wanderdasein führen, gänzlich ohne Kultur sind, von Pferdehandel, Diebstahl und Wahrsagen leben.

Wolff’s 1928 dissertation is as vague on the origins of being ‘asocial’ as it is on the meaning of the word. Referring later to the living circumstances of so-called ‘asocial’ people as “Milieuschäden” – harm done to a person by their social surrounds.

511 Grossmann, Reforming Sex, vii.
513 Grossmann, Reforming Sex, 7
514 Wolff, “Die Fürsorge für die Familie,” 42.
– it might seem Wolff really did see the situation as one in which problems could be remedied for all through better social conditions. She goes on, however, to bemoan the existence of “Stammtafeln asozialer Familien […] die in jeder Generation kriminelle Personen hervorgebracht haben”\(^515\) and declare the need for an overall “Bekämpfung der Asozialen.” She does not speculate on any ‘asocial’ individual’s possible need for marriage counselling or other such holistic assistance; help on offer to the ‘asocial,’ as per Wolff in 1928, comes only in the form of pregnancy prevention. Near the end of the dissertation, Wolff argues – in regard to her ‘asocial’ examples – there is a need to ‘rationalise’ reproduction in the interests of “Vermeidung [der] Uneinheitlichkeit”: a large-scale prevention of social disunity.\(^516\) Reading this part of her dissertation in 2012, even with the complexities of its historical context in mind, it is hard not to find it chilling.

For the most part, Wolff’s dissertation outlines a sexual health service encompassing advice, education, and unhindered access to birth control methods, with an insinuated inclusion of abortion, for women of any marital status, including prostitutes – it is very much in line with the progressive sexual health reform movement of Weimar Germany as outlined by Grossmann. The very vaguely defined ‘asocial’ are presented as an exception, however, and the methods and manners by which reproduction would be ‘rationalized’ for these people go without elaboration or description. If Grossmann’s research had included this early work of Wolff’s, she certainly would have been able to show it as a reflection of the need for nuance and caution in historical approaches to the concept of eugenics, especially in the case of Germany in its transition from Weimar to Nazism. “Clearly,” Grossmann wrote in regard to the broader topic, “this is not an either/or story.”\(^517\) That comment could easily apply to the story that is Wolff’s medical school dissertation and the life from which it sprung. It reflects neither full detachment from, nor explicit endorsement of, eugenics with all the terrible connotations the word carries today.

Not so many years later, ‘asocial’ became, in effect, a catch-all category the Nazi government applied to anyone they wished to persecute but who did not fit any other preordained category they had specified for the purposes of their regimented

\(^{515}\) Wolff, “Die Fürsorge für die Familie,” 43.
\(^{516}\) Ibid.
\(^{517}\) Grossmann, Reforming Sex, viii.
atrocities. The black triangle assigned by the Nazis to signify the ‘asocial’ was worn by many: Roma and Sinti people (those labelled in other times as “the gypsies,” or “die Zigeuner” – as in Wolff’s dissertation), people with mental health issues, physical disabilities or learning disorders, sex workers, homeless people and alcoholics. One could be classed as ‘asocial’ for being ‘workshy.’ Many people classified as ‘asocial’ were killed in the concentration camps and gas chambers. Some of them were women who the Nazis had identified as ‘Lesbierin’ in their files; others yet were on file with vaguer sex or gender-related charges included as part of their categorisation as ‘asocial.’ Charlotte Wolff, in the meantime, had escaped the regime, spent time in Paris, settled in London and discarded ‘asocial’ from her working vocabulary. Throughout the 1940s, alongside the already-discussed racism factor, her work continued to espouse the idea that the classification of people into categories like ‘feeble-minded’ and ‘imbecile’ was a good idea and, furthermore, that the physicality of people’s hands could assist in such categorising. Unbeknownst to her at the time, the German-language equivalents of those labels had, in that same era, become known as subsets of that awful, all-encompassing term, ‘asocial.’

In the years surrounding Wolff’s re-emergence in Germany as a public figure and writer, and in the time of her work on the Hirschfeld biography, the word ‘asocial’ – and its accompanying shadow, the black triangle – had re-entered collective consciousness. The pink triangle which had been forced upon men categorised as homosexual under Nazism had morphed into a symbol of gay pride across the ‘Western’ world in the era of gay and lesbian liberation. Erik N. Jensen has conducted outstanding research on the history, post-Nazism, of the appropriation of pink and black triangles as symbols of gay and lesbian community, identity and oppression by people in Germany, the United States and beyond. This work includes an outline of how lesbian historians, lesbian activists and all sorts of other self-identified lesbians, weary of being ‘included’ in a movement focused on gay men’s present-day issues and gay men’s sense of history, sought their own lesbian equivalent of the pink triangle and found it in the black triangle of the ‘asocial.’ Not everyone within these communities felt the appropriation of either triangle was a good

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519 Jensen, “The Pink Triangle.”
idea, but the pink triangle as gay pride symbol has endured as a cultural trope, regardless.

Jensen’s main source for tracing developments in 1970s and 1980s German lesbian communities’ approaches to and feelings about history – including, but not limited to the appropriation of the black triangle as a pride symbol – is the influential Berlin-based lesbian journal *Unsere Kleine Zeitung* (referred to henceforth as *UKZ*). In the next chapter, this journal emerges as a crucial source for gauging how Wolff was received and represented there and then, too. The same communities in and around *UKZ* which wished to celebrate Wolff and find a place for her in lesbian history, as they were writing it, were involved almost simultaneously in the rediscovery of the black triangle of the ‘asocial’ and its appropriation as a questionable but popular symbol of past and present oppression of lesbians. In effect, she was being written into history as someone who had suffered under the black triangle. Had she not escaped Germany when she did, it is likely she would have – terribly.

To state something at once obvious and very sad: she would have known that. Casting aside ‘what-if’ possibilities, alternate realities and the subjunctive mood altogether, though, Wolff’s past included a career in which, pre-Nazism, she felt she was in a position to label others as ‘asocial.’ Oblivious at the time to what the Nazis were doing in Europe – armed with a set of categories determining how and to what extent one was ‘defective’ – to those deemed ‘asocial’, in England in the 1940s Wolff continued to research how one might diagnose and categorise various ‘defects’ in people through their physical attributes. It cannot be mere coincidence that Wolff’s research into the human hand as a means of psychological diagnosis ceased in the same era of the twentieth century in which, in exile in London, she would have become slowly aware of the horrible fate of some of her friends and family, among millions of others. It is impossible to determine when this truth would have been

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520 One articulation of this at an academic level can be found in R. Amy Elman, “Triangles and Tribulations: The Politics of Nazi Symbols,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 30, no. 3 (1996), 1-11.
522 Walter Laqueur’s *The Terrible Secret* provides a compelling and thorough account of how long it took for news of Nazi mass killings to spread around the world, and how long it took for people to take this news seriously, and how difficult it was for anyone to reconcile such news with any sense of faith in humanity. There is no knowing how this experience would have been for Wolff, and it feels deeply inadequate to attempt to pinpoint a moment at which she ‘found out.’
apparent to Wolff at the level of the Nazis’ usage of terminologies that had been part of her line of work. Her 1945 book *A Psychology of Gesture* features a picture of Hitler in uniform, his face contorted and his hands grasping the air mid-speech; the caption underneath explains how the photo shows him to be a ‘maniac.’

1951’s *The Hand in Psychological Diagnosis* shows a shift away from absolute belief in a system of dehumanising mental ‘grades’ that were the basis of Wolff’s earlier hand analysis works – the concept of mental illness is introduced and the claim is made that the term ‘mental deficiency’ is misleading, to the detriment of all of society as well as to the people labelled as such.

That book was indeed her last on the topic.

In this chapter, considerations of social and historical context suggest that Wolff’s published instance of racism could be read as offensive even in its time and context, but that her decades of medical and scientific involvement with eugenic concepts were in line with popular thought in the times and places in question. Ulrike Janz, then, was right about the questions raised by the silence around *The Human Hand*. Her reaction to Wolff’s discussion of eugenics in *Magnus Hirschfeld*, however, reflects the puzzled, troubled curiosity felt by many others in similar instances (as seen in Stam’s work, and Lee’s). This curiosity was a catalyst for great advances in the historiography of the meaning of ‘eugenics’ in German society in the era of the Weimar Republic, especially in regard to feminism, birth control and the sexual health movement.

It is exactly this which Wolff had anticipated and perhaps too briefly attempted in *Magnus Hirschfeld*.

As the truths of the Europe she had escaped became clearer to her, rendering two decades of research work deeply problematic in the process, Charlotte Wolff had plenty of reasons to feel very, very depressed – and she did. The next chapter, assessing Wolff’s later twentieth century emergence as a writer, public figure and critic of history, will be formed around the chronology of the production and reception of her four creative prose works: *On the Way to Myself*, *An Older Love*, *Hindsight* and *Magnus Hirschfeld*. It will begin, then, by describing how the diary she kept at the lowest ebb of her depression in the 1950s later became *On the Way to*
Myself. In her writing, published and unpublished, Wolff rarely expresses her depression in terms of any sense of mourning, loss, or horror in the wake of learning about all that had gone on in Europe; certainly it is never articulated in relation to any feeling of conflict, regret or confusion upon knowing the beliefs which underpinned her hand research could be taken in the direction they had been by Nazism.

In an excellent essay on Wolff and her autobiographies, Darcy Buerkle sees great significance in the unspoken gaps between Wolff’s constructed self-image and what she would have likely felt and experienced throughout her life.\(^{526}\) Buerkle writes assuming (fairly) that the unspoken dark side beneath Wolff’s projected persona of the ‘happy exile’ contains all which she leaves unsaid about the toll taken by Nazism and the Shoah on her life, her loved ones and her mental health. It would contain all that pain, but – paradoxically, perplexingly, and beyond Buerkle’s observations – it would also contain the very different, difficult burden of Wolff’s own past involvement with eugenics and racism: dregs of earlier versions of science, outdated editions of mainstream medical thought which society would rather forget. Disloyalty is not the same as defamation: through moments of omission and hesitation, Charlotte Wolff’s role in the 1970s and 1980s as an outspoken critic of how homosexuality was being written into history quietly embodies the importance of “disloyal historiography”\(^{527}\) – not as licence for future scholars to make lists of bad gays and evil lesbians, but as a way of making space for the complexities of the past and the present.

We have already seen examples, through her poetry and its cultural context, of why she could not allow anyone to write her into a history where ‘lesbian’ had always meant the same thing. We now also understand more about why, knowing her own career history, she felt she could not stand by and watch Hirschfeld’s connection to eugenics see his work dismissed as if it made him an enemy by default. The overlap between these two aspects of Wolff’s drive to explain the past on her own terms is strong: the histories which insisted on the universal, ahistorical application of sexual identity categories were the same which had a tendency to assume sexual, political and intellectual orientations would align the same way they did in the culture in which

\(^{526}\) Buerkle, “Points of Departure.”

\(^{527}\) As a reminder – that is the phrase coined by Halberstam (The Queer Art of Failure) which can be retrospectively used to summarise the spirit of an investigation like Janz’s and, in a way, Dworkin’s.
those histories were needed and produced. We can continue, from here, with an investigation of Wolff’s presence in the later parts of the twentieth century as a writer and critic which recognises her experience of being written into history in a time of re-appropriated black triangles for the incredibly complicated and difficult situation that it was.
4. **How the Seventies met the Twenties: the intentions and reception of Charlotte Wolff’s life writing in the United Kingdom and Germany**

4.1 **On Life-Writing and Public Spheres**

Charlotte Wolff’s oeuvre of published life-writing, spanning from 1969 to 1986, can be seen to comprise a dialogue with her readers and a deep engagement with their interests and concerns. As the years progress, there is a visible increase in her writing’s sense of purpose and urgency, as well as in her own sense of identity as a writer with a particular mission to fulfil.\(^{528}\) Assessing these works, the importance of her decision to visit Berlin in 1978 as a touring writer and speaker is strongly evident: it was there and then that she realised her audiences’ keen interest in what she could offer as a “period piece” of Weimar Berlin lesbian history could be productively transformed into her own lucid critique of what was at risk when histories of sexuality only sought to replicate the ideologies and assumptions of the present.

Following this, Wolff’s works and interviews from 1978 onwards can all be assessed in terms of their expression of this critical stance. While her pre-1978 life-writing – the 1969 memoir *On the Way to Myself* and the 1976 novel *An Older Love* – shows Wolff expressing her thoughts on her own terms, resulting in confusion and even alienation among reviewers and readers, her 1980 autobiography *Hindsight* reflects a desire to participate directly and productively in the discussions and debates about sexuality and history which were taking place around her. This continued in her final work, the 1986 biography *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology*. After 1978, Wolff had found a role for herself as a critic of how sexualities were conceived of in the present and written into the past.

\(^{528}\) Wolff’s two other publications in that era were psychologically informed studies of sexuality: *Love Between Women and Bisexuality*. Both engaged with the literary and the subjective alongside their primary devotion to the tables, figures and discourses of psychological research, those two studies could even be argued to be life-writing as well, but this would be a more tenuous claim than with any of Wolff’s other aforementioned books. Their production, reception and cultural context have already been examined in Brennan’s 2011 study of Wolff’s place in the history of psychiatry. These two works will be acknowledged and discussed at certain moments in this chapter, when either their content or reception is a pertinent factor in considering Wolff more broadly as a writer and as a public figure.
In discussing New Historicism and the general importance of studies which assess the interconnectivity and overlaps of literary, cultural and social histories, Chapter 2 described how we can declare a work’s ‘intent’ and even go as far as to find meaning in it without denying the importance of acknowledging, via poststructuralist thought, that authorial ‘intent’ has no definite bearing on what a text can mean to its reader.\footnote{See pages 42-43.} It does not need to; readers can and do make what they want of a text. In the particular case of Wolff’s life writing, though, her archive reveals the extent to which she followed the reception of her work and was troubled by moments of significant divergence between her writings’ intentions and their reception. For the purposes of this study, with its interest in Wolff’s role as a critic of how histories of homosexuality were being written within her lifetime, the most interesting and revealing text to analyse is the dialogue formed by Wolff’s books, her written and spoken interactions with the public, and her responses to criticism.

Directly pertinent to this, recent work in the field of life writing studies has sought to investigate the relationship between life writing and its public reception. “Life writing,” it has been argued, “has everything to do with the public sphere.”\footnote{David McCooey, “Editorial: life writing and the public sphere,” \textit{Life Writing} 1, no.2 (2004), vii.} In the 1960s, Habermas had conceived of the public sphere as “public discussion among private individuals”\footnote{Habermas cited in McCooey, “Editorial,” ix.}; Hohendahl later argued Habermas’ notion of ‘literary public spheres’ is “precisely the locus where problems of identity and difference have been articulated.”\footnote{Hohendahl cited in McCooey, “Editorial,” ix.} That the idea of the public sphere can be much more productive in the plural than in the singular is a well-known argument, especially bearing in mind marginalised and underrepresented facets of society: rather than struggling for recognition in ‘the’ public sphere, one can try going about forming a sphere of one’s own.\footnote{Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” \textit{Social Text} 25/26 (1990), 56-80.} If “life writing does more than simply make the private public” in that “it also bridges opposing categories of experience [and] engages in dialogue,”\footnote{McCooey, “Editorial,” xi.} this chapter explores how Wolff’s work has done this in many contexts: mainstream British media, early 1970s gay liberation activism in London, lesbian communities in Berlin and the researchers and writers of histories of sexuality, among others.
Among the poetry, the manuscripts, the handprints and the heartfelt letters which comprise the majority of Wolff’s self-compiled archive, there is one folder that contains rather different subject matter. Forms – and formal letterheads – frame the story told in Folder 5 by a series of letters spanning the 1950s: the story of Wolff’s reluctant confrontation of her past, and of Germany as a nation, through the process of claiming for financial compensation from the German government for damages done to her career and her income levels. The Gesetz zur Regelung der Wiedergutmachung nationalsozialistischen Unrechts für die in Ausland lebenden Angehörigen des öffentlichen Dienstes (1952) made it possible for Wolff to lodge such a claim.

This would have been a distressing, conflicting task for anyone. It involved applying for compensation for career damage when other forms of damage done had not – and perhaps could not have – received acknowledgement. The language within which the process took place was troublesome in its own right: Wiedergutmachung suggests ‘making good again’, a phrasing which, as has been outlined by Hockerts, left many feeling even further distanced from the process. Things could not simply be made good again; to many, the suggestion felt absurd. The application process was arduous in itself: the folder in Wolff’s archive reveals a slow process by which she tried, and eventually succeeded, to elicit letters of support and evidence from former medical colleagues in Berlin. Between the lines of the legal forms and beneath the inexpressive language of legal and financial terminologies, an important turning point in Wolff’s life was taking place. She was working out how to confront the past and articulate it in the present. This was a task she undertook with great reluctance at first: early in the legal correspondence, she wrote to her lawyer asking him to drop the proceedings he had begun, adding she felt she wanted “to leave the past alone.”

Writing in 1958 to another lawyer who by then had picked up the dormant case, Wolff does something she did not seem prepared to do in her earlier

536 Wolff to Barrow, a lawyer, 28 September 1955. WC PSY/WOL/1/5.
correspondence with Barrow: she describes her working conditions and financial situation in terms of the damage done to them by the consequences of Nazi policy. Running her own private practice as a psychotherapist, she writes, she receives no pension entitlements. Her practice lacks security: income generated by it varies greatly from year to year, and this income never amounts to even a quarter of the minimum a doctor in her position might usually expect. 537 Two years later, she writes to this lawyer again – this time to thank him for the appearance of a substantial figure in her German bank account. This, of course, does not ‘make things good again’. It does however give Wolff, evidently still living through the effects of exile (including but certainly not limited to precarious income levels) a sense of financial security. As Virginia Woolf’s unnamed narrator in *A Room of One’s Own* once declared: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.” 538 Imperative or not, it certainly helps. Wolff finally had both. She continued her psychotherapy practice, but also began to write creative prose. There is no knowing to what extent the tangible outcome of her *Wiedergutmachung* claim was a catalyst for this, but the challenging procedure itself does coincide with Wolff’s return to writing. This confrontation of the past contributed to Wolff’s desire to explain, represent and reclaim her past through creative writing.

If what remains in her archive is an adequate reflection of her output, the late 1950s were the years in which Wolff began writing again in earnest. At one point in *On the Way to Myself* this is explained, in an understated manner, as the product of boredom: “I soon discovered the pitfalls of too much leisure and I took action. In my ‘free’ time I began to write, first a number of essays, then poems in German.” 539 These essays were later reworked into *On the Way to Myself*; the German poems have vanished from her archive. Wolff does not describe them at all, except for their role in breaking the “barrier” which had cemented in place between her and the German language:

One evening, when I read aphorisms in English to [Sybille Bedford] and Eda Lord, Sybille said: ‘Why do you not write poetry in German?’ Her words made an immediate, almost hypnotic impact on me. I started at once to write poems in German, indeed with the knowledge that no borrowed language can

537 Wolff to Hintz, a lawyer, 30 April 1958. WC PSY/WOL/1/5.
serve as a vehicle for images and thoughts which come from the well of one’s being.\footnote{Wolff, \textit{On the Way to Myself}, 184.}

This, of course, was written in ‘borrowed language,’ while the German-language poems which Wolff portrays there as the most direct and authentic route to her deepest thoughts were somehow lost or discarded. Given that Wolff successfully preserved the poetry she wrote in the years before fleeing Germany, it seems strange that the same did not happen with the poems described above. This is an important reminder of the inevitable incompleteness of archives.

Her essays and diaries were preserved, at least. The archived remnants of these are contained within the pages of a notebook labelled ‘Conversations with Myself, II’; there would have been, presumably, a Volume I – also lost. “Conversations with Myself, II” was a space in which she could at once describe and theorise her state of depression. It opens with entries, traceable to August 1958, in which she contemplates her experience of aging as one in which her own vitality and engagement with the exterior world does not diminish at all, but societal expectations of her capacity for such engagement certainly does:

> A person of 60 may be younger in vitality than a person of 30 – the idea of retirement is practically outdated, since we know that movement, physical and mental, keeps us alive, rather than rest. Indeed, the latter is, if taken to excess, the road to decline and, finally, Death. – This is already common knowledge, and the words old, old age, retirement [and] pension have the nasty flavour of […] decay.\footnote{Wolff, “Conversations with Myself, II,” 8 August 1958. WC PSY/WOL/6/2.}

This sensitivity to ageism and reluctance to slow down with the passing of time later developed into the vitality and determination with which she maintained an active role in discussions around sexualities and the writing of histories: in relation to those who sought to write about her past, she saw her role as that of an active collaborator, not as a passive object to be written about.

In 1958, however, she was still a long way away from gaining that sense of purpose. The subjects revealed by “Conversations with Myself, II” as close to Wolff’s heart at that point in her life are depression, psychiatry, aging, and human nature,
particularly pertaining to groups of people from whom she feels acutely distanced: young, modish ‘teddy boys’ and their girlfriends; the English and the French as generalised stereotypes; people with a secure sense of religion and identity. The diary thus reads overall as an attempt at productively grappling with depression and loneliness, both therapeutically and for the sake of representing that state of mind in its own right. Religiosity comes across as an appealing but ultimately unattainable state for Wolff: immersed in the community of the Quakers who had assisted her migration to the United Kingdom, and grappling with the meaning of her Jewishness which had meant so little to her sense of identity until Nazi persecution branded her an outsider, on the subject of religion Wolff concludes at one point in her diary that “whatever the reality of religious belief may be, its power on Man’s spiritual security and happiness seems to be beyond measure.”

It is not a quest for spiritual security through religion, but rather a quest for emotional security through a sense of identity that echoes across each page of “Conversations with Myself, II.” She contemplates this in terms of relating her remembered past self to a present sense of self:

> The desire and orientation towards Past or Future comes from a psychological condition, and a common one for that matter. We, all of us […] are followed by a shadow with a Janus-Head – like the God of the New Year, there is with us always something looking back and something looking forward – we cannot make one step forward without looking back, otherwise we lose our feeling of identity.

Memories of Wolff’s past, however, feature very little in her private diary. Readers of On the Way to Myself and Hindsight invariably notice a silence around her experiences of – or even her thoughts and feelings in relation to – Nazi persecution and subsequent exile; the diary is no exception. One reference to London smog and pollution making the city “a friendly gas chamber” shows Nazi atrocities were certainly on her mind. Her diary, though – like her later, more public life writing – focuses most intently and directly on her own immediate, private and existential suffering: a lack of any sense of identity or belonging.

In an entry from 1959, written shortly before her 62nd birthday, we can see the earliest instance of Wolff’s engagement with vivid description of memories of her past. Here, she evokes a memory from her very early childhood in the course of examining her own sense of identity, past and present: “My first image of myself must have been that of a boy as I requested from my father when I was about 4 years old to buy me a boy’s outfit.” That Wolff’s earliest detectable foray into writing her own past gravitates so quickly towards the subject of gender certainly reflects the importance of gender, sexuality and identity as subjects Wolff sought to make sense of through her writing. That entry, left incomplete in that particular notebook but demonstrating a clear intent towards essayistic structure and wholeness, also bears a title – “Birthday and the first three shocks” – which suggests Wolff had begun to see her diary as a venue for drafting works intended for later publication. This unfinished essay is certainly readable as the foundation of the work which became On the Way to Myself. Very shortly after writing ‘Birthday and the first three shocks’, Wolff was in contact with Alan White, Methuen’s managing director. He had been a friend of Wolff’s since the 1940s, when he had ‘discovered’ her in her capacity as a potentially popular scientist of the meaning of hands. Writing to him in December of 1959, Wolff explains that her proposed book, ‘Conversations with Myself’, would be structured around “three shocks.”

This was in response to a letter from White in which he confirmed Methuen’s official interest in the manuscript. He had already read some samples of Wolff’s work on the project thus far. It is unclear which essays he had seen, but his response was this, in a letter to Wolff: “Your notes contain strikingly illuminating sentences, phrases and words amid rough connecting matter, like jewels set in iron.” The correspondence between Wolff and White generally reflects his enthusiasm for her ideas, but a hesitance regarding the quality of her writing. The project was put aside for personal reasons for several years, and when Wolff returned to it in 1967, the process of manuscript completion, editing and production seemed to be rushed, with

546 Wolff, Hindsight, 171.
547 Wolff to J. Alan White, 15 December 1959, WC PSY/WOL/1/7.
548 White to Wolff, 3 December 1959, WC PSY/WOL/1/7.
549 White to Wolff, 19 November 1959, WC PSY/WOL/1/7.
550 Wolff, Hindsight, 210-211.
very few changes taking place from the first manuscript to the second.\textsuperscript{551} Off the presses and into the bookstores, \textit{On the Way to Myself} remained exactly as White had viewed its earliest drafts: a scattering of jewels set in iron.

\textsuperscript{551} Draft and final manuscripts are held at WC PSY/WOL/6/6/2.
4.3 “Remember yourself and you will be sane”: identity and the past in On the Way to Myself

In what is clearly a direct continuation of the project which originated as “Conversations with Myself, II,” Wolff’s preface to On the Way to Myself describes the book as “an autobiography of a mind and not a chronicle of a life,”552 with a structure formed by what she names as her own “shock experiences.”553 Here she articulates shock experiences not as a decidedly negative form of trauma but as “developments which effect a change in ourselves” and are thus “always creative.”554 This is shock as a medium for creation, not necessarily for destruction – shock much like that evoked by Walter Benjamin with the help of some references to Sigmund Freud. Benjamin’s most enduring conceptualisations of shock are those sourced from his work on Baudelaire.555 For Benjamin, modern cities – as overwhelming barrages of images, messages and crowds – wear people down: the populace of the modern city has its defences up by default. To be overwhelmed in the face of too much information and stimulus is to experience shock – a working definition he took from the theories of Freud.556 Discussing Baudelaire as the writer of modern life, Benjamin posits a constant duel between consciousness and the shock experiences that are everyday city existence – and that for Baudelaire, and by extension others who seek to create among the chaos of modernity, the negotiation of these shocks is at the core of the creative process.

The overlap between Benjamin’s work on shock in relation to Baudelaire and Wolff’s work on shock in relation to herself is too great to be a coincidence – and her connection to Benjamin and interest in Baudelaire allow us to safely assume Wolff would have read Benjamin’s writings on the poet. But when? The majority of this work was written years after the two friends had gone their separate ways, and was not published until Suhrkamp’s edition of Benjamin’s Schriften in 1955. Imagine Charlotte Wolff picking up a newly pressed copy of Schriften and finally reading – especially in the Baudelaire essays and fragments – the remainder of an oeuvre she had been part of in its nascent stages. This must have happened. In On the Way to Myself, in her own way which almost defies the passing of time and the death of

553 Ibid.
554 Ibid.
556 See page 58 of Chapter 2.
Benjamin, Wolff continues exactly as she had begun as a creative writer earlier in the twentieth century: writing in a community of like-minded thinkers alongside her friend Walter Benjamin.

Whether describing a moment when, as a teenager, she froze in amazement on the footpath outside the Danzig post office with a heightened sense of ‘third eye’-like perception557 or later, as a refugee in London, hearing war declared on the radio,558 in On the Way to Myself Wolff sought to articulate her own sense of the relationship between shock and creativity, pertaining to a selection of remembered experiences, rather than a strict chronology of her life. This premise is not actually maintained across the entirety of the book, though. The moments at which she keeps to this task do provide a compelling and convincing application of her own remembered experiences to the notion of shock as integral to the creative process. This gives way, however, to lengthy “biographical” depictions, particularly in the chapters ‘In Paris and London’ and ‘In London,’ of her encounters with those who had helped her or otherwise made an impression on her memory: these are often interesting, certainly helpful as historical documentation, but do not carry the same conceptual depth as other chapters.

On the Way to Myself spans eight chapters, nearly all of which are titled with geographical locations: “In Danzig,” “In Paris,” “In London,” “In Paris and London,” “A Journey into Russia,” presenting the book, from the contents page alone, as a recollection of many relocations. Her claim in the introduction, that “this documentary of the development of my mind is, broadly speaking, written as Hebrew is written, from back to front,”559 does not actually reflect the path taken in On the Way to Myself. The opening chapter, ‘A Diary’, outlines Wolff’s mostly inward thoughts on a visit to France in 1967; she then looks back on her teenage years in the 1910s, then skips forward to the day she arrived in Paris in 1933, having fled Berlin. The book then pauses in “In Search for Inner Peace” to reflect on Wolff’s involvement with – but distance from – the Gurdjieff Group in Paris and the Quakers in London, before advancing to her resettlement in London in 1936 and then to her work as a researcher in the 1940s and psychiatrist in the 1950s. The final narrative

558 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 142.
chapter, “A Journey into Russia,” is a reflection on the social and emotional situations which led to her visiting Russia in the early 1920s: significantly, it ends with an account of the era in which she escaped Nazi Germany. The book then ends with a chapter of aphorisms, titled “Flashes and Reflections,” which have a sense of specific time imposed upon them by only one thing: a subtitle of ‘1962-1966.’ The book is not a line drawn backwards – it is a jagged loop, starting and ending in the same place.

The placement of “A Journey into Russia” as the closing focus of the book’s narrative is important: it begins with “In Germany’s post-World-War-I period of inflation, I had the time of my life” and ends by outlining the destruction of this happiness under Nazism. The story told here represents a departure from the general tone and content of the book: the depression, isolation and anxiety told through memories or implied through reflective inwardness elsewhere in the book give way to a compelling story of adventure, romance and friendship. There is intellectual energy, purpose and determination; there is beauty, eroticism and fun. Its placement sheds all that has come before it in the book in a different light: the psychological suffering and inwardness of Wolff as a refugee, a rogue psychiatrist or outside observer of spiritual collectives is rendered entirely circumstantial and shown to be the wreckage of a destroyed identity. In “A Journey into Russia,” Wolff enjoys the security of her work as a doctor, the untroubled, unlabelled and open eroticism she shares with other women, and the free and eager exchange of ideas and poetry – in her own language – with like-minded writers and thinkers. This sense of belonging comes across as a stable feeling of identity; its loss, at the chapter’s close, is an insurmountable shock. Here, across three pages, Wolff describes her departure from the “happy dreamland” of security and identity through specific memories: a sudden sense of being surrounded by hostility; the loss of her job; her non-Jewish girlfriend Katherine’s decision to leave her; a fleeting but dangerous encounter with the Gestapo on a train; the day the Gestapo searched her house for bombs on the advice of a local teenager and departed apologetically.

Wolff’s allocation of just three pages to her experiences of Nazi persecution must be considered in relation to the lush descriptiveness allowed elsewhere: Part II

of the chapter, which narrates the journey she and Katherine had taken to Russia, spans seventeen pages of sensuality and adventure. Clearly, the emphasis of “A Journey into Russia” is not her persecution, but the identity she lost through it. Up until “A Journey into Russia,” there is no indication in On the Way to Myself that Wolff had ever had a ‘time of her life,’ nor a solid sense of place. Rather than theorising upon the effect of the shock of her loss of identity in the face of Nazi persecution, though, Wolff ends the story there. Readers are left to ponder the impermanence and instability of identity and belonging. The non-chronology of On the Way to Myself is a rejection of the idea of a progress narrative; Wolff’s portrayal of the ‘time of her life’ and its destruction is a direct refutation of the usefulness of histories, whether political or immediately personal, as linear narratives of progress. A short conclusion – one page in length – is appended to “A Journey into Russia,” in which Wolff declares this: “Of course the search for the Self goes on in every human being all the time. It is the most important search for all of us in all circumstances. The puzzle is that we can never really find it nor hold in to it when we get a glimpse of it.” That ‘glimpse’ of the Self, as articulated in “A Journey into Russia,” is how Wolff remembered her life before Nazi persecution.

It is in “Flashes and Reflections, 1962-1966” that Wolff’s sense of memory as crucial to identity is expressed most succinctly. In the interests of style, and as a reminder of how Wolff had originally regarded her own work, these “Flashes and Reflections” will be referred to here as aphorisms: Wolff’s manuscript had simply titled this section ‘Aphorisms,’ a title which would have served as another link to the tradition in which she and Benjamin had written together. Resonating strongly with ideas elsewhere in the book, the interrelated workings of memory, history and identity are a prominent theme of Wolff’s aphorisms:

564 See Chapter 1, especially page 30 onwards, for a discussion on the use of progress narratives in histories of sexuality.
566 This is one particularly telling example of a tendency detectable in the approach taken by those who proofread and edited the book: authoritative and universalising tones were steered towards sounding more subjective. Another example is that Wolff’s essay ‘On Depression’ was adapted into parts of the chapter ‘In Paris and London’: an essay offering ideas gives way to a narrative outlining personal experiences. Subjectivity is of course an entirely valid, interesting and powerful mode of expression: all that is being remarked upon here is the impression given by the revisions made to On the Way to Myself, in which Wolff appears to have been encouraged not to universalise or otherwise adopt a distinctive tone of authority.
11. Nostalgia is masochistic delight in enchanted frustrations.567

30. What we are to ourselves is always in the present; what we are to others is always in the past.568

45. Memory is the essence of identity.

There are two kinds of memory: [the first is] parrot memory [… ]. The other kind of memory, which I want to call ‘Jacob’s Ladder’, reaches to a desired end. It accompanies and leads the Self step by step on its journey from the unconscious beginnings to all forms of awareness. It is always there and always with us, but it can never be seen as a whole. Without its rungs the Self would fall into the bottomless pit of nothingness.

REMEMBER YOURSELF AND YOU WILL BE SANE.569

55. I am what I WAS and because I was.570

In accordance with its title, On the Way to Myself is, at its core, Wolff’s quest for a sense of identity via an interrogation of what the concept means to her. This is stated explicitly in the book,571 with Wolff at one point evoking her 1920s studies of phenomenology – “what is now called Existentialism”572 – under Husserl and Heidegger as the origins of her own understanding of identity as a “unique individuality,” going on to declare: “though I do not believe in God, I believe in identity which reflects the untouchable, inexchangeable [sic] SELF.”573 Though this attempt at a definition of identity is expressed over almost three pages, it offers much

569 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 236.
570 Ibid., 233. Aphorism 55, in its phrasing and its emphasis through the capitalisation of “WAS”, reads as a deliberate echo and subversion of “I am that I am”, the most common English approximation of the response Moses is said, in the Tanakh and the Old Testament, to have received upon asking the name of God. See E. Schild, “On Exodus iii 14 – ‘I AM THAT I AM,’” Vetus Testamentum 4, no. 3 (1954), 296. Wolff, an avid, philosophically engaged reader, had regularly attended synagogue until she was sixteen and engaged critically with religious texts even when very young, claiming “the Bible, books on eastern religions, and philosophy” had provided her with spiritual support and guidance through her “uneasy adolescence” (Alpert, Like Bread on the Seder Plate, 142; Wolff, Hindsight, 37): this is visible in her Old Testament-inspired poetic juvenilia as mentioned in Chapter 2. The Old Testament’s prominence as a lifelong point of reference for Wolff is also evident when considering her repeated evocations of Ecclesiastes 1:9 (“and there is no new thing under the sun”) when faced, later in life, with articulations of sexual and gender fluidity as if they were a wholly novel concept. Notably, she only ever describes her scriptural reference point as the “Old Testament”. Wolff was a scripturally literate thinker and reader who liked to make religious references on topics extending beyond faith and theology as such. She would have been aware, through English- and German-language scholarly approaches to translating this line in the Book of Exodus, of its resonance with any form of contemplation of the relationship between the notion of identity and the notion of existence (Schild, “On Exodus iii 14”, 296-297). This would have compelled her to evoke it the way she did in Aphorism 55: in effect, as a more succinct variation of the same point she raised in ‘Conversations with Myself, II’ when she theorised that we all, Janus-like, “cannot make one step forward without looking back, otherwise we lose our feeling of identity.” Wolff, “Conversations with Myself, II,” 8 August 1958.
572 Ibid.
573 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 100.
to consider but no lucid explanation of what Wolff means. It certainly shows just how
highly she valued the concept of identity. A clearer impression is found in her pages
of aphorisms. “Memory is the essence of identity,” she states there, with all the
confidence and absoluteness an aphorism affords.\(^{574}\)

Reading aphorisms 30, 45 and 55 together, it appears Wolff’s concept of
identity is one in which we see ourselves as composites of how we remember our past
experiences, whereas others’ impressions of our identities are comprised of how they
remember their past experiences of us, and the gap between these two versions of
one’s self can be fraught with profound, even oppressive levels of
misunderstanding.\(^{575}\) This resonates strongly with an Existential work much more
contemporary to the time in which Wolff wrote \textit{On the Way to Myself}, and which
Wolff’s archive suggests she very likely had read and engaged with deeply: Sartre’s
\textit{Being and Nothingness}.\(^{576}\) Wolff’s own conceptualisation of the interactions of
memory and identity, as made clearest through her aphorisms, very strongly
resembles an argument set out by Sartre in his chapter “Bad Faith,” where the
particular form of externally imposed identity being problematized is that of sexual
identity. Wolff’s encounters with those who sought to write her into history, which
will be discussed later in this chapter, often read as re-enactments of the dilemma
outlined by Sartre and echoed in Wolff’s own aphorisms.

In “Bad Faith,” Sartre poses problems around the supposition that one is the
same person in the present as one was in the past. He does not employ the phrase “I

\(^{574}\) Contemplating a perceived decrease in the relevance of aphorism as a practise in writing across the twentieth
century, the American poet Sharon Dolin explained it thus: “Traditionally, [aphorisms] have dressed themselves in
the suit of rhetorical authority – and since the sixties, relativism – the personal, the subjective – has been the only
acceptable truth.” “Making a Space for Aphorism: Exploring the Intersection between Aphorism and Poetry,”
\textit{American Poet} 40 (2011). http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22565. With this in mind, it is
unsurprising that the title of ‘Aphorisms’ was revised. Susan Sontag, near the end of her life, began work toward
an essay on the aphorism. This essay was never completed, but in it Sontag planned to elaborate on her idea that
“aphorism is aristocratic thinking: this is all the aristocrat is willing to tell you; he thinks you should get it fast,
without spelling out all the details […]” \textit{As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks 1964-

\(^{575}\) Here Wolff is clearly influenced by R.D. Laing’s \textit{The Politics of Experience}, which she makes explicit early in
\textit{On the Way to Myself} (15-16). She deeply admires Laing’s work, but sees it as pessimistic: “the impossibility of
communication has been over-played by him and other authors and playwrights.”

\(^{576}\) In a letter Wolff wrote to an interviewer (Wolff to Anke Wolf-Graaf, 13/8/1982, WC PSY/WOL/1/4/2) who
had requested further details on her connections to existential thought, she declares Sartre’s work had been her
main source of ideas. This letter suggests a desire to distance herself from her past associations with Heidegger
and Husserl – concordant with the tendency in her 1980s correspondence to discourage researchers from focusing
on her ‘student days’ – and thus reads as an indication of her desires and priorities at the time of writing as well as
serving as a document of her own personal intellectual history. Whatever the letter may connote through its
attempt to refute connections already well-established through her life-writing, it would be remiss not to consider
it a reflection of Sartre’s importance to Wolff.

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am what I was” in that precise configuration, but it is evoked in a revisiting of the “famous” sentence “He has become what he was”\footnote{Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 98.} and, most of all, in a moment in the book where Sartre declares: “We are readily astonished and upset when the penalties of the court affect a man who in his new freedom is no longer the guilty person he was. But at the same time we require of this man that he recognise himself as being this guilty one.”\footnote{Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 106-107.} Across this discussion, while the concept of ‘guilt’ is employed frequently as a useful point of reference in comparing one’s past deeds to one’s present sense of self, the point being made is not one that hinges on notions of guilt or innocence: rather, Sartre seeks to trouble the notion that sincerity, or any other variation on disclosure of apparent truths, is by any means straightforward (if at all possible). Here is where the likelihood that Wolff was influenced by Sartre’s thoughts on ‘bad faith’ and sincerity in her aphoristic writing – and, more generally, in her own ideas on identity’s relation to the past – connects back towards a recurring concern of this study: the example Sartre chooses to expand upon immediately after establishing the sincerity/insincerity conundrum described above is the situation faced by a hypothetical “homosexual.”

Sartre’s “homosexual” is racked by guilt and neuroses but, more significantly here, is perpetually averse to being categorised by externally imposed identity labels. Sartre imagines him so: “it frequently happens that that this man, while recognizing his homosexual inclination, while avowing each and every [homosexual act]\footnote{The phrase as per Barnes’ translation of Sartre is actually “particular misdeed.”} which he has committed, refuses with all his strength to call himself ‘a paederast’. His case is always ‘different,’ peculiar; there enters into it something of a game, of chance, of bad luck […] we should see in [his cumulative acts] the results of a restless search, rather than the manifestations of a deeply rooted tendency.”\footnote{Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 107.} This reads similarly to Wolff’s later assertions that one’s sexuality is a matter of biography\footnote{Wolff, “Alles ist Biographie.”} – and what Sartre then does with his constructed example, namely the “homosexual” who refuses to frame himself as such, reads remarkably well as a synopsis of situations faced when writing histories of sexuality even today. It serves, in effect, as a criticism of the demand placed by some upon others to ‘come out of the closet’ as gay or lesbian in
the interests of sincerity and authenticity—an obligation which, as will be explained later in this chapter, had become an important strategy for gay liberation movements in the era in which Wolff wrote and promoted her novel *An Older Love*. Observe: first, Sartre introduces readers to a new figure set up in opposition to the label-averse homosexual—his “friend who is his most severe critic”. This critic has but one demand of his friend: that he “declare frankly—whether humbly or boastfully matters little—‘I am a paederast.”’

Sartre then questions whether the ‘homosexual’’s friend and critic really is a “champion of sincerity” for insisting this. This hypothetical ‘homosexual,’ he explains, “has an obscure but strong feeling that a homosexual is not a homosexual as this table is a table or as this red-haired man is red-haired.” This is elaborated upon, mostly in terms of ‘mistakes’ and ‘misdeeds’ being ‘cleansed’ by the passing of time. While such phrasing hardly renders *Being and Nothingness* an overlooked gay liberation manifesto, it should not detract from the main point: Sartre is effectively arguing that to impose a sexual identity category upon an individual who does not see such a concept as applicable to their own mindset and experience engenders at least as much insincerity as one’s refusal to ‘come out.’ After all, he continues: “Who cannot see how offensive to the Other [that is, the homosexual] and how reassuring for me is a statement such as “He’s just a paederast,” which removes a disturbing freedom from a trait and which aims at henceforth constituting all the acts of the Other as consequences following strictly from his essence [?]”. Imagine replacing “He’s just a paederast” with another statement of a sort, such as an invitation to be included in a museum exhibit on lesbian and gay history (as received by Wolff in the 1980s): the external drive to identify is no longer pejorative, but for Wolff, the same offence was felt—freedom is reduced to essence.

With this established, Wolff’s later interactions with historians, writers and readers who wished to make sense of her as a figure in lesbian history can be seen as the identity crises they so often were for Wolff—rather than as veiled denials from the depths of the closet. Her aphorisms, viewed alongside related passages in *On the Way to Myself* and relevant ideas in the diary which later became the book, demonstrate the

583 Ibid.
584 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 108.
form taken by Wolff’s engagement with problems of memory and identity in a time and place before she was cast in to a problematic limelight as a living relic of lesbian history. The structure and thematic concerns of the book, in the terms Wolff chose to explain them, are clearly linked to Walter Benjamin’s Freud-inspired work towards understanding Baudelaire through the idea of shock. Ultimately, the whole book reads as a continuation of Wolff’s intellectual pursuits pre-exile: a complex embroidery of philosophical, psychological and literary concerns, framed, this time around, by narratives of personal experience.

*On the Way to Myself*, by Wolff’s own description an “autobiography of a mind and not a chronicle of a life,” can be understood as a memoir by Smith and Watson’s definition in which that genre “takes a segment of a life, not an entirety […], focussing on interconnected experiences.” Even a more rigid, earlier articulation of memoir’s difference from autobiography, such as Neumann’s notion of memoir as depicting one’s recollections of life within a prescribed social role – with autobiography, in contrast, allowing space for portrayals of individual experience before and beyond socialisation – is applicable, bearing in mind Wolff’s self-perceived social role, at the time she wrote that book, was that of a creative mind in search of a sense of self. Given that these “interconnected experiences” were often opaque in terms of their interconnection, and considering that the only consistent “role” occupied by Wolff throughout the book is that of her acting as her own psychologist, mainstream reception of the book reflects how reviewers did not know what to make of this unusual memoir.

As has been shown here, Wolff’s archives also demonstrate how the editing process tried to steer the manuscript away from universalising statements, instead encouraging the work to take form as a series of subjective memories. This would have been in the interest of making the book more clearly legible – and thus sellable – as a memoir. Instead, though, *On the Way to Myself* reads as a memoir that tends towards universalising and theorising – or else as a psychological tract told through the lens of personal experience – in any case, certainly as a book which never could be easily defined. The promotional blurb in the first and only edition of *On the Way to Myself*:

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Myself describes Wolff and her work so: “[…] she is ‘an artist of psychology’, and it is thus that she appears in this odd and fascinating book.”

It seems the book did not quite meet the interests of most mainstream British papers and journals: it was advertised but not reviewed in the Listener, the Guardian and the Observer. The advertisement was centred upon an endorsement by the famous actor Michael Redgrave, who had been a friend of Wolff’s: “Long and eagerly awaited by her friends, this autobiography by Charlotte Wolff exceeds expectations. It should make her many more friends and readers.” Several regional British papers offered cautiously positive reviews of the book which made much of Wolff’s proclaimed agnosticism. Readers of the Midlands Advertiser and the Dudley Herald were informed it was a book of “imaginative psychology,” using lines lifted directly from the promotional blurb. Quite remarkably, it was the conservative Daily Mail and its close relative, the Scottish Daily Mail, which paid the most attention and devoted the most page space to the book. The reason was clear: they liked the aphorisms, and believed their readers would too. Headed in England’s edition with “Who’s Afraid of Charlotte Wolff?” and more politely in Scotland with “You put it so nicely, Dr. Wolff,” each edition offered a large selection of the “Flashes and Reflections.” The Mail’s preference was for the ones which exposed what Wolff perceived as weaknesses in the English – for instance, “The English folie de grandeur is dressed up as Miss Modesty.”

Wolff was sent a transcript of a review of the book which was broadcast on Radio Zambia / Radio Tanzania. It is arguably the book’s best review: this empathetic reviewer certainly felt the angst, at once existential and everyday, of the book, declaring “this book by a woman [who] has been described as an ‘artist of psychology’ is both necessary and natural. Necessary because there is an important link between psychology and art, and natural because the author began her creative life as a poet”. The reviewer goes on to cite one of the book’s most memorable lines – “depression is frozen passion” – before recommending anyone read it who is feeling “depressed”, “pessimistic”, or “sensitive.” This review and the one in the

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588 Dust-jacket blurb (author unknown) for Wolff, On the Way to Myself.
589 Clippings taken from WC PSY/WOL/6/6/1 of advertisements run in those periodicals on 16/3/1969.
Quaker journal *The Friend* are alike in that they recommend the book for its value as a self-help text of sorts.

Unlike Wolff’s later publications, *On the Way to Myself* seems to have received much more attention among her English-language readership; her archive contains no trace of critical or popular response to *Innenwelt und Aussenwelt*, which was published by Rogner & Bernhard in 1971. The publishers’ introduction to that translated edition describes the language of the book as reminiscent of Husserl and Heidegger, concluding with a very apt quotation from Ulrich Sonnemann: “Je beispielloser die Situation, um so mehr wächst auf Erden das Maß, in welchem schon darum, daß sie auf exemplarische Präzedenzen, derengleichen sich kaum mehr findet, Bezug haben, Normen nichts taugen können: der Advokat hat noch sein Wörterbuch, nur einen zahlungsfähigen Klienten von gesicherter Identität immer seltener.”592 We can see from this that Wolff’s memoir was recognised by its German publishers as a document of how histories can be rendered unrecognisable and certainly lacking when an example of past experience such as Wolff’s is brought to light. Later in this chapter there will be further discussion of how readers of *An Older Love* and *Hindsight* – in English and also in German translation – seemed mostly unaware of Wolff’s 1969 memoir. Considering Rogner & Bernhard’s decision to present the book in the context of Sonnemann’s words, this seems an unfortunate irony.

*The Lady* offered a review sympathetic to Wolff’s plight as a refugee and her situation in the world; interestingly it was also the only review to even acknowledge Wolff’s far from coy or euphemistic descriptions of her love for other women. Whether out of ‘ladylike’ tact or simple misreading, *Lady* reviewer Elizabeth Coxhill adds a few gentleman suitors to Wolff’s life story, stating, still in sympathy for the exile, that “her longing for friends and roots by its very vehemence antagonises the men, or more frequently the women, to whom she is attracted.”593 No other reviewer brings up the romantic strands of the book at all – and thus the obvious homoeroticism. Coxhill only does so in the course of describing the emotional state she perceives and pities in Wolff, presenting this biographically inaccurate (but

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592 “The fewer examples there are for a situation, the space on earth increases exponentially, in which norms can be of no use in that they relate to exemplary precedents which hardly exist any longer: the lawyer still has his dictionary, just more and more seldom a solvent client of certain identity.” (translation mine) Sonnemann cited in publishers’ introduction to Wolff, *Innenwelt und Aussenwelt* (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971), 2.

593 Clipping of untitled review by Elizabeth Coxhill, *The Lady*, 3 April 1969. WC PSY/WOL/6/6/1.
probably to Wolff’s theoretical liking) bisexuality to readers as a slightly gossipy but far from dramatic aside.

Gossip is by no means a bad thing, and by no means removed from scholarship: in a collection of essays on the meaning of sexuality in the writing of cultural history Henry Abelove evokes ‘deep gossip’ (a line from Allen Ginsberg’s elegy to Frank O’Hara) as a greatly useful concept and phrase when addressing how people’s life experiences are and are not reinterpreted into histories. Gossip, he explains, “is deep whenever it […] touches on matters hard to grasp and of crucial concern.”594 Charlotte Wolff’s relation to the shifting configurations and meanings of sexual identity categories in the spaces she occupied across the twentieth century, especially late in life when she was being written into histories, is clearly a matter hard to grasp – and, as this study continues to demonstrate, is certainly of crucial concern to ongoing work across several fields. With this in mind, how does Wolff describe and define her relationships with other women in On the Way to Myself?

In terms of definition, the answer is quite simple: she does not define her relationships (or herself) at all. Describing, on the other hand, she does plentifully. The chapter “A Journey into Russia” is rich in this descriptiveness, focusing as it does on a very romance-driven storyline: a trip Wolff took to Russia with her girlfriend Katherine, ostensibly to deliver lectures on the experimental film of Viking Eggeling but mostly to visit another girlfriend, Lisa – the object of her greatest affections as described in Chapter 2’s exploration of Wolff’s 1920s poetry. Laying the foundations for the complicated story at the heart of the chapter, Wolff first describes her experiences of Berlin in the 1920s: declaring, in the very first line of the chapter, that this had been “the time of [her] life”595 – a time where, alongside studying and attending classes at the university there was time for “love, friendship and poetry.”596 She describes how she lived in furnished rooms at Nollendorfplatz – an area which would have already been recognisable to some readers as a distinctly queer part of Berlin, either by reputation alone or by its portrayal as a setting in Christopher Isherwood’s Goodbye to Berlin, which by then was triply famous, having been remade as the Broadway play I Am A Camera and the musical Cabaret – and that

594 Abelove, Deep Gossip, xii.
596 Ibid.
Nollendorfplatz had been her choice as it was near “everything [she] desired”: trams, buses, a subway line and, more curiously, “girls in high boots standing about and shouting at night until customers took them away for a time.”

In the midst of this description is the one instance of the word ‘lesbian’ being used in the entirety of the book: its use here is as an adjective, describing some but not all of the nightclubs she frequented around Nollendorfplatz. In this same section she describes the local nightlife as “queer”: she does not use the word pejoratively and seems to also mean something beyond ‘peculiar,’ but is certainly not using it as an adjective directly pertinent to sexuality. Bearing in mind, though, that “queer” is understood today as a descriptor which challenges the boundaries and the usefulness of descriptors, Wolff’s use of it to evoke an entangled night-world of prostitutes, poets and rich tourists making their way around “Lesbian and other night clubs” is uncannily in accordance with its purposes in queer theory (and practice) decades later. In any case, those two nebulous adjectives in the descriptive preamble to “A Journey into Russia” are the closest Wolff comes to any articulation of identity or community related to sexuality. The rest of the chapter takes readers through an adventurous journey – Berlin, Sebastopol, Alupka; shady spies, jealous husbands and violent children – in which Wolff’s romantic and erotic connection to both Katherine and Lisa is openly addressed, but never articulated in terms of any sense of sexual identity imposed either from an internal sense of truth or from external social pressure. This is not a fleeting or shy acknowledgement of Wolff’s sexuality: at 38 pages, “A Journey into Russia” is the longest chapter in *On the Way to Myself*.

With this considered, it is worth questioning the frequency with which recent writings on Charlotte Wolff’s autobiographical works imply that *On the Way to Myself* is an inhibited and stifled precursor to her later autobiography *Hindsight*, written in an era in which she could not be open about her sexuality. *Hindsight*, consequentially, gets portrayed as a cathartic outpouring of truths; *On the Way to Myself* was a strategic compromise, locatable somewhere between silence and full disclosure.

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597 Ibid.
598 Ibid.
599 Buerkle (“Points of Departure,” 23) phrases *On the Way to Myself*’s treatment of sexuality in terms of “erasure,” with *Hindsight* an act of “reclamation.” Brennan (“Charlotte Wolff’s Contribution to Psychology,” 105) theorised it as exemplary of ’strategic liminality’ in Wolff’s life and work: “a non-sensationalized personal lesbian narrative running like a thread through a ‘commercially viable’, relatively mainstream book.” This is quite possibly so – but the implied argument there is that Wolff’s mode of describing her relationships with other women in *On the Way to Myself* was a strategic compromise, locatable somewhere between silence and full disclosure.
Myself is described in pitying tones as a work true to its name in that, much like the society in which it emerged, it was still in progress towards sexual liberation. We should be wary of any suggestion that the absence of any clearly articulated concept of sexual identity or community in On the Way to Myself is tantamount to deliberate elision and omission – especially since the fact of Wolff’s attraction to and relationships with women is not hidden at all in the book, just the notion that those would link, by default, to a broader context involving identity and, most likely, ‘coming out’ as a political act. The situation reads much like the conundrum of Sartre’s ‘homosexual’ and his friend the ‘champion of sincerity’ in Being and Nothingness. To paraphrase and expand upon what we have already heard from Sartre: who cannot see how incongruous to Wolff’s memoir and how reassuring for its later readers is a statement such as “She’s suppressed her lesbianism”, which removes a disturbing freedom from a trait and which aims at henceforth constituting all Wolff’s writing as consequences following strictly from her essence? On the Way to Myself is a work of memoir in which Wolff could – and did – describe her attraction to other women without articulating it in terms of identity or community at all. Identity itself, however, is discussed often: as a highly individualistic sense of selfhood in which all one’s past thoughts and actions are remembered in a way that reconciles them with what one does and thinks in the present.

Memory, then, is at the core of identity as defined by Wolff in On the Way to Myself; her memories of her sense of self in relation to sexuality in the distant past are established here as distinctly individualistic. With this understood, Charlotte Wolff’s interactions with her readership over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s are clearly intelligible as a clash between Wolff’s own notion of identity and the concept of collective, strategically essentialist sexual identity which helped strengthen the

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600 Importantly, Wolff had at first envisioned including an essay titled ‘Female Homosexuality’ within the loosely connected memoir and reflective essays that form On the Way to Myself. The explanation she gave for omitting this from the final version of the book was that she decided the topic needed a more thorough investigation than one reflective essay could address – and thus the essay ‘Female Homosexuality’ became her 1971 book Love Between Women. (Hindsight, 215). Her archive contains no trace of any discussion with publishers regarding the ‘Female Homosexuality’ essay, so there is no way of knowing whether the eventual exclusion of that essay from Wolff’s memoir was due to any publisher pressure. Methuen rejected the opportunity to publish Love Between Women, which certainly suggests they might not have been keen on the essay (Rejection letter from Methuen’s John Cullen to Wolff, 26 June 1969, WC PSY/WOL/1/7). Just like at any other point in this thesis, while articulating the clear limits of viewing On the Way to Myself as a suppressed and veiled ‘lesbian’ narrative, I am not seeking to deny Wolff ever faced any of the myriad forms of sexual and gendered oppression that did and do exist in our world: there is a chance the exclusion of ‘Female Homosexuality’ from her memoir had not been the autonomous choice she liked to portray it as.

601 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 108.
social and political presence of gay and lesbian communities and activist groups in the 1970s and 1980s.
4.4 “Either come out or you are complete rubbish”: An Older Love, its younger readers and the politics of the closet

19. The root of all imaginative invention is either biographical or autobiographical. The difference between a biography and a novel is no more than that made by a process of screening and weaving into willed patterns. A novel is a transformed and abstracted biography or autobiography.

Charlotte Wolff, ‘Flashes and Reflections, 1962-1966’

The ultimate in self-oppression is to avoid confronting straight society, and thereby provoking further hostility. Self-oppression is saying, and believing: ‘I am not oppressed’.


She takes a great interest in gay rights and would be quite willing to wave banners on the streets “but only if someone said to me ‘Look, Charlotte, it would really make a difference if you came along. ’ Then I would go as long as it didn’t overtax my strength and give me a heart attack.”


The Guardian, everybody, knows I am a lesbian, and good gracious, I mean, NATURALLY. Either come out or you are complete rubbish. There is no other way. Either we say who we are or we are nothing. I go as far as that.

Charlotte Wolff in an unpublished interview transcription, 1977

Having established On the Way to Myself as a clear expression of Wolff’s individualistic approach to identity and memory, directly applicable to her later interactions with historians and other readers of her work, the momentary shift in stance that takes place in her novel An Older Love is surprising and significant. This novel is a fictionalised treatment of Wolff’s frustrated encounters with two women intent on denying any erotic or sexual element to their almost lifelong cohabitation and companionship. Their attitudes and beliefs are questioned and criticised through the inner thoughts of an unnamed protagonist, as well as through the conversations this protagonist has with a cast of minor characters resurrected from Wolff’s own memories of her life in Berlin before she fled in 1933. It is thus through recourse to

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602 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 231.
605 Wolff, interview by Judy Gillies, c.1977, transcript, WC PSY/WOL/6/5/1. Emphasis in original.
the past, rather than through any glimpse of an imagined future or even an expressed awareness of social change in the present, that Wolff constructs this critical portrayal of the effects of suppressed sexuality on a person and those around them.

Nonetheless, read in alignment with how Wolff discussed the work publicly around the time of its release – and how it was received in the United Kingdom and Germany – *An Older Love* constitutes an act of ‘coming out’ as per the expectations and requirements of the sexual identity politics of the time and place in which it was written and published. In writing this novel and publicly standing by its inferred message that sexuality is best named, claimed and out in the open, Wolff aligned herself in direct support of gay and lesbian liberation movements.

Indeed, for a relatively fleeting moment, between the publication of *An Older Love* in 1976 and *Bisexuality* in 1978, Wolff seems happy to describe herself as a lesbian. This is noteworthy for its incongruity with the impression forged by Wolff’s presence as a writer and public figure in later years, and the resonance of this with her distant past as she came to remember and represent it. It suggests Wolff’s hopes and expectations for gay and lesbian liberation – including, but certainly not limited to, the writing of sexualities into history – were, in that relatively fleeting moment, in a comfortable enough alignment with the discussions and ideas she encountered. Her later rejection of anything endorsing sexual identity categories as an intrinsic attribute of – or even a useful concept for – people must therefore be seen not as a direct continuation of the sexuality-without-labels stance visible in *On the Way to Myself* or, arguably, in her 1920s poetry. Rather, it seems to have been a pointed return towards that stance after a brief but ultimately failed moment, via *An Older Love*, in which Wolff and her self-identified gay and lesbian readership seemed to be on common ground.

*An Older Love* depicts the story of three women in their seventies: Caroline and Christabel of the quiet, old and small town of Malvern, and the unnamed first-person protagonist who comes to visit them from London as an at once needy and needed friend. Caroline is an effusive philanthropist who takes people on as ‘projects’ of sorts, while prickly, possessive but well-meaning Christabel loves her and lives with her. The protagonist is one of Caroline’s ‘projects’ – and they share an erotic attraction which, aside from one moment in which Caroline’s usual sense of proper
conduct lapses dramatically, is never expressed. This protagonist is Jewish, a refugee from Germany, and a psychiatrist who operates beyond the established values of the field. Her attraction to other women, as portrayed in this novel, carries no sense of fear or stigma. In the frequent interiority of the novel, this protagonist, in voice as well as in ideas, sounds a lot like the Charlotte Wolff with whom readers had already been able to acquaint themselves through On the Way to Myself. As just one example: this protagonist at one point declares that there is no such thing as original sin, but that original anxiety is the default state of humanity. That had been one of Wolff’s points of reflection in On the Way to Myself.

Smith and Watson’s necessarily porous description of ‘autofiction’ is helpful in understanding the workings of An Older Love and its potential meaning to readers. Here, they consider valid doubts as to the possibility of ever being able to distinguish ‘autobiography’ from ‘fiction’ – both, after all, being literary, and thus texts, and thus ‘made up’, as per Paul Jay’s argument – before stating the important point that, regardless of the fuzzy boundaries between different forms of writing as just described, “the reader comes to an autobiographical text with the expectation that the protagonist is a person living in the experiential world, not a fictional character, and that the narrative will be a transparent, truthful view of that world.”

Smith and Watson argue that autofiction – a frequently used descriptor for first-person fictional narratives (with autobiographical elements) – suggests “no definitive truth about the past self may be available,” thus reflecting a sense of impossibility in what is often expected of autobiographies and histories.

The namelessness of the protagonist in An Older Love reads as a deliberate invitation for interpretative flexibility. Let us remember, here, Lejeune’s pacte autobiographique: an assumed contract between writer and reader, in which a writer of autobiography claims to be telling his or her own truth within the work, within reason, and readers can be assumed to receive the work as such, thus forging a different understanding to if the same work were presented as fiction. Paul John Eakin wrote in his preface to Lejeune that this notion of the autobiographical pact would be

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609 Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 260.
610 Ibid.
easily dismissed as “author-based” criticism – that is, dependant on the problematic concept of authorial intent – were it not for one small but important factor: the name on the title page matching up to that of the protagonist of the text is, in most cases, a reliable “sign of intention” that the writer seeks to portray his or her own thoughts and experiences through that protagonist.\textsuperscript{611} – indeed, that the work in question is intended to be received as an autobiography.\textsuperscript{612} Had Wolff chosen to append some arbitrarily chosen name to this figure in her novel, this would have been a decisive shift away from the autobiographical pact, but not necessarily an effective one. Instead, she chose to do no such thing. A nameless protagonist neither commits to nor shirks from the name-bound notion of the autobiographical pact. This creates a space in which readers could – and, as discussion of the book’s reception will later show, often did – consider the book ‘autobiographical.’ More importantly, it generated an uncertainty around the extent to which readers could feel they were reading ‘autobiography’ or ‘fiction,’ reflecting the unreliability of either genre in its own right.

The narrative of the novel is, ultimately, a story of severance between the protagonist and her two friends in Malvern: the closing lines of the book show the protagonist hanging up after a phone call, resolving she will have nothing more to do with Malvern and that the friendship is over. The tangle of insecurities and dramatic moments which lead up to that is complex, but the general premise of the irreconcilable difference between Wolff’s protagonist and the two Malvern women is relatively simple. The difference is this: Christabel and Caroline, both heavily religious and happily existing within the confines of an isolated town which operates in the novel as an island of refuge from shifts in social thought, refuse to conceive of any of their feelings for each other (or, in Caroline’s case, for the protagonist) in terms of sexuality – the protagonist, on the other hand, sees this stance as sadly repressed. Nothing changes for Christabel, who dies, or for Caroline, who continues along as she always has. The only form of resolution offered in Wolff’s narrative is the unwritten future beyond the hung-up phone call that ends the novel: a future in which the protagonist no longer has to configure her own emotions and sexual

\textsuperscript{612} There are, of course, exceptions to this, many of which seek to deliberately blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction: as just a few contemporary examples, Paul Auster’s \textit{New York Trilogy} (Faber, 1987), Miguel Syjuco’s \textit{Ilustrado} (London: Picador, 2010), and Sheila Heti’s \textit{How Should A Person Be?} (New York: Henry Holt, 2012).
feelings to suit the worldview of her now former friends, within their language that furtively, coyly and devoutly bypasses the erotic.

This ending is one of the two significant ways in which, by choosing to present these experiences, feelings and memories as fiction, Wolff was able to depart from the limits which would have been imposed by an obligation to write the ‘truth’ through autobiography. *Hindsight* devotes considerable space to Wolff’s recollections of her times with Caroline, Isabel and Gertrud, three figures whose characteristics, situations, words and deeds as reported in *Hindsight* leave no doubt in any reader’s mind that they had been written into *An Older Love* as Caroline, Christabel and the relatively minor character Emma.  

In *Hindsight* it transpires that Wolff’s uncomfortably undefinable connection to Caroline endured for many years beyond the abruptly cut phone call which marks the end of the protagonist’s involvement with the ‘Caroline’ in the novel. Frustratingly but tellingly, *Hindsight* offers no reflection whatsoever on the process behind the writing of *An Older Love*: Wolff tells her stories of Caroline, Isabel and Gertrud with no acknowledgement of the déjà vu any reader familiar with *An Older Love* would have felt upon reading of these people, their thoughts and their interactions. The novel and its intentions are noticeably absent from *Hindsight*. Instead, readers are offered a plainly stated conclusion as to what these women’s ways ultimately taught Wolff: “Isabel and Caroline were ‘hidden’ lesbians. One can never catch those in the net of statistics. Their number is certainly considerable, even in our permissive age. ‘Conscious’ lesbians pity them, but I am by no means sure that they are not misguided in doing so. [sic] Those I knew had an inner richness which outweighed the danger of nervous and emotional disturbances.”

It seems Wolff had changed her mind: the decisive severance between Caroline and the protagonist in *An Older Love* facilitates a forward-looking escape from frustration and insincerity for the protagonist, encouraging in its readers exactly the kind of pity towards “hidden lesbians” that only four years later, in *Hindsight*, Wolff renounces.

Through its elisions and its revisions, *Hindsight* reads as a subtle retraction of *An Older Love*. It also, however, presents a frank account of another saddening and
similar act of retraction – Caroline’s insistence on burning all the letters Charlotte Wolff ever wrote her, and even requesting those she wrote be returned, so she could burn them too: “I could not help laughing at her confession [of burning the letters]”, Wolff writes in Hindsight, adding that she then told Caroline “It reminds me of the Nazis, burning the degenerate books of Jews and other ‘vermin’”.\(^\text{615}\) It follows that Caroline is thoroughly absent from Wolff’s archive: Wolff had complied when asked to send all her letters back. Through this admission in Hindsight, it also seems likely An Older Love was written at least partly as a form of retribution. Years of correspondence may have been reduced to ash, but the stories behind them, the eroticism, the romance and the troubled reflections on its meaning – indeed, the very mindset which could bring someone to burn the letters of a love that had not ended badly – could still be pieced together as fiction. By writing them into a novel where Caroline’s name was not even changed, Wolff made very public what had once been, for her, troublingly private. Her later silence around this novel’s content and function can be read on a personal level as a gesture of contrition. Ideologically, Wolff’s quiet disavowal of An Older Love in later years reflects the distance that formed between her and many of the goals and vocabularies of gay and lesbian rights movements as they moved from utopian concepts of liberation to more pragmatic strategies of identity politics. Wolff simply stopped talking about her ‘coming out’ novel. In the moment of its composition and publication, however, An Older Love is legible as a dramatic gesture for Wolff, both personally and – in the broader sense – politically.

Another influential friend whose blunt disapproval of Wolff’s relationship with coy Caroline is cited repeatedly in the Malvern episodes of Hindsight is a woman named Ruth, who had frequented Berlin bars and nightclubs with Wolff when they had both been young: her role as per Hindsight was as “a constant reminder of the pleasures and pains of our German past.”\(^\text{616}\) Ruth is a recurring character in An Older Love, too, with neither her name nor her function altered. As a figure in the novel, Ruth’s opinions and utterances are given a prominent platform, particularly in the form of dialogue between her and the protagonist in which they reminisce on their days and their nights in Weimar Berlin. This creates a space in which the veiled, suppressed approach to sexuality exemplified by the situation between Caroline and

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\(^{615}\) Wolff, Hindsight, 206.
\(^{616}\) Wolff, Hindsight, 208.
Christabel is rendered pitiful and wholly dissatisfying when compared to their memories of another time and place. Consider, for instance, Ruth in one of many such conversations: “When I think of the Maskenbälle at the Academy of Art, Berlin nightlife with all those homosexual clubs, I find this town the dullest place in Europe.”

The freedom of fiction, then, allowed Wolff to amplify voices of nostalgic dissent in her portrayal of a time, a place and a situation markedly different to her remembered past by granting the figure of Ruth a prominence she might not have had in an ostensibly ‘non-fiction’ version of events. It also allowed Wolff to evoke important aspects of this past by resurrecting the dead. A minor character in the novel, Friedrich David is talked about by other characters far more than he is actually allocated any agency of his own: his role in the narrative is as another of Caroline’s ‘projects,’ an old, dying man in need of company and help. The protagonist recognises Friedrich as a well-known and well-regarded essayist and translator from Weimar Berlin. The two had never been friends; the protagonist merely knew of Friedrich as a recognisable literary figure. Both characters find significance in a shared but at first suppressed memory of having met once, at a party: they recall each other’s youthful looks with mutual enthusiasm, as if their young selves were again brought to life through being remembered by others. A lengthy explication through dialogue, covering the task of translation, the workings of Marxist historical materialism, Friedrich’s own poetry and his reception as a “poetic thinker”, makes it clear that while he and the protagonist may never have been close friends the way Wolff and Walter Benjamin were, Friedrich’s literary achievements render him a very close approximation of Benjamin:

[Protagonist:] ‘I know you only as an essayist and translator of French poetry and prose, who nearly got a chair at a German university, but wasn’t chosen in the end.’

[Friedrich David:] ‘Well, we know why. A Jew could, at best, become a Privatdozent. There were a few exceptions.[…]’

‘Wasn’t it your translations of Verlaine, Baudelaire and Jouve, as well as your essays on German literature, that made your name?’

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‘Yes, but you see, my interpretative work made some impression because I am a Marxist. I did some research into the political and social background of my subjects, and I looked at people and ideas in their historical setting. No cultural achievement can be understood without it. I don’t believe in fragmentary interpretations of literature and the arts. They may be luminous, but they don’t illuminate. Single stones of a mosaic don’t show the design and structure of the whole.’

‘I agree with you. Did you yourself ever write poetry?’

‘Yes, until I was about twenty-eight. My poems weren’t good enough. That’s why I translated other people’s.’

‘But it was your imaginative style as a writer that made such an impression.’

‘Did it? A well-known critic called me a poetic thinker – a backhanded compliment. But, please, let’s not talk all the time about me. I want to know about you.’

This conversation, after its abrupt ending, gives way to a focus on the present: illness, old age, depression and anxiety. Friedrich David never again serves much of a function in the novel’s plot, nor is he again allocated as much dialogue. He is relegated to his role as a dying, anxious man in need of help. But that fleeting moment, in which his past as a revered literary figure is made a focus in the present alongside the protagonist’s demonstrable sense of belonging in his intellectual milieu, inevitably alters all that follows: this flash of mutual recognition of their past selves reflects their insurmountable loss, making their present selves more clearly understandable and their situations visibly sadder. In this sense, the spectre of Walter Benjamin in the form of Friedrich David serves the same function as did “A Journey into Russia” in On the Way to Myself: a contextualisation of the present which grounds the subject’s sense of identity (be they Friedrich David, an unnamed protagonist or Wolff herself) in a reclaimed past. This happens again, explicitly, later in the novel: encountering a renamed but very lifelike version of Stéphane Hessel, Franz and Helen’s son, the protagonist converses with him at length and remarks to herself: “I found in him the memory of my roots and a past in which he had played a considerable part. I became another, younger self, which had little to do with my life as it was, difficult and alien in a xenophobic country.”

620 Wolff, An Older Love, 82.
Through the representative possibilities inherent in creating character and dialogue, Wolff was able to harness her protagonist’s sense of identity to its roots in the past, and also cast this remembered past, importantly, as a more liberated, less anxious location than the present. Alongside this, by taking people, places and experiences from her own life and portraying them in fiction, Wolff was able to alter events to better suit the point she sought to make at the time: her sense that her friends the “hidden lesbians” were dangerously insincere and hypocritical. The differences between the Malvern narratives of *An Older Love* and *Hindsight* suggest she regretted having done so: possibly for personal reasons, but perhaps also because, in retrospect, her novel read more as a condemnation of unlabelled and undefined love and sexuality than she wished of it when, later in the 1970s, she began to perceive ‘coming out’ as an act of ‘going in’ to a new set of limitations.\(^6_{21}\)

At the time of writing *An Older Love*, Wolff did briefly – and clearly – see liberatory potential in the rhetoric gesture of ‘coming out of the closet’ and identifying, privately and publicly, as a lesbian. Published in 1976, *An Older Love* emerged at a point in time by which point gay liberation movements in the United Kingdom were flourishing. Wolff responded to this with acute awareness and keen interest.\(^6_{22}\) Her novel, as has been shown, presents a narrative of a lesser-known form of gay liberation: the departure of an elderly person from a milieu in which same-sex attraction was only spoken of in veiled terms, and very rarely acted upon. It argued for the importance of openness, honesty and unrepressed sexuality – a good cause.

But what else did this entail? Was authenticity not what Sartre’s ‘critic’ was seeking when he demanded his friend declare himself a homosexual? There was an increasing tendency for homosexual freedom from repression to be conflated with a need for people to have solid, unambiguous sexual identity categories, configured into communities. *An Older Love* certainly was written in favour of freedom from repression, perhaps even as a defiant gesture of protest upon knowing Caroline had burned her letters. However, the book demonstrates no awareness, let alone

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\(^{622}\) The appendix to the second edition of *Love Between Women* is a thorough record of the gay and lesbian liberation and rights organisations Wolff was involved with and aware of in the early 1970s and her thoughts on them.
endorsement, of the idea that wholly fixed concepts of sexual identities and communities would be the answer to the problems posed or situations faced by self-denying, letter-burning “hidden lesbians.” Written remnants of Wolff’s encounters with people who had read her novel in the United Kingdom – and, later, in Germany as a translation – provide a compelling account of the ideological discordance between Wolff’s idea of liberation – and, indeed, identity – and the beliefs of many other seemingly like-minded people who read her novel.

In this brief moment in Wolff’s career as a writer and a public figure, as well as seeming comfortable with describing herself as (and being described as) a lesbian, her approach to being interviewed and represented in various media was candid, open and enthusiastic. There is one particular document in Wolff’s archive which encapsulates the moment well; it also demonstrates what she had sought to communicate in her novel. This document, a transcription of an interview that took place between Wolff and Judy Gillies, with Wolff fielding numerous questions from an audience afterwards, is another reminder of the inevitable incompleteness of the stories told by papers and objects in archives: the typed transcript bears neither date nor title, and offers no indication of whether this interview was recorded for broadcast or had been received solely by its live audience, perhaps at a literary or a gay and lesbian activist organisation.623 It has proved impossible to identify the interviewer, Gillies, as part of any organisation. No other correspondence or documentation in Wolff’s archive makes reference to Gillies or the interview, which is noteworthy in its own right as nearly every other interaction of that sort, particularly from later years, has a wealth of background discussion filed somewhere in Wolff’s archive.

Such an absence of documentation regarding the Gillies interview suggests this brief era in Wolff’s career as a public figure was indeed one where the ideologies of sexual identity were not a wholly negative issue for her. In the Gillies interview – and, as will soon be demonstrated, other interviews with Wolff in that same era – it seems Wolff felt she could criticise the limits of sexual identity categories while also making the most of their much more positive potential: to articulate the existence of something that might otherwise be repressed through silence or a lacking vocabulary. In this era she tested the possibility of challenging the notion of sexual identity

623 Wolff with Gillies, interview.
categories while still using them. What follows here is an elaboration on this, with the very lucid and at times surprising revelations of the Gillies interview as a point of frequent return.

In this interview, Wolff is not shy to admit her novel is crafted entirely from components of her own life:

It is an extraordinary pretension, I think, of many writers that they do not want to admit that what they write is really what has come out of their own lives. In fact, I am convinced that all writings are either biographical or autobiographical and even there the border line is very fine.

With that established, she speaks of her recent experiences of being interviewed by journalists in the wake of An Older Love’s publication. She tells of two encounters which, judging by the surprise she expresses – and by the tone and content of the reports in question624 – were among her earliest encounters with writers intent on representing her as a lesbian by that exact term:

I was interviewed for Gay News by a very charming young man and one of the first things he asked me was, “Now, are you a lesbian?”

I said: “OF COURSE I am.”

Then I was interviewed by a most charming woman from The Guardian who asked me the same thing immediately. I count it as almost incomprehensible that I was asked the question. (emphasis included in transcript)

Those two interviews – with Janet Watts of the Guardian and Keith Howes from Gay News – stand apart from all later interactions Wolff had with anyone seeking to describe or represent her, whether in the interests of journalism, history or otherwise. Both Watts and Howes spoke with Charlotte Wolff at a time where she had not yet decided her own ideas were irreconcilable with words like ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ even as a matter of conversational convenience. This press coverage of Wolff upon the release of An Older Love makes much of disclosing Wolff’s sexuality, and doing so as if it had not been done before. A curious and relevant fact: no coverage of An Older Love, whether review or interview, mentions the existence of On the Way to Myself, in which Wolff’s relationships with other women, as explained earlier, are described very openly – just without any form of descriptor. Watts and Howes, together, were

the first and also the last to write about Wolff “as a lesbian” without seeming to raise her ire. This was mainly due to their timing – but not to discount their charm: in the introduction to his piece, Howes actually itemises the lines of strategic flattery he delivered to Wolff. One example: “I was able to tell her truthfully that I had read [An Older Love] twice (it’s quite short and deceptively simple) and that I was happy that, at last, someone had written a good book about women over sixty in love.”

The Guardian was able to run the article resulting from Watts’ interview with a subheading of “Charlotte Wolff is a psychiatrist and a lesbian. Now she has revealed some of her thoughts and feelings about female sexuality in her first novel.” Gay News, likewise, introduces Howes’ interview as one in which Wolff talks to him about being, in her own words, “a lesbian, a psychiatrist, someone who feels enormously”. Those words, incidentally, had been chosen by Wolff to describe the unnamed protagonist of An Older Love – who, in the same breath, she also declared to be “very much me”: another reminder that, however any given critic might draw their own lines around and between fiction and autobiography, public reception of Wolff’s novel was reception of Wolff-as-character, within but also beyond her novel. Her book was being read as a lesbian book; she was being read as a lesbian. In that particular moment, and with her understanding of the implications of sexual identity categories at that particular moment, she objected to neither of those readings.

Occurring as they did at the very beginning of Wolff’s career as a public figure, at a point where she must have still felt relatively open and willing to discuss her past in detail, the Watts and Howes interviews contain biographical information which Wolff never again disclosed either in interviews or in her life writing. Asked by Howes how her family reacted to her evident attraction to women, Wolff responded with what was to become her common refrain of insistence that it had never been an issue – also adding that “the only terrible shock to [her] family was [her] sister running off to Hungary and becoming pregnant.” One section of Howes’ article, bizarrely subheaded “Negligé” [sic] in reference to what one anecdotal character was wearing when she opened the door, is devoted to a narrative woven from scraps of gossip (certainly ‘deep’ as per Abelove’s articulation as mentioned earlier;
nonetheless phrased in a way one imagines Wolff may have found tactless) about Wolff’s relationships with women in the 1930s and 1940s. “Her love life was teeming”, reports Howes, before listing descriptions of a few unnamed lovers, assuredly rich, famous or both.\textsuperscript{628}

Never again did any interviewer, writing for a magazine or a history book, obtain the specifics of Wolff’s past to that extent. Later in the 1970s, for instance, Wolff was interviewed by the German social historian Ilse Kokula for \textit{Unsere Kleine Zeitung}. Understandably, given the context within which she worked at the time, Kokula had angled for a story rich in tales of Wolff’s times as a young woman, stories which would contribute to a sense of lesbian history. Wolff’s resistance to this is visibly dramatic in the letters she wrote to Kokula not long afterwards.\textsuperscript{629} Her discomfort with having given an interview focusing, to a large extent, on her pre-1940 love life is so great that it becomes a point of elaboration in \textit{Hindsight}:

I had not looked forward to this interview, which I felt might put me in an awkward position. I tried hard to remember my pleasurable past which had been its \textit{raison d'être}. But my tongue did not function properly. I spoke in bad German about things I either did not want to talk about, or which my memory had either blurred or repressed.\textsuperscript{630}

If Wolff had expressed any similar hesitance or discomfort in the wake of Howes’ interview a few years earlier, no traces of it remain except the surprise she describes feeling, in the Gillies interview transcript, that the question of whether she were a lesbian or not was even worth asking. It seems she felt no need to justify the tone and content of the Howes interview by publishing a story of its context, as she did for the Kokula interview by describing it in \textit{Hindsight}. The main difference is timing: Howes got in first, whereas by the time of Kokula’s interview, Wolff was already tiring of the priorities evident in portrayals of herself. It is also worth considering the fact that Howes wrote Wolff into gay current affairs, whereas Kokula sought to write her into lesbian history. Appearing in a newspaper, Wolff felt her past was being used as contextual material in the promotion of her work in the present; interviewed in the interests of a sense of history, she could only feel she was valued more as a vessel of memories than as a writer and thinker. With the history in question being ‘lesbian

\textsuperscript{628} Wolff with Howes, “Love has many faces,” 14.
\textsuperscript{629} Wolff to Kokula, 20 September 1979. SLA.
history’, her qualms would have certainly multiplied. It also must be acknowledged that Kokula’s interview was in German – and in Germany. This would not have been easy.

Wolff’s unguarded approach to her first two public interviews – with Watts for the *Guardian* and Howes for *Gay News* – yielded other forms of disclosure that would never happen again. Howes’ “Negligé” section ends with an anecdote describing a different connection to people in high places, an awkward bridging of gossip with heavier matters: he reports that in the 1940s someone allegedly asked Wolff, on behalf of the British government, “what’s the matter with Adolf Hitler?” Her answer: “He’s a crazy paranoiac.” Wolff’s spirit of openness, at the beginning of what was to become a long-term involvement with the public, clearly also extended to matters likely much more difficult than recounting old love affairs. In Watts’ *Guardian* interview, Wolff seems comfortable enough to disclose what happened to her family after she fled from Nazi Germany: her immediate family had died of natural causes (her parents very elderly, her sister unwell) but many of her aunts, uncles and cousins were murdered in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. She had never articulated that in a public context before, and it seems she never did again. As soon as she said that to Watts, she followed by declaring: “I shall always feel this extraordinary threat of brutality, cruelty connected with science, which manifested itself in some of the German people.” The previous chapter, examining Wolff’s career in science, touched on the likelihood this was how she felt from the 1950s onwards; in this one interview, she was able to state this openly and succinctly.

By the time *An Older Love* had been published, Wolff had nearly finished writing *Bisexuality*. Her interviews from this era thus also demonstrate how her ideas at the time were not noticeably any different to the arguments she put forth in *Bisexuality* and in subsequent public appearances and interviews. There is significance not only in the never-again-revealed aspects of those interviews, but also in their inclusion of early instances of stories and claims which later became common refrains for Wolff: for instance, insisting that men and women should love each other, but that “love has many faces,” Wolff pointedly describes her one sexual encounter

632 This information can also be found in Wolff’s archives, in the folder PSY/WOL/5/2.
with a male (they were both teenagers) as her own highly personal demonstration of why it is limiting to define oneself as strictly hetero- or homosexual, just like she later does with the same anecdote in *Hindsight*. She told Howes that while she did not enjoy it much, the boy was a great friend. She also includes some details that do not make it into the *Hindsight* version: that this boy friend of hers later became a philosopher in Paris and, incidentally, “was very homo.”

Wolff, then, was already speaking in favour of the “bisexual society” she would later be known to champion whenever she had an opportunity – and yet also felt inclined to make statements such as “I’m a complete lesbian and I don’t care who knows it”. This does seem incongruous, especially when considering how the “bisexual society” arguments she made in later years would usually be accompanied by an absolute disavowal of any available vocabulary of sexual identity categories. A compelling explanation for this momentary overlap of seemingly mismatched ideas can be found when we remember to consider, in close detail, what the focus of this early media representation of Wolff was mostly about: her novel, *An Older Love*. Here is Wolff, as transcribed in the Gillies interview, explaining the core concern of the book:

> It is a novel of fundamentally lesbian women who because of their upbringing and certain social conventions and other pressures inside themselves and outside themselves have not admitted or not even recognised themselves to be what they are. And I have shown in this novel what the consequences can be if such feelings, […] such fundamental sexuality is there […] but is neither applied nor even recognized.

> The point of the story is, what is sexuality doing to people when it is not recognised and when it is, on the contrary, turned in on itself? For instance, the most delightful person of the group, […] an absolute typical lover of women, […] had an absolute horror of homosexuality and called all homosexuals ‘hermaphrodites’. She had no idea, not the slightest knowledge.

> “This suppressed sexuality,” Wolff went on to diagnose, “is isolating people from themselves.” The main point of her novel, she says, is this question: “what does sexuality DO when it is not recognised[?]” Evidently, what takes place in this interview is an explicit and unambiguous explanation of *An Older Love* functioning –

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634 Wolff, *Hindsight*, 16.
637 Wolff with Gillies, interview.
at least according to Wolff’s intentions – as a case study revealing the danger and the sadness of repressed sexual attraction. She goes on to describe Caroline as having been “very loving, very tender, passionately fond of her friends, very very attached to [Wolff], but religion had taught her “homosexuality is wrong” and this is absolute. This is out. And all homosexual women, to her, are hysterical and she is not homosexual.” That Wolff, ostensibly describing a character in her novel, ends up saying that character was attracted to her is a reminder of her constant slippage between articulating the novel as a work of fiction and utilising it as a conversation point which enabled her to talk further about her own life and, most of all, about the denial (she calls it “suppression”, which seems a fair description) which she had witnessed in the life of Caroline. More broadly, it is another reminder of how unclear the distinction between autobiographical and fictional writing can be – especially in *An Older Love*.

In the Gillies interview, Wolff declares Christabel’s suppression as depicted in *An Older Love* (and thus, also Isabel’s, as later to be portrayed in *Hindsight*) “a false way of living.” The conversation turns to matters of authenticity and honesty, and here it strongly resembles the conundrum between the ‘homosexual’ and the ‘critic’ in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, which had been part of the mindset with which Wolff had written *On the Way to Myself* in the 1950s and 1960s. This time around, however, Wolff sounds more like the ‘critic,’ who called for full disclosure as key to a sense of authenticity, than like the ‘homosexual’ who Sartre seemed to champion as justifiably reluctant to have his whole being defined in terms of his sexuality. Again demonstrating a fascination and perhaps a nascent irritation with how media outlets were beginning to portray her in terms of her sexuality, she says this: “The *Guardian*, everybody, knows I am a lesbian, and good gracious, I mean, NATURALLY. Either come out or you are complete rubbish. There is no other way. Either we say who we are or we are nothing.”638 There, it seems, she conceives of ‘coming out’ and declaring herself to be a lesbian as a speech act which communicates the fact she is sexually attracted to women and acts upon it – nothing more, nothing less, and certainly no pledge of allegiance to any specific community or ideology.

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638 Gillies with Wolff, interview.
Further into the interview, when relating her present situation and (momentary) sense of identity to her memories of the past, Wolff says things which clearly foreshadow a major motivation for her later decision to firmly distance herself from concepts of sexual identity. Judging from her recorded memories in life-writing, and the traces of her pre-exile life in Berlin which were examined in Chapter 2, this also echoed an attitude she had held much earlier in life. The motivation in question was, of course, her increasing awareness that sexual identities were being written into histories in a way that did not match up to the worldview she had held at the time, as well as those of many people she had encountered. This happens when Gillies asks Wolff how her parents had reacted to her “being a lesbian,” to which she responds by saying they had shown no objection whatsoever, before adding: “You speak of this idiotic thing you call permissiveness. There was a freedom then.” ‘Permissiveness’ is a notion which has become as readily associated with Weimar Berlin nightlife as ‘romance’ is with Paris, but here Wolff pinpoints a seemingly obvious yet remarkably noteworthy aspect of ‘permissiveness’: it connotes permission, and thus a sense that whoever enjoys this ‘permissiveness’ is, at some level, aware that whatever they enjoy is not considered worthy of that permission by the standards held in other social contexts. Differentiating between ‘permissiveness’ and ‘freedom,’ Wolff articulates the importance of the presence or absence of a sense of stigma or oppression in the formulation of one’s sense of self in relation to sexual behaviour. To enjoy ‘permissiveness’ might seem deviant or, in any case, aberrant; to enjoy freedom, by Wolff’s explanation, is to be devoid of any sense that anything one does could be seen as a sin, a crime or a deviation.

Gillies wisely sees this as a point worthy of elaboration. She asks Wolff if attitudes were really all that different in the social contexts of her life before fleeing Germany or if she had simply been individually privileged. Unlike in later writings, where Wolff’s urgent accounts of the past as a place of different ideological configurations are nuanced enough to acknowledge that she had enjoyed the particular privileges of an elitist milieu, here she responds with an effusive assertion that the case was entirely one of the former: it was a different context, and nothing to do with individual privilege. Whoever transcribed the Gillies interview chose to replace several names with ellipses, likely due to a struggle to understand unfamiliar names. In Wolff’s following elaboration of her remembered pre-exile sense of freedom from
any need for definitions of sexuality, it is difficult to imagine she had meant anyone but Walter Benjamin:

Do you know of ...............? He is one of the greatest philosophers of our time. Well, he was a Jew and he was married and so on, certainly bisexual, and he was a great friend of mine, and men and women we went all together into this wonderful night club as described by Isherwood, it was a land of glory, a land of freedom, was Germany. Nothing was looked at as something one had to “come out of”, there was no “coming out”. You were already there.¹³⁹

What does it mean, then, that in the space of the same interview, Wolff was able to say “either come out or you are complete rubbish” but also to declare that true freedom was a state in which ‘coming out’ was a redundant concept? It is important to note Wolff was by no means the only person expressing such thoughts in that context. She was, rather, endorsing the ideological claims of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which had been active in the United Kingdom since 1970. The GLF was not a ‘gay rights’ movement in the sense which might be understood today: its goals had nothing to do with gay marriage, gays in the military (as has been a recent concern in the USA), gay adoption or any other assimilatory political cause. In the recent, reflective words of Peter Tatchell, who had been involved with them in the early 1970s, “GLF espoused a nonviolent revolution in cultural values and attitudes. It questioned marriage, the nuclear family, monogamy and patriarchy – as well as the wars in Vietnam and Ireland. Although against homophobic discrimination, GLF’s main aim was never equality within the status quo. We saw society as fundamentally unjust and sought to change it, to end the oppression of LGBTs – and of everyone else. […] Our message was ‘innovate, don't assimilate.’”¹⁴⁰

Writing in 1973, Wolff had high praise for the GLF, seeing their manifesto as “an articulate document of progressive thinking,”¹⁴¹ and arguing that “the GLF goes courageously to the roots of society’s malformations.”¹⁴² They forecast a future in which society was free of gender roles, and saw gay rights not as an end in itself, but

¹³⁹ Wolff with Gillies, untitled interview transcript.
¹⁴² Wolff, Love Between Women, 220.
as a stepping stone towards that utopia. Likewise, during the phase in her career in which *An Older Love* was published and Wolff was only just beginning to receive attention from interviewers and writers, Charlotte Wolff evidently believed in the utility of ‘coming out’ as a gesture towards an ideal society in which no such speech act would be required at all.

The difference between Charlotte Wolff’s perspective on ‘coming out’ and the stance of the Gay Liberation Front as made visible in their manifesto is temporal. Gay liberation movements had their eyes on the future but were not privy to any more of a nuanced sense of history than anyone else was. It follows, of course, that their vision, as articulated in their manifesto, assumed all that lay behind them in history was a dense mire of sexual and gender oppression. Wolff, however, liked the GLF’s vision of the future because it reminded her of attitudes she felt she had been able to hold in her particular milieu in pre-Nazi Berlin. Their utopian vision may well have been shared, but the GLF’s view of the past solely as a place of oppression implied a sense of linear progress towards this gender-egalitarian future. Wolff was in a position from which she could think backwards as well as forwards, and imagine freedom (but not permissiveness) in both directions. The GLF manifesto does not decry sexual identity categories like ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ as being symptoms of oppression in their own right, but another canonical text of early-1970s radical gay liberation does: Dennis Altman’s *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*. As briefly mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Wolff’s archived correspondence reveals her interest in radical gay liberation was deep enough that she had read not only the GLF manifesto but also Altman’s book, to which her response was scriptural: “there is nothing new under the sun.” This was in a letter to Clarence Tripp, a psychiatrist who had worked with Kinsey, in which she also dismissed Altman’s book as “third-rate.” This is unfair; Altman’s *Homosexual* was brave and progressive in its context. Wolff’s dismissal of Altman reflects her increasing frustration in the face of assumptions that the ‘freedom’ sought by the GLF and like-minded others resembled nothing that had ever been before.

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643 Gay Liberation Front, “Manifesto.” Of particular interest regarding their utopian vision is the section ‘The Way Forward’.
644 Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*.
645 Letter from Wolff to C. A. Tripp, 11 June 1977. WC PSY/WOL/1/11/2.
One more crucial aspect of *An Older Love’s* production and reception is given due attention in Judy Gillies’ interview with Charlotte Wolff: the fact that Wolff’s entire oeuvre, with the exception of her 1920s poetry, was written in a language which, it seems, never ceased to feel foreign to her. Asked by Gillies what motivated her to write a first novel so late in life, Wolff responds: “I wanted to do something different to what I had ever done before; except of course when I was very young before I lost my language I wrote poetry.” Gillies continues by asking Wolff if she might have “expressed herself” sooner had she not been preoccupied with the research and writing of *Love Between Women*: in the context of the broader interview, Gillies is here implying *An Older Love* is the first instance of Wolff genuinely ‘expressing herself’ in terms of her sexuality. The discussion of *On the Way to Myself* earlier in this chapter explored Wolff’s descriptions there of how it felt to write in “borrowed language”; that book, in itself, is concrete evidence of Wolff’s previous engagement with essay, memoir and aphorism as modes of ‘expressing herself’. That Wolff did not wish to raise the subject of her earlier published life writing and its direct engagement with the challenges of writing in a ‘borrowed’ language is puzzling. *On the Way to Myself* did not seem to reach a wide readership and, for reasons beyond speculation, Wolff did not mention the book at all in her interactions with Gillies, Howes or Watts.

Gillies’ sense that Wolff had never “expressed herself” in terms of her sexuality prior to *An Older Love* must have originated, then, in the lack of any description of Wolff’s personal life in the discussions surrounding her psychological work on sexuality. The promotional blurb for *Love Between Women* tries to convince readers Wolff’s interest in lesbianism is purely professional, and her one other prominent public appearance, “play[ing] the part of the psychiatrist” in a 1971 televised documentary on lesbians, *The Important Thing is Love*, involves her speaking only about others and never disclosing a thing about herself. In a 1973 appearance in the popular British feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, Wolff also discloses

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646 Wolff with Gillies, interview.
647 Dustjacket blurb, author unknown, for Wolff, *Love between Women*.
648 This phrase is Wolff’s own, from *Hindsight*, 222.
649 *The Important Thing is Love*, dir. Robert Kitts. Curiously, this documentary introduces Wolff to viewers with a shot that pans from her head to her toes, slowly revealing – as if to shock and surprise – that, beneath the chunky turtleneck, this short-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, androgynous-looking old person is wearing a skirt, thick stockings and ladies’ shoes.
nothing about her private life and her sexuality is never mentioned. 650 Gillies can hardly be considered mistaken: in this moment in which the frank but uncategorised eroticism visible throughout On the Way to Myself had faded from the public awareness it only fleetingly reached, Wolff’s composition and discussion of An Older Love did constitute a form of ‘coming out’. 651 Whether anyone was surprised at all is another question entirely. In any case, ‘coming out,’ for Wolff, clearly did not mean declaring something that had, in all times beforehand, been hidden due to a sense of oppression. On the Way to Myself is proof of that; all that has been gathered from her years in Berlin and Paris earlier in the twentieth century in Chapter 2 certainly attests to that as well.

We can return, then, to Gillies’ question: would Wolff have ‘expressed herself’ sooner had she not been preoccupied with writing Love Between Women, a task for which she had perhaps been strategically keeping her private life extremely private so as to maintain a veneer of ‘objectivity’ as a psychiatrist?652 Wolff’s response focuses on the difficulty of writing in what she had already articulated in On the Way to Myself as “borrowed language”653 and re-emphasises her sense of identity as a writer: “You know, I doubt it. Because I had great difficulty with the language being English. If English was not foreign I might have done it earlier. […] Being a psychiatrist and doing this work is in fact for me a second best. My real love is verse – is poetry.” She goes on to mention her ability in French and her engagement with Baudelaire’s work as a young woman before declaring she “was always really a literary person.”654 That is one of the earliest and clearest expressions of a desire Wolff expressed in nearly every interview from that point onwards: that she is no longer to be portrayed as a psychiatrist or scientist, nor even as a doctor, but as a writer.

The “borrowed language” of An Older Love did not resonate well with many critics in the United Kingdom. Excerpts cited in this chapter so far reflect the uneasiness and idiosyncrasy that surfaced at times in Wolff’s written and spoken

650 Carol Morrell, “Choosing the right couch,” Spare Rib (December 1973), 30.
651 Brennan and Hegarty (“Wolff and Lesbian History”) have argued convincingly that, at least in the early 1970s, Wolff’s refusal to describe herself at all in terms of sexuality while simultaneously writing an entire book on the subject could be seen as “strategic liminality.”
652 Ibid.
653 Wolff, On the Way to Myself, 184.
654 Wolff with Gillies, interview.
English; only some reviewers had patience with this. Reviewed in the Observer, the book was the “weirdest book of the week”: “careless and perfunctory – repetitious, fragmented, frequently unconvincing – but […] interesting, for all the wrong reasons.” Wolff, according to the Listener, had “produced the chrysalis of a good book, but no butterfly emerges”, due to her lacking “the storyteller’s gift which would have given life to her case-histories.” The renowned author Angela Carter, writing for Spare Rib, had some positive comments to make on the book’s portrayals of friendship and class, but ultimately dismissed it as “a very odd novel indeed”, incompetent as a work of fiction, with its potential to illuminate ideas around age, sexuality, outsider status and the English middle class left sadly unfulfilled.

Another well-known author, Nina Bawden, addresses the novel at the level of its language in a review for the Telegraph: “Dr Wolff often writes awkwardly. ‘One can meet one’s past at any time, but there are places, such as Soho, which are especially opportune for coming across the unexpected.’ Well, yes, how true, but a more workaday writer might have sought a less obvious way of putting it.” The Times Literary Supplement review also chooses to cite examples of Wolff’s prosaic shortcomings, describing a “certain rigidity” in the language, of which the “worst moment” is this utterance, in dialogue: “She was dressed in a black silk suit, beautifully cut, with colourful accessories to enliven its classic style.” Even the most impressed reviewers of An Older Love found space to mention their reactions to Wolff’s prose style: Anthony Masters in the Birmingham Post mentions an “an over-formulation of both prose and dialogue that makes for a slight stiffness”; the Quaker journal The Friend also describes a “slight awkwardness of presentation.”

Those two reviews had otherwise found plenty of reason to recommend Wolff’s novel, with Masters praising it for its uniqueness and as a “loving and compassionate demonstration of human frailty” and the Friend also perceiving qualities of compassion as well as originality and imagination. Nina Bawden’s Telegraph review stands alone, though, in lucidly arguing for the book’s value as a work of literature. As shown above, she too found the prose awkward, but later in the

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657 Angela Carter, review in Spare Rib (c. October 1976), WC PSY/WOL/6/5/1.  
661 Incomplete clipping of review in The Friend (10 December 1976), WC PSY/WOL/6/5/1.
review, describing the style as “stately [and] naïve”, she attributes to it “an unselfconscious power that seemed, […] in the end, to suit the novel perfectly.” The greatest value of the book, she explains, is in what it represents – and that it has dared to try representing it at all: “Dr. Wolff has taken matters that are rarely treated seriously in modern fiction – the loves of old people, their humiliations and their rages – and written both believably and compellingly about them.”\(^\text{662}\)

John Mellors and Anne Duchêne are the only two reviewers who take issue with the genre ambiguity created by the heavy presence of Wolff herself in the text through her biographical and ideological resemblance to the unnamed protagonist. Mellors: “[Wolff] is a psychiatrist who escaped from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. So is her narrator – and that, perhaps, is the trouble. An Older Love, a first novel, reads too much like memoirs interspersed with lecture notes.”\(^\text{663}\) Duchêne: “This narrator imposes some inhibition on reviewing by being so very like Dr Wolff herself: a German Jewish refugee psychiatrist, with a special interest in [hand research:] a field which may seem to some laymen as blithely intuitive as, say, Victorian phrenology.”\(^\text{664}\) She suggests here that to criticise the book any more harshly would constitute a personal attack; this also, however, betrays a belief that writing is in some sense obliged to safely inhabit certain genre boundaries. All other reviewers appeared content to accept the autofictional nature of An Older Love for the commonplace literary phenomenon that it is.

Tellingly, Duchêne’s review dwells on her own preconceptions of the novel, based on its promotional blurb: an expectation that it would be “militantly feminist” due to having been published by Virago, and that, somehow, the blurb had suggested a “steamy lesbian tale.”\(^\text{665}\) Her review tasks itself with warning potential readers against those assumptions, suggesting she imagined such expectations would have been common. Regarding the book’s depiction of gender and sexuality, Duchêne appears ultimately confused by An Older Love. She describes Emma, a Jewish refugee character in the book who serves as a vehicle for Wolff’s descriptions of leftist and feminist activism in early twentieth century Germany, as “veer[ing] so continually between the butch and the feminine as in the end to disappear in a large

\(^{662}\) Bawden, “Reviews.”
\(^{663}\) Mellors, “Unreasonable men.”
\(^{664}\) Duchêne, “A dovecote.”
\(^{665}\) Ibid.
Wolff saw no value in the idea that people could only be one or the other, and it seems likely that she had intended the character of Emma to be a demonstration of that. In *Time Out* Sara Maitland astutely describes having felt a “vague sensation that the book was written ‘to help people understand.’” Duchêne’s review demonstrates just what a challenge that would have been.

There is one particular excerpt of *An Older Love* that makes a very fitting close to this section, looping back, as it does, to the literary history explored in Chapter 2, hinting at Wolff’s curiosity towards the later twentieth century reception of that literature and its cultural context, and strongly foreshadowing how Wolff would later make use of her own remembered past as an argument against how so many histories of homosexuality began to be written. The nameless protagonist is in conversation with Ruth, her nostalgic and cynical friend from Weimar Berlin days, and their thoughts turn, again, to the past:

> We journeyed back into the Berlin of the late twenties and early thirties – our Berlin. Once again we reminisced about its highlights: the *Maskenbälle*, the Deutsche Theater under Max Reinhardt, the cafés in the West End, meeting-places for avant-garde writers and artists. Some of them sat there all day long, with endless cups of coffee, writing and talking. We shared the thrill of staring at them when we were still in our teens. And later we found a niche in the shadow of that Olympus, when we knew Else Lasker-Schüler, Gottfried Benn, Alfred Döblin and others. We talked about Lasker-Schüler’s fantasy of being the Prince of Thebes, and her love for the very German Gottfried Benn.

> ‘You know, don’t you, that those two idols of ours have had a recent revival in Germany and elsewhere?’

Ruth said, ‘I was only a sightseer among the great, taken in tow by you.’

> ‘Anyway, it was those times, the personalities and pleasures, which moulded our tastes, yours as well as mine.’

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666 Duchêne, “A dovecote.”
4.5 “Berlin Again”: reception, situations and expectations upon Charlotte Wolff’s return to Berlin

Nun fragen Sie mich, ob ich vielleicht bestimmte Fragen über die homosexuelle Situation der zwanziger Jahre in mein Vorwort hineinbringen will. Die Tatsache ist, dass ich keine Ihrer Fragen beantworten könnte.

Wolff to a young historian, 1977. 669

Es interessiert mich mehr und mehr, wie ich das Leben, das ich gelebt habe, jetzt neu und doch in vielen Richtungen ganz anders sehe, als früher.

Wolff to the same historian, 1978. 670

We went on agreeing and disagreeing in hot dispute and friendly concord.

Wolff, in Hindsight, on her encounters with a Berlin audience. 671

Wolff was still enjoying her brief phase of ideological compatibility with sexual identity politics in between An Older Love and Bisexuality when she wrote to Käthe Kuse in 1977 saying this: “Es ist sehr möglich, dass ich im November nach Berlin komme, und es würde mir grosse Freude machen, Sie alle kennen zu lernen. Ich gehöre selber zu der lesbischen Schwesternschaft.” 672  
Kuse, from Berlin, was only slightly younger than Wolff. She had refused to be part of any Nazi organisation, and had hidden a Jewish couple in her home during the war. Another Jew she helped in that time was the artist Gertrude Sandmann, who had been an active and enthusiastic participant in, by the younger social historian Ilse Kokula’s phrasing, “die lesbische Subkultur der Weimarer Zeit”. Kuse and Sandmann became reacquainted in the 1970s, at which point they decided to start a community group for older women who identified as lesbians. 673 They named it L74 – L stood for Lesbos and 74 for the year it was founded, and fostered a sense of community through meetings, events, and

669 Wolff to Kokula, 21 October 1977, SLA. “Now you ask me whether I would perhaps like to incorporate particular questions regarding the homosexual situation in the twenties into my foreword. The fact of the matter is that I could not answer any of your questions.”

670 Wolff to Kokula, 26 September 1978, SLA. “It interests me more and more, how I now see the life I have lived in a new and in many ways quite different way to how I saw it earlier.”

671 Wolff, Hindsight, 270.

672 Wolff to Käthe Kuse, 20/4/1977, WC PSY/WOL/1/4/2. “It is very possible that I will be coming to Berlin in November, and it would be a great joy to me to get to know you all. I myself belong to the lesbian sisterhood.”

673 All information mentioned in those sentences is sourced from Ilse Kokula, Jahre des Glücks, Jahre des Leids: Gespräche mit älteren lesbischen Frauen. Dokumente. (Kiel: Frühlings Erwachen, 1990), 9-10.
the foundation of a lesbian archive and a lesbian magazine. L74 were also instrumental in facilitating Wolff’s return to Berlin, which was the first time she had set foot in that city since fleeing in 1933.

This return was, of course, a decision and a gesture loaded with meaning far beyond her interactions with lesbian-feminist communities and their significance when assessing Wolff’s role as a historical object who talked back: it was a return from exile, a tour through a city made strange by the passing of time and yet at once still familiar to Wolff, spatially and visually, as the setting and the scenery behind the life and the sense of self she once had there. Darcy Buerkle’s essay on Wolff’s escape from and return to Berlin focuses on the anxiety of the rootless exile and the “choreography” of Wolff’s attempts to construct a consistent and confident self through her writing. It was written to accompany the artist Matthew Buckingham’s 2007 installation *Everything I Need*, which explored the question of what Wolff might have thought and felt on her flight from London to Berlin in 1978. Buckingham’s installation featured two screens side by side: one showing images of the interior of an aeroplane similar to that on which Wolff would have flown, the other showing text, mostly adapted from *Hindsight*, which seeks to convey Wolff’s thoughts as she “connects the person she once was in Berlin to the person who returned.”

Buerkle’s essay closes with an apt quote from *Hindsight*: “Artists and writers are predestined observers of the unusual and uncanny and it is worthwhile to take their visions and superstitions seriously. They may indeed be the better recorders of history than the professional historians.” Indeed, the collaboration between the academic Buerkle and the artist Buckingham remains the most holistic and certainly the most inventive assessment of what was at stake in Wolff’s return to Berlin, and how this was articulated in *Hindsight*: in essence, how the book was written as a direct response to the feelings incited by this return.

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674 The archive they established evolved into Spinnboden Lesbenarchiv, still extant today and a source of several resources which have been vital for this project, including *Unsere Kleine Zeitung*, the magazine they founded.
675 The ways in which this is expressed by Wolff herself in *Hindsight* and thus legible as an act of ‘retrospective flânerie’ have been discussed by Gleber (*The Art of Taking a Walk*, 208-209).
677 Matthew Buckingham, “Everything I Need.”
Wolff certainly was inspired to try making sense of how the person she once was did and did not relate to the person she was upon returning to Berlin – her theories on the connection between memory and identity would have been put into practise when she confronted the city she had fled so long ago. Most pertinent to this study is the question of how Wolff’s experiences in Berlin in the late 1970s reflect the differences between how Wolff remembered her sense of self in her own past and how others were in the process of interpreting it. Her own internal sense of identity and of history came to clash with those which others sought to impose upon her. Central to this was Wolff’s engagement, upon her return, in dialogues about sexuality, its vocabularies and their histories. It was, after all, correspondence with L74 that gave Wolff the impetus to return. The letter quoted above shows us what the women of L74, and probably many others among German lesbian feminist communities, must have felt they could anticipate from Wolff: a warm, supportive addition to their established sense of identity and community. It also suggests this is what Wolff, at that particular and fleeting moment, felt she was able to provide.

Over time, this dynamic shifted to a challenging, fraught and often uncomfortable clash of ideas – not specifically with L74 – especially but not exclusively regarding people’s understanding of the past. This, together with a smaller sequence of similar events in the United Kingdom, was all eventually reflected upon in Hindsight, where she wrote at length about her experiences of interacting with a community who were interested in what she had to offer as a “period piece.”

Before discussing Hindsight as a work in its own right, there is much to consider amongst the traces that remain of Wolff’s interactions with her German readerships upon her return to Berlin.

This is how it began: through the international networks of postage that connected lesbian magazines across continents, Wolff was made aware of a page in UKZ which cautiously described her as the author of a contentious book on lesbian sexuality before announcing she had written a novel about a love triangle between three women which was said to contain “autobiographische Fakten.” The anonymous UKZ writer had heard about it from the British lesbian journal Sappho,

679 Wolff, Hindsight, 255.
and declared a hope that this new novel would be published in German translation as soon as possible. *Love Between Women* (and its German translation) had been entirely devoid of any indication Wolff herself loved other women, and this page in the *UKZ* demonstrated no awareness of the existence of *On the Way to Myself* or its translation, *Innenwelt und Außenwelt*. The page served as an announcement, of sorts, that Wolff had now written something less clinical and detached about love between women, and that – via the “autobiographische Fakten” – it was drawn from her own experience and thus would be valued differently by readers.

Lesbian communities, unsurprisingly and understandably, wanted to see representations of themselves from within their sense of community. At a time when this was sorely lacking, especially in German, there were clearly high hopes attached to this novel. Significantly, when it was translated and published as *Flickwerk*, for some readers those hopes were dashed: the prominent German feminist magazine *Courage* ran a review lamenting how, having picked up the book “voller Erwartung und Spannung”, the reviewer was then left disappointed by the narrative’s vagueness and negativity. Further to that, the sense that “der Leserin werden kaum Identifikationsmöglichkeiten geboten[…]” was considered another majorly disappointing factor.\(^{681}\) The pre-publication description of *Flickwerk* in *UKZ* had made some unfulfilled promises regarding what the novel could offer readers who might look to it as lesbian life writing and expect it thus – in keeping with the ‘Identifikationsliteratur’ trend in German feminist literature at the time – to reflect and validate their own senses of self and situation.\(^{682}\) Unlike its English original, *Flickwerk* has endured as a work of interest to German readers: it has been republished several times.\(^{683}\) Nonetheless, that small story of expectation and reception reads well as an analogy for how the comforting encouragement which was hoped and expected of Wolff as a public figure in Germany in the 1970s compared to what she actually offered: a challenge.\(^{684}\)

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\(^{682}\) Regarding the limitations imposed by the culture of ‘Identifikationsliteratur’ among West German feminists in the 1970s more broadly, see Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 66.

\(^{683}\) See reference list for details.

\(^{684}\) One writer who rose to *Flickwerk*’s challenge was Verena Stefan: her review of the book in *Die Zeit* did not demand means of identification where they could not be found, but instead focused on the book in terms of its approach to history and to intergenerational dynamics. She locates and describes one fleeting instance in which a character mentions a young, actively feminist niece: the importance she places upon this reflects the extent to
Wolff’s challenge to the expectations which awaited her began before she had even reached Berlin. After her initial letter to Kuse, she became involved in deep correspondence with two younger members of L74 who sought her involvement with a research project on the Weimar-era periodical *Die Freundin*. This journal represented a range of sexual and gender identities but was in the process of being reclaimed as a lesbian magazine. Wolff’s letters to these two researchers offer an illuminating insight into what younger writers of histories about sexuality and society hoped to achieve in Germany in the late 1970s – as well as showing us how Wolff responded upon realising these histories-in-progress were unlikely to reflect her remembered experiences.

First of all, what was it like for her to encounter *Die Freundin*? Her response to being sent all these copies of a publication she claimed she had never heard of – from researchers who saw her as a suitably authoritative correspondent, hoping she might write a foreword for their project – was one of surprise and bemusement. She seems taken aback by its level of ‘kitsch’, writing of that in letters and also later in *Hindsight*, in relation to a sense that the people represented by the magazine were “of a different class who loved, wined and danced in a different world.” This reflects Wolff’s lifelong attachment to the idea she belonged to an ‘élite’: a position which at times added a sour note of snobbery to the way she came across as a public figure in the class-conscious, egalitarian activist contexts of German lesbian feminism and British gay liberation. But in the context of her exchange with these researchers, there was a much more critically useful way her distancing from *Die Freundin* could be read: as an emphasis on the importance of milieu-specific histories of sexuality. At one point, with a developing tone of frustration, Wolff writes this to one of the researchers:


Wolff to Rieger, 6 October 1977, SLA.


A striking example of this in *Hindsight* can be found when, immediately in advance of outlining her motives for embarking upon research into female homosexuality, Wolff expresses a cautiously phrased but strongly negative opinion regarding British social welfare policy: 209-210.

Very early on in this correspondence, Wolff’s response to the first of the many ‘lesbian history’ questions to come is an earnest recommendation of On the Way to Myself:

Sie finden das, was Sie von meiner lesbischen Seite wissen moechten, besonders in letzten Kapitel.[here she means ’A Journey into Russia’] Und ich konnte es nicht besser sagen. Auch ist es mir wichtig, die ganzé Persönlichkeit, apart from emotioneller und sexueller Einstellung zu projizieren. Das ist sehr wichtig, um die Betonung und den Ton in der richtigen Proportion zu sehen und zu halten.690

She never did depart from that insistence that, while her own sexuality was nothing to hide, it should also not be emphasised above all other aspects of her biography. It is not hard to imagine how puzzling or inadequate ‘A Journey into Russia’ might have been for an eager researcher of lost lesbian history in the late 1970s: as outlined earlier, that chapter of Wolff’s 1969 memoir completely eschewed stories of oppression or marginalisation, and likewise never conceptualised of sexuality as related to a distinct sense of identity or community. So the line of questioning continued, in search of the stories these historians had expected to find and which their readerships expected to hear. Wolff’s brief mention of ‘Razzias’ in the above example demonstrates this well; these were vicious police raids on lesbian nightclubs. It would be wrong, in every sense, to dispute they happened – her point is simply that they were not a definitive experience in her own milieu. It is in this context that Wolff wrote this important and memorable line in one of her letters to the researchers: “Sehen Sie, damals war jemand wie ich nicht in einer ‘LESBISCHEN GEMEINSCHAFT’”.691 Current critical and theoretical work on the desires of historians of sexuality, on what they hope to extract from the traces of the past they

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689 Wolff to Kokula, 21 October 1977, SLA.
690 Wolff to Kokula, 30 September 1977, SLA.
691 Wolff to Kokula, 5 November 1977, SLA.
discover, seems yet to acknowledge the strength with which this resonates in the contacts historians made with still-living 'subjects.'\textsuperscript{692} Wolff’s correspondence is an immensely significant document of such an exchange.

While the above excerpts from her correspondence with the \textit{Freundin} researchers insinuate a tense incompatibility of ideas, it must be stressed that these letters, overall, convey a great amount of warmth and friendliness, too. Wolff did not see this challenging exchange as incompatible, in its own right, with a spirit of collegial enthusiasm. In \textit{Hindsight} she implies this correspondence provided her with the “vital spark” that motivated her to finally visit Berlin.\textsuperscript{693} She takes care to emphasise just what a hard decision it was to “impulsively overthr\[o\]w decades of rejection of everything German”, and her trepidation at the inevitable prospect of having to “feel the past which had annihilated many of [her] family, and nearly caught [her] in its net of destruction.”\textsuperscript{694} Knowing what we now do about the contents of the \textit{Freundin} correspondence, it seems Wolff felt a courageous sense of purpose in her return to Berlin. This “vital spark” was the realisation she had something important to contribute to the histories being written: a critique of their approaches and assumptions.

More than one archive in Berlin contains fragments of dramatic and emotionally fraught episodes from her career as a public figure among German lesbian and feminist circles in the late 1970s which were not addressed in \textit{Hindsight}. These will be outlined here as possible insights into how the dynamic between Wolff and her audiences in Germany shifted from one of challenging but warm intellectual exchange to one of conflict and mistrust – ultimately distancing Wolff from the idea of sexual identity categories entirely, even just as the temporary political utility they had been branded as by the Gay Liberation Front in the mid-seventies.

The first of these episodes: the Munich-based feminist publisher Frauenoffensive, who had published the German translation of \textit{An Older Love}, \textit{Flickwerk}, collectively decided to drop Wolff from their stable of authors not long after she set foot in Berlin in 1978, handing their publishing rights for \textit{Bisexuality} over to another publisher. A letter had been sent to Frauenoffensive from women of

\textsuperscript{692} See Chapter 1, 23-30.
\textsuperscript{693} Wolff, \textit{Hindsight}, 255.
\textsuperscript{694} Ibid.
the Hamburg-based Amazonen Frauenverlag who had attended Wolff’s readings in Berlin, denouncing Wolff as having spoken of Frauenoffensive in an extremely defamatory manner. The letter they sent is a detailed account of the atmosphere and content of Wolff’s public reading at the Amerika-Gedenk-Bibliothek and also outlines the reading she gave at the Lesbische Aktionszentrum (LAZ) the very next night. Wolff’s first-night defamations, as per the letter from the Amazonen-Verlag: addressing the fact Bisexuality was yet to be published in German, she reportedly said that was Frauenoffensive’s fault, and later, reading from Flickwerk, she appeared troubled by the words on the page before her, allegedly slamming the book shut and saying to her audience “Furchtbar, diese Übersetzungen, ich erkenne mein Buch nicht wieder, als ob ich ein ganz anderes Buch vor mir habe, diese schlechte Übersetzerin, nein, Sie machen sich alle gar keine Vorstellung, da ist ja kaum noch Ähnlichkeit mit meinem Buch.”

This resonates with the issues Wolff had with translations of her earlier works. Wolff had in fact written to the German translator of Flickwerk approving of the translation. Comparing An Older Love to Flickwerk line by line, there are no strong points of difference: the translator was very faithful to Wolff’s style and phrasings. Given that this visit, in 1978, was the moment in which, by her own storyline in Hindsight, Wolff finally “overthrew decades of rejection of everything German” – including the language – it is possible that it was at this public reading at the Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek that she first fully confronted how she felt faced with ‘her own work’ translated into German: it was the very idea of being translated into German, rather than the quality of any such translation, that shocked her that day.

Describing her own experience of that evening, Wolff describes a day of tiredness and anxiety after which she read to an audience of about 400 people, many of whom were very keen to ask her about Virginia Woolf at the reading’s end. Confronted with a question about “why and how [she had] left Germany and if [she] was happy in England,” Wolff reflects in Hindsight that it was that particular moment that she “became conscious of real contact with [her] German audience” and rose to

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696 Ibid.
the occasion by telling her audience about Hitler, about the Nazis, about her
persecution in that “abyss of sadism and inhumanity”, and about how lucky she had
been to get out when she did.698 “I knew I had to say these things,” she continues, “or
I would have felt a traitor to my own people.”699

Angelika Bammer has presented a compelling case, especially through her
analysis of Verena Stefan’s Häutungen (a text also published by Frauenoffensive,
contemporaneous to Flickwerk) and its reception, for us to cautiously consider just
how unprepared and, in some cases, unwilling many people in West German feminist
communities in the mid-to-late 1970s were to confront the worst aspects of their
country’s past.700 Häutungen faced criticism for endorsing a reductive conflagration
of ‘woman’ with ‘nature’ and also for its “glorification of a mythic [woman-centred]
past”701 which bypassed Germany’s recent history. “In its repudiation of history and
construction of woman on a mythic scale,” writes Bammer, “[Häutungen] set the
stage for what was to become the dominant mode of West German feminism well in
to the next decade, namely thinking of women in victim terms rather [than] as co-
responsible agents of history. […] The position of victim, while painful, provides
refuge from the even more painful issue of historical complicity.”702 Not everyone
liked Häutungen: in any case, Bammer’s study provides a relevant backdrop for
considering the impact Wolff’s words at the Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek could have
had on the people there. Its suggestion that women were not thought of as at all
complicit with the wrongs of the past resonates deeply with the discussions of Chapter
3.

Amazonen-Verlag’s report on Wolff’s next evening of supposedly slandering
Frauenoffensive consists, for the most part, of the letter-writer expressing a deep
disagreement with Wolff’s ideas as expressed in Bisexualität, but also that “abgesehen
davon ist sie sowieso immer, wenn unangenehme Fragen zum Inhalt ihrer Bücher
gestellt wurden, von diesen furchtbaren Verlagen (allgemein) entweder falsch
übersetzt oder sowieso mißverstanden worden.”703 Wolff’s distress at the experience

698 Wolff, Hindsight, 266.
699 Wolff, Hindsight, 267.
700 Bammer, Partial Visions, 72.
701 Ibid.
702 Bammer, Partial Visions, 73.
703 Amazonen-Verlag to Frauenoffensive, 25 April 1978. (“Aside from that, whenever uncomfortable questions are
asked about the content of her books, she [claims to be] either mistranslated or misunderstood by these (generally)
terrible publishers.”)
of reading translations of her work into German, a language she had once cut all mental and emotional ties with, obviously hurt a few people’s feelings through its mode of delivery: Wolff’s disgruntled, sometimes harsh and often inconsistent complaints about translators and publishers. All we have left of this evidently unfortunate clash of sensitivities are those two clearly divergent accounts. Wolff’s conveys the sense that her reading at the Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek was a monumental achievement for her in which, still fresh off the plane, she was able to confront her German audience about her experiences under Nazism. The Amazonen-Verlag depict her as mean-spirited and anti-feminist.

Frauenoffensive took their word for it. Wolff wrote to her friends, the two researchers from L74, calling that course of action “fascistic”704 and adding that it brought to mind, for her, a new type of ‘fifth column.’705 So much of the letter from Amazonen-Frauenverlag to Frauenoffensive is taken up with criticisms of Wolff’s work, rather than any alleged actions, that it is hard not to feel she had a point to make there. Would Frauenoffensive have severed their ties with Wolff if her work had aligned with the essentialist, separatist tendencies of lesbian feminism which were in currency then and there? It did not, so there is no way we could ever know. In any case, only days after her arrival in Berlin, good will between Wolff and her audiences had begun to erode the moment that letter was written – or the moment Wolff complained about the translator, depending on how one views the situation.

Of course, not everyone felt the same way as the people who wrote on behalf of the Amazonen-Verlag – one particularly bitter gripe of their correspondent was her observation that when Wolff spoke of endocrinology and hormone therapy (topics found in Bisexuality) at her LAZ reading, “da jubelten […] alle, weil niemand wußte wovon sie sprach, und alles sich sehr wissenschaftlich anhörte.”706 Had everyone’s response been the same as that of the Amazonen correspondent, it is unlikely any further interactions with Wolff would have felt productive from either her perspective or theirs. This was not the case. Unfortunately, it would have probably seemed to be the case when an intensified, detailed version of a very similar attitude was expressed in the pages of the popular German feminist magazine Courage in 1979, within a

704 Wolff to Kokula, 2 June 1978, SLA.
705 Wolff to Rieger, 17 May 1978, SLA.
review of the fourth annual Sommeruniversität der Frauen, in which Wolff had been a panelist and speaker. This leads us to the second of the dramatic episodes.

The 1979 instalment of the Sommeruniversität der Frauen was themed “Autonomie oder Institution: Über die Leidenschaft und Macht von Frauen.” Wolff’s main contribution to the ‘Sommeruni,’ a busy and popular event which spanned several days at the Dahlem campus of the Freie Universität, was an evening reading from *Innenwelt und Außenwelt* (again, the ‘Russia’ chapter) and *Bisexualität*, which by then had been released in Germany by another publisher. Wolff’s account of this reading in *Hindsight* dwells more on an anxious day of anticipation than on the event itself, but is still revealing: from the reading she reports “applause greeted [her] asides about certain passages of [Bisexualität]” and that, having exceeded her allowance of time before a question and answer session could take place, the audience demanded one be arranged for the next day. Both Heidi Giesenbauer’s review in the published proceedings of the ‘Sommeruni’ and Wolff’s own account in *Hindsight* describe the atmosphere of that discussion session as having been “electric.” Giesenbauer wrote: “alle teilnehmerinnen an dieser diskussion waren sich einig in den [sic] utopieentwurf: die gleichstellung aller sexueller formen, das ende der kategorisierung würde den sexismus aufheben. mit einem großen zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl aller beteiligten endete diese diskussion.” Wolff’s description echoes that same sentiment, and even includes two lingering descriptions of a photograph taken that day which was published beneath Giesenbauer’s review: it shows Wolff, lively and animated, holding forth with her arms wide open in a lecture theatre crammed with a diverse sprawl of women seated in the aisles, on the floor, behind, beside and before Wolff. Some were lucky enough to get a seat. One would almost suspect Wolff had Giesenbauer’s review beside her as she wrote her memories of that day for her autobiography – but that review was published a year after *Hindsight*. It seems they simply shared the same impression of how the event had been.

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709 Wolff, *Hindsight*, 293.
One of Wolff’s correspondents from the *Freundin* project, however, did not – and it was she who was tasked with reviewing the ‘Sommeruni’ for *Courage*.711 This is what she wrote about the first of Wolff’s two appearances at the ‘Sommeruni’:

Ihre Exzentrik mochte manche Frau etwas irritieren, aber allein durch ihre Anwesenheit wirkte sie unwahrscheinlich tröstlich für viele. Da kommt eine alte Frau angereist und sagt: „Kinder, ihr macht es richtig.“ Sie war einfach ein Trost gegenüber den anderen aggressiven Veranstaltungen.

[…]

Aus der Bisexualität trug sie ihre Hauptthese vor: das emotionale Leben beginnt mit Prostitution, das sexuelle Leben mit Masturbation, dies seien die beiden Bestandteile, auf denen jede sexuelle Identität entsteht. Mein Eindruck war: sie hätte erzählen können, was sie wollte, wichtig war einfach, daß sie da war. Man kann überleben, das war eigentlich die Botschaft, die von ihr rüberkam. Der Respekt war einfach größer als der Einwand, der gegen Teile ihrer These hätte gebracht werden können.712

Further to that, her appraisal of the informally organised discussion (among a good two hundred women) the next day was comparably charitable:

Es war eine richtig liebliche Atmosphäre da, alle lächelten, wie im Mädchenpensionat. Charlotte Wolff sprach hauptsächlich übers Glücklich-Werden am Beispiel der Dressur zur Heterosexualität und Weiblichkeit: „Wir leben alle aus zweiter Hand; es ist wichtig, aus erster Hand zu leben, das Leben selber zu bestimmen.“ Das war zwar ein sehr individualistischer Ansatz, aber in einer Situation, in der sich viele schwach fühlen, war das für zwei Stunden einfach aufbauend und persönlich befriedigend.713

The aspects of Bisexuality highlighted in the review above were certainly questionable by the standards of her late-1970s German audiences: psychological theories on how one has come to feel and act the way one does, especially when the proffered answers tend towards early childhood as an explanation, would often be seen as laughably universalising generalisations of human nature and experience. Such generalisations also tended to be associated with psychoanalysis – whether Freudian, Jungian or otherwise barely mattered. Psychoanalysis, to many among Wolff’s audience, would have been shorthand for counterproductively, even

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711 On the subject of courage, I must disclose this: photocopies of all that is cited here from *Courage* were handed to me, directly, by Ilse Kokula. She wished me well, and I view her generosity as a very courageous act. I hope she will see my approach to the material she gave me in a similar light. I am very grateful for the support and encouragement she gave me in Berlin.


713 Ibid.
oppressively grandiose generalisations. On the level of textual connotations it is worth noting that the Courage review did introduce her to readers as a “Psychoanalytikerin.” That would not have been a value-neutral term to most readers of Courage.

A distinctly and understandably uneasy approach to the vocabularies and theories of psychology is also evident if we ask what Wolff’s audience at the ‘Sommeruni’ actually understood of her talk there. Kokula’s assertion that Bisexuality presents, as its main argument, the notion that sexual identity is the product of supposedly prostitute-like and masturbatory feelings in early childhood does not tally with the contents of the book – and yet this synopsis is also presented in Giesenbauer’s review. That was likely a very bad misunderstanding, possibly symptomatic of the complete aversion held by many to anything resembling psychoanalysis. Giesenbauer’s and Kokula’s reviews indicate that, in the context of her public readings at that point in time, Wolff was in the habit of discussing Bisexuality with heavy reference to aspects of its content which would have shocked and confused any audience sceptical of psychological theories and psychiatric practise. This approach would have confused and alienated some people. That ‘Hauptthese’ cited by both Kokula and Giesenbauer appears in Bisexuality only once, as a refutation of Freud’s Oedipus complex, intended merely to say that, contrary to Freud’s concept of a libidinous child, any needy clinging expressed by a baby towards its mother is likely the product of anxiety, not lust. It is a simple point made in passing and by no means a main argument. Wolff must have spoken about it at some length at the ‘Sommeruni’ though, in order for it to be cited in two reviews.

No records remain of what Wolff would have actually said to her audiences at that presentation, but here further description of Bisexuality can provide useful insights into where Wolff and her audiences may have differed ideologically. Bisexuality, in short, is a book that challenges simplistic dualist notions of gender identity and sexual categorisation through recourse to literary history, social

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714 Brennan has pinpointed instances of this in Wolff’s interactions with the British lesbian journal Sappho (“Charlotte Wolff: ‘Reluctant’,” 209; “Charlotte Wolf’s Contribution to Psychology,” 97). A compelling outline of what has been said about homosexuality in the name of psychology, psychoanalysis and psychiatry – and thus why many felt the need to keep a safe distance from its words and theories – can be found in Stephen Frosh, For and Against Psychoanalysis (New York: Routledge, 1997), 191-208.


commentary and scientific theories, en route to presenting a study of the lives, the feelings and the sexual fantasies of 75 men and 75 women who identified as bisexual. It condemns nobody; it pathologises nothing. In terms of its multidisciplinary approach, Brennan explains the book’s complexities and contradictions well, describing it as “declaredly rooted in phenomenology, but arguably poised between the remnants of a psychoanalytic framework, phenomenology, and more traditional scientific discourse.” The “scientific discourse” in question centres upon endocrinology and, more broadly, the study of hormones and their psychological and physiological influence upon people. As such, it directly descends from Wolff’s hand research but also foreshadows more recent work along similar lines and the intersection of medicine with current societal understandings of gender more generally, particularly regarding the situations faced by transgendered people. Nonetheless, the amount of space Wolff devoted to discussions of psychological theories, especially her engagement with Freud’s idea of the Oedipus complex, rendered Bisexuality objectionable to many readers in its time.

Significantly, Bisexuality’s section of so-called ‘biographies,’ mostly candid confessionalists written by the participants themselves, takes up almost half the book, allowing Wolff’s authoritative psychologist tone to give way to a polyphony of very different voices and ideas, presented without judgement. The book took so many

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717 Wolff, Bisexuality, 67.
718 Brennan, Charlotte Wolff’s contribution to psychology, 130.
719 Consider, for instance, the methodologically questionable study of hormonally influenced ‘finger-length ratios’ on same-sex-attracted women of varying gender identities: see page 138.
720 Today, transgender people can receive help from endocrinologists alongside psychiatrists. Wolff’s archives, read alongside Bisexuality, reveal her to have been deeply interested in the problems faced by transgender people, and a supportive advocate for social change to make their lives better. In an undated, unpublished review she wrote of Rudolf Klimmer’s Die Homosexualität als biologisch-soziologische Zeitfrage (1965), Wolff comments on Klimmer’s open attitude to “sex changes”, which, in the form of hormone treatments, he apparently believed should be as easily obtainable as any other prescription medication. She states she agrees with him in theory, but that in practice one should at least consult a psychiatrist first, to avoid “farcical” situations: Wolff, undated manuscript, WC PSY/WOL/1/4.
721 Comparable reactions had emerged among gay and lesbian communities in the United Kingdom, too. Gay News ran a review of Bisexuality which expressed a similar clash of understandings to what transpired in Berlin but also raised some valid points about the book’s shortcomings: Marsaili Cameron, “Uneasy assertions” [review of Bisexuality], Gay News 130 (1977), 26. The rapport that had once existed between Wolff and Gay News vanished. The British lesbian magazine Sappho had allegedly gone as far as to warn readers to steer clear of Bisexuality entirely, denouncing its lengthy section of ‘biographies’ as “pornographic.” Wolff to Doris Rector, 29 October 1982, WC PSY/WOL/1/4.
different approaches to the topic of gender and sexual identities that it is hard to even attribute any ‘main argument’ to it; if it has one at all, it is that the absurdity of polarised sexual identity categories can be seen in the socially constructed nature of gender identities. From there, Wolff does not argue that everyone is fundamentally the same, though, but that the diversity of hormonal levels and endocrine constitutions found in people renders the idea of declaring everyone either ‘man’ or ‘woman’ within strict boundaries also absurd. Intersex and transgender people are presented not as anomalies, but as proof.722

Of course, Wolff’s appearance at the 1979 ‘Sommeruni’ and her readings at the Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek and the Lesbische Aktionszentrum one year earlier had not solely focused on attempts to explain Bisexuality. Her life-writing had played an equally important role: she had read from Flickwerk and from the ‘Russia’ chapter in Innenwelt und Außenwelt, she had fielded questions about her past, her role as ‘period piece’ had satisfied curiosities but also challenged complacencies – through her insistence that ‘lesbian community’ was not an applicable concept for her own past, and also through speaking frankly about Nazi persecution to her audience at the Gedenkbibliothek. The cumulative effect of Frauenoffensive’s decision – influenced strongly, as the correspondence shows, by a dislike of Bisexuality – and the Courage review was this: Wolff felt that, to many among her audiences in Berlin in the late 1970s, her ideas were not taken seriously. She feared people were just humouring her because it was nice to listen to an elder talk enthusiastically about the past – especially if she told positive stories about lesbian nightclubs in the 1920s. The negative reaction to Bisexuality was understandable in its political context, but these critics went beyond that by dismissing positive reactions to her work (including Bisexuality) as empty, polite gestures.

Charlotte Wolff read Kokula’s review in Courage and wrote a letter to the editor.723 She had a lot to say, but the first point she sought to clear up was this: “Ich bin nicht Psychoanalytikerin, sondern Psychiaterin, die anti-Freud orientiert ist.”724 From there, she continued by stressing that her statements regarding prostitution and masturbation were by no means the main topic of Bisexuality, but simply the

722 Wolff, Bisexuality, 34-35.
723 Wolff, “Sommeruni.”
724 Ibid. “I am not a psychoanalyst, but an anti-Freudian psychiatrist.”
beginning of a brief critique of Freud’s notion of the Oedipus complex – a point confirmed by the book itself. The main point, rather, was to argue the case all people are “bisexuell”: not in their sexual orientation but in their innate gender identity. “Bisexuelle Geschlechtsidentität ist allen Menschen eigen, ob sie sich als homo-, hetero- oder bi-sexuell empfinden. (Bisexuell ist hier im konventionellen Sinn gebraucht.) Ich lehne nämlich alle diese Kategorien ab, da sie von der Gesellschaft [auf]gezwungen sind.”725 In detail, she takes apart Kokula’s description of events at the informal discussion of Bisexuality, suggesting she could not have been paying any attention at all: the main topics of that meeting, from Wolff’s own memory, were gender identity, sexual orientation and “die Idee (noch utopisch) einer bisexuellen Gesellschaft, in der Sexismus undenkbar ist.”726 As for the suggestion her public role was that of a comforting grandmotherly figure, Wolff had this to say:

Von einer ,lieblichen Atmosphäre‘ war keine Rede. Es war nicht wie in einer ,Mädchenpension‘. Meine Zuhörerinnen waren gespannt, intensiv, absorbirt, und manche hatten Zweifel, äußerten Widerspruch. […] Das Bild, das Kokula von meinem Buch und mir gegeben hat, war absprechend. Die Darstellung von mir als einer alten Frau, die Trost brachte, war eine besondere ,gaffe‘. Diskriminierung gegen das Alter ist intolerant und erniedrigend. Ich fand diese Anschauungsweise unsensitiv und beleidigend.727

The next issue of Courage took the issue further, with an unapologetic letter from Kokula defending her task as having been to provide a subjective account of the atmosphere across a variety of events at the ‘Sommeruni,’ and that she stood by everything she said as a personal response.728 It is true that, read in context with the rest of the ‘Sommeruni’ article, Kokula’s words on the mood of pleasant respite at Wolff’s talks make more sense: she sought to contrast the atmosphere of Wolff’s lecture with other more “aggressive” discussions on the topic of sexuality and gender boundaries elsewhere during the event. Taken in its entirety, her review of the ‘Sommeruni’ is a thoughtful assessment of how each event related to the others on offer. But did she need to connote an intellectual softening in the case of Wolff’s readings and discussions? Perhaps so, but perhaps Wolff’s second-day discussion had

725 Wolff, “Sommeruni.” “Bisexual gender identity is inherent in all people, whether they identify themselves as homo, hetero or bisexual. (Bisexual is used here in the conventional sense.) To be precise, I reject all these categories, as they are imposed upon us by society.”
726 Ibid. “The idea of a bisexual society (still utopian), in which sexism is unimaginable.”
727 Ibid. “There was no talk of a ‘lovely atmosphere’. It was not like being in a girls’ boarding house. My audience was excited, intense, absorbed, and some had doubts and offered arguments. The image Kokula has given of my book and of me is pejorative. The depiction of me as an old woman, who brought comfort, was a particular gaffe. I find this way of looking at things insensitive and offensive.”
simply attracted a crowd more capable of nuanced argument and less inclined towards polemics. Heidi Giesenbauer had been in that crowd, and Courage ran a letter from her directly beside Kokula’s – and directly in opposition to everything Kokula had written. In a prose dense with the language of social critique, Giesenbauer frames the situation as “ein Kampf um Macht und Unterordnung” in which Wolff has been marginalised, dismissed and indeed attacked due to her “Andersartigkeit (in diesem Fall das Alter),” no differently to any other instance of “die Unterdrückung und Verfolgung von Minderheiten durch Arroganz und Anmaßung.”

Wolff’s ideas clearly had a lot of support among the communities she encountered: they were by no means uniform in their views, and Wolff was by no means alone in her thoughts. Wolff tells a story in Hindsight of an encounter with a young woman in Berlin which was entirely positive and productive. Here, Wolff recalled how a tense ‘nature vs. nurture’ debate at one of her public talks in Berlin in 1978 was calmed down by a question that shifted the talk back to her own memories: “would you mind telling me about Else Lasker-Schüler? Was she a lesbian, do you think?” Wolff’s response, as per Hindsight, was this: “As far as I know, all her lovers were men, but she loved women emotionally, a love she has celebrated in some of her poems. I think of her as bisexual.” Wolff’s archives reveal the woman who asked this question was Ursula Hasecke, a scholar who was at the time writing a dissertation on Lasker-Schüler’s poetry. Wolff and Hasecke wrote letters to each other after that first brief and public conversation. What follows here is Wolff presenting, in a 1979 letter to Hasecke, her own history of engagement with Lasker-Schüler’s poetry and its relation to her own reading of particular biblical characters and stories:

![Image of the page]


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729 Giesenbauer, “Charlotte Wolff” (letter to editor), Courage 2 (February 1980), 59. “A fight for power and subordination”… “otherness (in this case, age)”… “the oppression and persecution of minorities through arrogance and insolence.”
730 Wolff, Hindsight, 270.
731 Wolff to Ursula Hasecke, 16 October 1979, WC PSY/WOL/1/4/2.
That letter is clearly not just about Lasker-Schüler – Wolff seeks to convey above all else the idea that in her adolescence, through religious scripture, Lasker-Schüler’s verse and her own conviction, she perceived same-sex love as something timeless and self-evident. She also reveals much about Lasker-Schüler’s importance to her in the process.

Hasecke’s analysis of Lasker-Schüler’s work was published in 1982 and it demonstrates considerable engagement with Wolff’s ideas. Wolff’s declaration of ‘homoemotionality’ as a useful term for discussing love between women allowed Hasecke to explore the ‘homoemotional’ as well as homoerotic aspects of certain poems, and to do so with recourse to ideas beyond a polarised division of non-erotic ‘friendship’ and primarily erotic and identity-bound ‘lesbianism.’ By focusing on emotion and eroticism as something more complex than could be discussed with a discourse of ‘heterosexuals’ and ‘homosexuals’, Hasecke was able to consider further possibilities as to what Lasker-Schüler was thinking, feeling and writing about. Readings of Lasker-Schüler as ‘queer’ are well-established now; Hasecke’s reading stood alone in its open-minded approach at the time.

Wolff’s letters to Hasecke are enthusiastic; her joy to be recounting such distant aspects of her past is visible in the energy of the language. Hasecke must have found the correspondence worthwhile and helpful, too, since Wolff’s ideas and letters resonate throughout the publication which eventually resulted from her research. Such an exchange would have heartened Wolff: through it, she would have been shown how her memories of the past could be valued in the interests of a better understanding of the present and its own historicity. In another letter to Hasecke we can see how Wolff was eager to connect Hasecke’s work and Lasker-Schüler’s biography to her own thoughts on sexuality and gender, and we can see how strongly Hasecke’s interpretation of Lasker-Schüler was influenced by Wolff:

733 Wolff, Love Between Women, 21.
734 Sieg, Exiles, Eccentrics, Activists.
Alle Gedichte, die Sie zitieren, zeugen von der homoerotisch-homoemotionellen Liebe für Frauen. […] Wir müssen an die Zeitspanne ihres Lebens denken, um ganz zu verstehen, daß sie die Homoerotik nicht so klar in dem letzten Gedicht herausbringt. Und da kann ja auch eine Doppelliebe – ‘bisexueller’ Art (im weitesten Sinne) hineinspielen.736

Comparing this productive collaboration to the other encounters described above, it is clear that by the end of the 1970s Wolff had become a complicated and divisive figure among the public spheres of lesbian/feminist Berlin. Some saw her as a relic who could say whatever she wished, while others saw her as a brave thinker whose ideas progressively transcended many of the available discourses around sex and gender. In fairness, many probably perceived elements of both in her presence as a public figure. What is important from here is to see how Wolff responded to these troubling and encouraging moments in the dialogue. Her experiences in Berlin and her interactions with the people she met there helped her realise that her memories of the past were at risk of being co-opted in the interests of histories she saw as flawed – but that, through writing and engaging directly with her audiences, she could instead use her memories of the past to strengthen understanding of her ideas in the present. This is what she sought to do in *Hindsight*.

4.6 The Value of *Hindsight*: the intentions and the reception of Wolff’s ‘chronological’ autobiography

Who is Charlotte Wolff writing to?


In her introduction to *Hindsight*, Charlotte Wolff declared she had written “the history of [her] life from birth to the present day, [...] told chronologically.”738 In doing so, she took her theories of sexuality and gender and applied them to a narrative of her entire life, in the hope of strengthening her valued but fragile bond with a readership which was increasingly rejecting or otherwise refusing to hear her ideas. Here she wrote of a past in which her identity as a poet and writer was paramount and her sexuality had not been an issue, recounted her experiences of exile and involvement in forms of science that had shifted immensely in meaning across the course of the twentieth century,739 and reflected on her times of depression. Those stories were then followed by thoughts on the meaning of her re-emergence as a public figure and ‘period piece’ in Germany in the late 1970s: the heavy focus she places on this in the narrative of *Hindsight* attests to how important this had been to her. This focus also results in *Hindsight* functioning remarkably well as a critique of essentialist and ahistorical approaches to the writing of sexualities into histories – written from the perspective of someone often seen as a historical figure herself.

With a linear narrative structure (unlike in *On the Way to Myself*) and a first person perspective clearly intended as a representation of her own voice (unlike the slight removal effected by the unnamed protagonist and the inventions of fiction in *An Older Love*), Wolff intended *Hindsight* to be seen as a conventional autobiography by any definition.740 It displays just as much engagement with ideas around memory, history and identity as did her earlier life writing. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, Wolff’s foreword to *Hindsight* makes no impossible promises to tell the

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739 As Chapter 3 explained in depth, she did not reflect upon this to the extent she could have.
truth of the past ‘as it really was,’ instead declaring her autobiography to be the product of imaginative and emotional interpretations of events: “the light [imagination] sheds on happenings and feelings is what counts – the real story.”

Even without any promise of ‘the truth,’ we still have an autobiography in the sense of Lejeune’s *pacte autobiographique*, but one in which the ‘contract’ we can imagine having been established between writer and reader now has some realistic and reflective new sub-clauses in the small print.

_Hindsight_ should not merely be seen as a sequel to _On the Way to Myself_; its structure, its contents and its intended place in a dialogue with readers renders it a different kind of book. It is useful here to consider Smith and Watson’s thoughts on what can be found in the work of authors who write and publish more than one autobiographical narrative:

[... Multiple] autobiographical narratives [...] offer fascinating glimpses into life narrators’ successive interpretations or revisions of the past. These versions, written at different points in their lives and [sometimes] retelling the “same” story divergently in two subsequent narratives, invite readers to question whether different readings of an experience signal stages of, or changes in, the overall pattern of beliefs encoded in the [...] story. Or do changes from one text to its “sequel” or “prequel” signal larger cultural transformations affecting how people know themselves through stories tellable (and discourses available) to them at particular historical moments?

In the case of Wolff, her life writing and its timing, Smith and Watson’s question is directly applicable. With this in mind, an outline of the main ways in which _Hindsight_ differs from the genre-crossing, memoir-like ‘autobiography of a mind’ that was 1969’s _On the Way to Myself_ is a productive place from which to start discussing _Hindsight_’s production and reception.

Judging from the titles alone, it is apparent that _On the Way to Myself_ looks ‘forward’, as a quest for a sense of self and identity not yet attained, and _Hindsight_, in turn, could be seen as a complementary mirror image: a narrative looking back, once some semblance of that desired sense of identity has been attained. This also is true once one reads beyond the titles. The ‘Self,’ alongside identity by any other name, is no longer the direct subject of discussion in _Hindsight_; reflective interiority emerges

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741 Wolff, _Hindsight_, viii.
742 Smith and Watson, _Reading Autobiography_, 33.
only in the form of asides in what is, for the most part, an outward-looking, narrative-driven text. If a reader were to pick up *Hindsight* and read its last page first, a strong sense of identity through purpose is immediately visible in the book’s closing line: “Berlin had again become a place on my emotional map. It had given me a new lease of life.” *Hindsight* was the first published outcome of this new lease of life. Its backwards glance on the past with a firmer sense of purpose in its voice and its structure might well render it a mirror reverse of *On the Way to Myself*, but by closing with the declaration of “a new lease of life,” Wolff also subverts any notion that the backwards-looking, reflective autobiography of a woman in her eighties need necessarily be her last word.

As with *On the Way to Myself*, Wolff’s archive holds the remnants of *Hindsight*’s earliest origins: a small notebook of fragmented ideas and lists of memories. Remarkably, it is written in German, and at a time when she would have been immersed in the language intensely: it is a travel diary documenting her return to Berlin in 1978. Written at the end of tiring days, in shaky handwriting, many parts are illegible. Each legible line and phrase, in its content and approach, resurfaces in *Hindsight*: descriptions of streets and suburbs, meals and meetings, encounters with young feminists and recollections of their ideas. ‘Conversations with Myself, II’, the diary which became *On the Way to Myself*, was written at a time in which Wolff could not face the German language, and does not read as if addressed to any wider readership. It was a private diary in its own right. The untitled notebook of jottings towards *Hindsight* reads, in contrast to this, as a temporary storage space for ideas destined for a larger, more cohesive and ambitious work. This notebook also reflects something else significant about *Hindsight*’s beginnings: Wolff wrote down her thoughts on the most recent past first, and only later turned to the task of writing her early life as a chronological narrative to meet what she had already written about those recent and important times in Berlin. “The seventies meet the twenties” was

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744 This, at the time of my research, was held under PSY/WOL/6/6/2 in Wolff’s archive, but may have since been relocated, as that folder was meant to hold only material pertaining to *On the Way to Myself*.

745 Her 1978 return to Berlin was not her first encounter with Germany post-exile. In a triangular situation oddly similar to her and her lover Katherine’s quest to find her other lover Lisa in Russia in the 1920s, Wolff’s friend Ruth urged her to go back to Germany for a reunion with that very same Katherine. This happened in 1964, but struck Wolff – as per *Hindsight* – as an insincere encounter. The shadow of Nazism loomed over that trip in the form of a ‘typical ‘old-time’ German’ who “stared at [Wolff] with unceasefal hatred” *Hindsight*, 251. The experience seemed to drive Wolff away from, rather than towards, the sense of return to self and purpose which her later trip to Berlin gave her.
how she had phrased the interest shown by others in her past upon her return visit; the process of writing *Hindsight* was one in which she wrote of her past so it could meet the people and the ideas of the seventies.

To a significant extent, then, Wolff wrote *Hindsight* with a specific audience in mind: the mostly young, mostly lesbian-identified feminists she had met in Berlin. Of course, she would have been eager and receptive for readership beyond that particular audience; had she seen them as her only prospective readers she may have even attempted to write *Hindsight* in German, like the notebook of ideas which began the project. Writing of her encounters with the young readers, writers and historians she had met in Berlin, near the close of *Hindsight* she declares these women had “once more [given her] the assurance of being wanted and sought after” and she keenly anticipates that “the lines of communication which had started in 1976 would not only be continued but broadened out.”746 *Hindsight* was clearly intended as one such broadening of those lines of communication. Wolff tailored its approach and contents to suit.

This had two particular effects on the book. One is that its narrative and structure reads as a deliberate attempt at explaining what she felt her Berlin audiences most needed to understand better: how her disdain for fixed, absolute sexual identity categories –whether in the writing of history or in people’s present sense of self – had clear origins in her memories of the past. This is a major thread in *Hindsight*’s narrative: the reader has only just reached the end of page 2, past a description of Riesenburg, the town where Wolff was born, when Wolff tells the story of how on the day of her birth her father phoned his brother and made the mistaken announcement that his “little boy” had arrived – and that this uncle told her this story in her teens, wistfully adding she had always been “a camouflaged boy”.747 Wolff’s life story, as per the structure of *Hindsight*, is one that troubles gender categories right from the page describing her birth. Only a few pages later, the notion returns: baby Charlotte is now a small child asking her father if she can wear boys’ clothing instead of what she is expected to wear. At this point in the story, Wolff-as-narrator interjects to address all that she imagined her readers would be thinking: “I had never been conscious of

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any preference for the male in my family, I just felt that my clothes were not the right apparel for me. It was only in my late teens and early twenties that I wished I had been male, because the girls and women I loved were attracted to men.”748 Here it is clearly visible how Wolff’s mode of narration in Hindsight allows for the views she held at the time of writing – gender and sexual identities as mutable; definitive nouns as an unproductive language in which to speak of either – to be applied to her memories of the past, in the interests of furthering how well she is understood in the present. Wolff’s interjection at that point in the narrative speaks directly – and defensively – to an imagined feminist reader, who she anticipates might interpret her narrated younger self’s wish to wear boys’ clothes as symptomatic of an envy of male privilege. Wolff does not discount that possibility, but also urges her imagined reader to think beyond such an explanation.

Sexuality and gender are not the only aspects of her shifting sense of self addressed in the opening pages of Hindsight: Wolff also strives to clarify how, as a Jew, she had not felt like an outsider in the setting in which she grew up. She attributes this, in part, to having been sheltered by her parents’ own self-perception as “German Jews living in peace with their neighbours”: “perhaps because of their stance, I didn’t see the error until I was an adult.”749 Wolff’s ways of articulating her Jewish identity – and the many things this has meant to her – through her life writing have been discussed in several studies.750 What is immediately striking when reading the childhood narrative that opens Hindsight is that from the very start of the book Wolff seeks to negate two dominant preconceptions of what her life has involved: a lifelong sense of marginal identity both as a Jew and, through the eyes of her later audiences, as a lesbian. Wolff does not do this so as to diminish the importance of anyone else’s stories of such oppression: rather, through writing specifically about her own subjective experiences and her own milieus, Wolff seeks to ‘rescue’ her own memories of the past from being erased by less specific, broad-brushstroke narratives of history, and urges readers to consider the historical and geographical relativity of any sense of identity, any sense of where the ‘outside’ and the ‘inside’ lie.

748 Wolff, Hindsight, 6.
749 Wolff, Hindsight, 7.
750 Buerkle, “Points of Departure”; Alpert, Like Bread on the Seder Plate; Pass Freidenreich, Female, Jewish and Educated; Rappold, Charlotte Wolff.
That is not to say that in *Hindsight* Wolff somehow tried to convince her readers she never was oppressed as a Jew; rather, her intention was to stress that she was never *aware* of marginalisation or discrimination in her own life until the rise of Nazism. There her experiences of persecution were direct and Wolff admittedly “saw the error” of her sense of belonging with the Germans. Beyond this, in *Hindsight* she demonstrates very little desire to contribute to any broader conversation on the topic.

Once her narrated self is safely off the train from Berlin to Paris in 1933, the chronology of her life as told in *Hindsight* tells no more stories about Nazi persecution or atrocities. This has been discussed by Buerkle as one of several “glaring, consistent, elisions” in the book.\(^\text{751}\) Elision is, in its own right, not unusual in life writing or any other form of representation: the ‘whole’ story is impossible to capture and all we can expect to find in an autobiography, for instance, is a depiction of the writer’s sense of self and history as he or she wishes others to see it. Buerkle also laments the incompleteness of Wolff’s depictions of her own personal life in *Hindsight*.\(^\text{752}\) These “elisions” are strategic: Wolff wrote this long, chronologically ordered narrative of her life in an attempt to represent herself beyond the terms of her experiences as a Jew persecuted by the Nazis and her supposed identity as a lesbian, and thus open up the possibility of new approaches to her own history and, by extension, history more broadly. In the case of her experiences of anti-Semitism and Nazi oppression, she openly admits in *Hindsight* that she had simply been oblivious when she was young. This is not the case with how she writes about her experiences of openly being attracted to other girls and women. Wolff writes *Hindsight* fully


\(^{752}\) Ibid. Buerkle points out that Wolff’s 30-year relationship with Miss Audrey Wood, a Quaker midwife who typed all Wolff’s later manuscripts and many of her letters, goes unacknowledged in *Hindsight*. This is listed as another ‘glaring elision’ that betrays a level of insincerity in Wolff’s narrative. However, Audrey Wood is mentioned more than once in *Hindsight*, including once in the course of Wolff describing how her audiences in Berlin insistently asked whether her travelling companion was actually her partner – with an affirmative response. *Hindsight*, 269. Wolff and Wood did not live together; little is known about their relationship except that they seem to have invented a dynamic very much their own. This clearly involved a strong sense of privacy. As Chapter 2’s descriptions of the worlds of the Hessels and the Benjamins already suggested, Wolff’s worldviews were formed in a milieu in which love, eroticism and romance were not intrinsically bound with any notion of monogamy or of marriage as ownership. Friendships could mean as much as relationships, if not more, and the lines between the two were not always clear. Wolff granted her connection to Audrey a veil of privacy in *Hindsight* – but what about, for instance, Wolff’s lifelong friend Ruth? She was a lover, a friend and a rival of Wolff’s all at once in the twenties, escaped to London from Berlin like Wolff did, was an important enough figure to reappear in fictionalised form in *An Older Love*, and was mentioned many times again as a past and present companion in *Hindsight*. Wolff did not live by the hierarchies of connection and kinship practised by most around her, namely that in which a partner or spouse is consistently one’s central emotional focus. Her beloved companion Audrey may have wanted privacy; Ruth, on the other hand, may have meant just as much to Wolff. In short, it does not follow that by neglecting to plainly state the history of her relationship with Audrey in *Hindsight*, Wolff cut out the most intimate and important part of her own private life.
conscious of how her memories could be seen to involve self-deception and attributes this to certain aspects of her remembered past, but not to others.

One clear example of how Wolff had the interests and desires of her Berlin audience in mind – and that their approach to the past bore an influence on her own – can be found in the form of Wolff’s decision to include a brief description of the ‘Razzias,’ or police raids on nightclubs frequented by prostitutes and other women attracted to women, in *Hindsight*’s narrative of the 1920s. She had, as mentioned earlier, insisted in a 1977 letter to Ilse Kokula that she had nothing to say on the subject of police raids or similar persecution as she had simply not been part of that milieu. After that exchange, it seems Wolff felt it was necessary to explain to her imagined readership in *Hindsight* just why this was so:

In spite of the freedom, or illusion of freedom, in the Weimar Republic, lesbians were watched by the police, and from time to time lesbian clubs were raided. It was by no means clear whether the police wanted to clamp down on prostitutes rather than lesbians, but both proprietors and visitors were afraid of ‘Razzias’. The girls thought they were hunted on both counts. […] It was an ambiguous situation all round. Perhaps the police meant to kill two birds with one stone! I had been spared the experience of being caught. The threat overhanging our secret pleasures rather added to their attraction. We looked on the ‘Razzias’ as a big joke rather than a danger, as not much happened anyway. The police wrote down the names of those present, gave them a warning and left.

Luckily, I was unaware of threats to my happiness and my very security.753

Notably, the ‘I’ of Wolff as narrator barely enters that description until near the end, when she mentions she never got caught by a police raid. Prior to that, her descriptions might even come from Kokula’s research. Wolff’s memory of how the ‘Razzias’ were a “big joke” to her and her friends jars with the fear and sense of persecution she describes the prostitutes and club proprietors feeling. She had concluded that the ‘we’ she had been part of, the ‘we’ who found police raids funny, had been very privileged. ‘Grassroots’ historical research like Kokula’s, which searched for evidence of past persecution of lesbians, had encouraged Wolff to interrogate how she remembered her past. The “freedom” she attributed to her Weimar Berlin days with utmost confidence in the Gillies interview in 1977 had become “freedom, or illusion of freedom”. Wolff’s acknowledgement of the ‘Razzias’

753 Wolff, *Hindsight*, 76.
in *Hindsight*, not long at all after insisting she had nothing to say about them, reflects how ‘lesbian history’ research did actually, at times, play a productive role in her work. The result was not one in which Wolff dismissed her own memories of the past as delusions, repentantly admitting that she had in fact been oppressed. Her ‘Razzia’ story is, rather, a call for historians to acknowledge the past as milieu-specific and subjective.

Regarding the nature of sexual identity and the imposition of present-day categories onto the past, Wolff felt she could make a useful contribution. She did not feel she had made an “error” there; rather, she felt she could enable her readership to detect errors in their own views. This explains why the narrated self in *Hindsight* is described so often in relation to notions of sexuality and gender – more so than in relation to how Wolff related to her own Jewish identity. It must be stressed that Wolff depicted herself as a whole, complex figure, not just in terms of her sexuality or her Jewishness: *Hindsight* is long and follows a chronology with a clear structure that allows for plenty of vivid, descriptive reflection on the books she read and the teachers she loved; the exercise equipment her mother used and the car her friends drove around France. Nonetheless, an untroubled attitude to her own attraction to other women, taken for granted as normal, natural and obvious to herself and all around her, is maintained as an unwavering character attribute for Wolff as narrating voice and as narrated character – and this is done with such frequency and insistence that it certainly stands out as one of the strongest threads of the narrative. This makes sense; it was the point she wished to stress to the readership she had gained across the 1970s.

Because of this, Wolff attempted to write *Hindsight* using a vocabulary intelligible to this imagined readership: at times, this resulted in her employing the very same terms, such as ‘lesbian’ and ‘homosexual,’ that she tried to challenge elsewhere in the book. Buerkle has observed how Wolff’s “reclamations” in *Hindsight* of erotic and romantic tales from her youth “are at odds with her writing on sexuality.”754 She is certainly right that *Hindsight* does not follow a consistent path in this regard: here Wolff repeatedly declares sexual identity categories played no role in

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754 Buerkle, “Points of Departure,” 23.
her youth, that they were then and still remain limiting, oppressive and false\textsuperscript{755} – and yet makes reference to “dyed-in-the-wool lesbians”\textsuperscript{756} at a bar in the 1920s, thus not only employing the term but applying it to the past. The friction between the arguments she tries to make and the language she deploys is one of the book’s most confusing and distracting elements. It reflects the difficulty of ever writing about the past without filtering it through the language of the present – even for someone who had been part of the past about which they wrote.\textsuperscript{757} It could have been prevented by some thorough and specific editing, though, and does not actually distort Wolff’s intentions beyond legibility.

The way Wolff writes sexuality and gender into \textit{Hindsight} is for the most part consistent with her less directly personal writings on the subject. At one point, for instance, she chooses to describe the cheerful demeanour and physical grace of two “fat”, “hairy” and “amiable lesbians” as “typical of the endocrine make-up they portrayed.”\textsuperscript{758} Awkward but not as pejorative as it may immediately sound, such a description is classic Wolff: it matches soundly with her description of people with Cushing’s syndrome in \textit{Bisexuality}.\textsuperscript{759} The inconsistent wavering between \textit{Hindsight}’s descriptions of “lesbians” and Wolff’s strident disavowals elsewhere in the book of anything to do with sexual identity concepts is symptomatic of a rushed and under-edited manuscript – most importantly, it reflects how the book was written with an audience in mind who were very much invested in the concepts Wolff sought to problematize, and that her attempt to appeal directly to them while also putting forth contradictory opinions resulted in a jarring inconsistency. In response to the question posed by Smith and Watson, then, the “larger cultural transformations” of gay and lesbian liberation certainly impacted upon Wolff’s priorities and decisions when structuring the narrative and choosing the language of \textit{Hindsight}. New discourses of sexual identity were certainly made available to Wolff; new stories of oppression and ‘coming out’ were tellable. This did not result in Wolff writing a narrative in which these new discourses and stories were unquestioningly superimposed upon her own remembered past, though. Instead, she tried to communicate just how historically contingent such stories and vocabularies were.

\textsuperscript{755} Wolff, \textit{Hindsight}, 60; 230-231.
\textsuperscript{756} Wolff, \textit{Hindsight}, 78.
\textsuperscript{757} See Chapter 1.2 for discussions of this.
\textsuperscript{758} Wolff, \textit{Hindsight}, 77.
\textsuperscript{759} Wolff, \textit{Bisexuality}, 45.
Autobiography was an efficient means by which to do this, as it was the form most likely to be interpreted by readers as Wolff’s own sense of truth. In Laurie McNeill’s words, adherence to the conventions of a widely understood genre is a way “for subjects to do ‘things’ with their narratives in ways that will be recognised by their communities. Making their ends known is especially important to life writers, because of what is at stake for authors and the stories they tell about themselves and their communities.” Wolff had taken an inventive approach to time and structure in *On the Way to Myself*; she had created a narrator and story which uneasily blurred fiction and non-fiction in *An Older Love*. Those books were the creative work of Wolff as a writer looking inwards; *Hindsight* was the work of Wolff as a public figure looking outwards. Being understood and believed was her priority.

This is visible in one particularly telling moment in Wolff’s archived correspondence: in the course of writing *Hindsight*, she felt the need to write to the Bishop of Gloucester requesting some form of written evidence that she had, contrary to the omission of her name on the paperwork, been invited to speak as an ‘expert’ to a working party for the Church of England’s Board for Social Responsibility, who were in the process of writing a “Report on Homosexuality.” “This oversight is rather painful to me”, she wrote, addressing their failure to credit her, “because I am mentioning the experience of meeting the Working Party in my autobiography which I am now writing. I could be called a liar by my readers, as they won’t find my name among those whom the Working Party has met.” The Bishop’s secretary wrote back with apologies and the assurance her evidence had been “helpful.” Wolff’s worried letter reflects the ‘higher stakes’ of her autobiography, for both its author and its imagined readers: even with her introduction’s endorsement of imagination over ‘reality’, Wolff cannot bear to imagine this one loose thread of information being picked at by any reader, unravelling the perceived credibility of the work as an account of how she remembers her own lived experiences.

It seems that nobody ever checked up on that claim – but it is understandable that Wolff had worried about it. In *Hindsight* her Working Party story involves her

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761 Wolff to John Yates, the Bishop of Gloucester, 19 October 1979. WC PSY/WOL/1/11/2.
762 G. S. Ecelestone to Wolff, 22 October 1979. WC PSY/WOL/1/11/2.
saying to the Bishop, in response to his assertion homosexuals must be tolerated, “Don’t speak of tolerance, Bishop. Tolerance is condescension, which defeats its object. If you tell homosexual people that one must be tolerant of them, they might answer you ‘Go to hell.’ Jews would feel similarly offended if treated in a diminishing fashion.” Wolff’s caveat that *Hindsight* deals with imagination more than with ‘reality’ exempts readers from any need to believe her words to the Bishop were quoted verbatim. Nonetheless, she wanted readers to at least feel that such a heroic outburst was imaginable, and thus possible. If someone had been pedantic enough to search out Wolff’s name among the listed ‘experts’ who presented to the Working Party, upon finding her name nowhere on that list, that story would become a lot harder to imagine as possible, and the whole chronology of *Hindsight* might have lost its believability.

The book’s final chapter, ‘Berlin Again’, is a lengthy reflection on the cultural and historical context of the lesbian and feminist communities Wolff encountered in late-1970s Berlin, and how she interacted with them. Here, Wolff historicises their thoughts and their actions, articulating the general spirit of “the seventies meet the twenties” as one of “longing” and “need” — coming to the same conclusions in 1980, from her own experiences, that other scholars are reaching today regarding the question of gay and lesbian history’s emotional importance to its readers and also its writers. In response to her own struggle with what it meant to be written about and conceptualised in others’ terms, it can be said that through *Hindsight* Wolff historicised the communities that had sought to historicise her. It should be clear by now why Atina Grossmann has cited *Hindsight* as exemplary of how research into the meaning of sexualities in Weimar Berlin society is by no means an “overdone” research topic. It is also apparent how well this book functions as a reminder for historians and other scholars of the importance of taking a “milieu-specific” approach to describing the mindsets of people in the past. Wolff’s autobiography functioned – and was intended – as a direct response to certain tendencies she had experienced first-hand in the writing of sexuality and gender into history.

767 Fenemore, “The Recent Historiography of Sexuality.”
Distressed at the prospect of the broader distribution of a 1979 UKZ interview in which she had fielded questions mostly centred on nightclubs and girlfriends, Wolff wrote a letter imploring this not to happen. This was heeded. At the time of writing that, she could not stand the thought of being portrayed solely in terms of her sexuality, especially using terminologies and ideologies in which she was quickly losing faith – namely, she did not want to be included in a “Lesbenbuch.” She wrote: “In einem Buch MUSS ich als der GANZE Mensch gesehen und beschrieben werden.” In this exchange, she was clearly already in the process of trying to exclude herself from ‘lesbian history,’ as such – a stance which would have confused and alienated many at the time, but, viewed from a distance, can be interpreted as a difficult but bold gesture in rejection of polarising approaches to sexuality when writing about the past – and the present.

Alienating earnest young historical researchers when their dynamic had and could perhaps have continued to be productive was perhaps not the best strategic aspect of that gesture. Writing Hindsight, however, certainly was. She presented her readers with a narrative in which she had been an intense adolescent bookworm, a lively, adventurous young student of medicine and philosophy, a poet among better-known poets, a desperate but relatively fortunate refugee, a scientist, a psychiatrist, and – ultimately – a ‘period piece’ fielding questions about her past in the interests of something called lesbian history, something which she acknowledged made sense and was necessary in its context, but not that it matched to her own past.

Wolff paid close attention to the book’s reception among English-language readerships. Only two critics, both of whom interviewed Wolff rather than engaging with her thoughts solely through her writing, perceived Hindsight as an interesting challenge to popular thought on sexuality and the writing of history, and focused on it as such: John Cunningham in the Guardian and Jenny Lacey on the BBC show Nightline. Both these interviews serve as remarkably lucid demonstrations of Wolff’s attempts to communicate those points to her audience around the time of

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768 This is the interview which was briefly mentioned in the section on An Older Love regarding its resemblance to the Howes interview in terms of candidness: “Berlin-Paris-London.” See page 206. It is rich in detail and I would recommend it to anyone researching for a biography on Wolff.
769 Wolff to Kokula, 20 September 1979, SLA.
770 Ibid.
771 Cunningham, “Masculine and feminine within her compete…”
772 Wolff with Lacey, interview.
Most English-language reception of *Hindsight* did not see the book that way and was decidedly more negative. The matter-of-factness with which Wolff describes her sexuality – remember, this is a narrative which portrays no dramatic self-loathing, no ‘coming out’, no sense of marginalisation – tended to be read more as “odd detachment”; Dervla Murphy in the *Irish Times* felt that “Dr. Wolff’s unlabelled sexuality seeps uneasily through into every chapter.” At least Murphy picked up on the lack of labels as a point worth considering. Most reviewers did no such thing.

An *Observer* review declared Wolff’s English to be inadequate for the task, but provides no examples – “She has trouble with her English, which makes some of the things she says sound more absurd than they are, and she hasn’t had much help from her editors.” This reviewer provides no examples, and then goes on to miss every point Wolff ever made: “Intoxicated by the old magic of the city and by her welcome as a doyenne of women’s liberation, she becomes slightly confusing. But her [message] seem to be […] if you are prevented by whatever reason from being a Lesbian, try at least to be bisexual.” Closer to the mark, the presence of her theories on sexuality throughout the book is emphasised by a *British Book News* reviewer who felt that “the most interesting aspect of the book is a recurring and forceful but factually unsupported argument for the view that bisexuality is the natural human condition, particularly for women.”

Some reviewers were thoughtful enough to comment on aspects of the book other than Wolff’s sexuality – “The evocation of exile, of having no nationality even to believe in, and above all no language, is very moving,” as wrote one such reviewer. Overall though, the folder of *Hindsight* reception in Wolff’s London archive, when read all together as one text, tells a consistent story of mainstream reviewers either struggling with or otherwise simply dwelling on Wolff’s ‘lesbianism’. The *Sunday Telegraph*, for instance, summed *Hindsight* up as “an account of an eccentric and sensitive lesbian woman’s traumatic experience of

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776 Ibid.
Wolff, collecting and filing these reviews, would have likely felt her book had failed – or that nobody had read it properly. She would have certainly felt some reviewers had dismissed her and her work unfairly.

Reviewers for popular British broadsheets in 1980 could, as far as historical context goes, be excused for seeming fascinated at best but ignorant at worst when faced of Wolff’s frank descriptions of loving other women. Remarkably, the reviewer tasked with reading *Hindsight* for *Gay News* reacted to the book with an acidic tone of disgust, describing Wolff’s decision to write a second autobiography as “an act of singular greed.” *An Older Love* and even instances of subjective reflection in parts of *Love Between Women* are said to reflect this same “greed.” The reviewer finds just one fleeting instance of value in the book, in that Wolff’s stories of teenage sexual encounters with other girls are vividly descriptive. This renders the rest of the book a bigger disappointment, though:

Readers of *Gay News* might hope that Wolff’s descriptions of Berlin in the late ‘twenties and early ‘thirties under the Weimar Republic – so homosexual and permitting, so tantalisingly on the edge of the Nazi pit – would have the same drive [as the earlier descriptions of teenage sex and romance], particularly as the main character is not only homosexual but also Jewish. But unfortunately she is astonishingly obtuse as well.

This shows just how ambitious *Hindsight* was in attempting to construct a narrative of Wolff’s life that does not foreground her persecution as a Jew or as a woman who loved other women. The review closes with this remarkable dismissal of Wolff’s work and public persona: “Altogether, Charlotte Wolff emerges from her two autobiographies as an amazing old person: egocentric, verbosely unfocussed, into triangular relationships and psychosomatic illness, snobbish, dependant, combative, sensual, and – at last! – out.” At last? As this chapter has shown, Wolff was ‘out’ in the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s, by the political standards of the time and in the pages of the *Guardian* and, indeed, *Gay News*, with her emergence as a public figure upon the release of *An Older Love*. Prior to that, the first of her published works of life writing, her 1969 memoir *On the Way to Myself*, made no effort to obscure her

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780 She habitually wrote back in response to negative reviews; her archive contains a letter documenting her “horror” upon reading the *British Book News* review. Wolff to G. Dickinson (editor of *British Book News*), 15 March 1981. WC PSY/WOL/1/11/1.
781 Hibbert, “Soft focus.”
past relationships with other women, and one prominently lengthy chapter of that book, ‘A Journey into Russia’, was centred around just such a storyline. This reviewer’s verdict on *Hindsight*, then, reflects how Wolff, in the wake of *Bisexuality*, had become so controversial a figure as to even be loathed by some – and that part of this negative image was the mistaken idea she was still ‘in the closet.’

The *Advocate*, arguably the United States’ equivalent of *Gay News*, also ran a review of *Hindsight*.782 This review, by Margaret Cruikshank, took a less scornful tone than *Gay News* had done, but found the book equally puzzling. “Readers […] will discover a few apparent contradictions. Wolff, a sexologist, tells virtually nothing of her own sexual or emotional experiences in her many relationships with women. She thinks such labels as lesbian and homosexual are “erroneous and nonsensical”, but she uses both freely throughout her book. She holds up bisexuality as a model for the future but her own life story offers no evidence at all to support her faith in it.”783 Wolff’s failure to have defined her theory of bisexuality in terms legible to the societies around her shows its effects strongly in Cruikshank’s review, where she seems to interpret the ‘bisexuality’ Wolff endorses throughout *Hindsight* as the thing it usually connoted in Cruikshank’s social context (and most others): being openly attracted to both men and women, and acting on it. Cruikshank’s review reflects a belief in the polarised, gendered sexual identity categories Wolff openly and intelligibly spoke out against: “Both the text and the photos in *Hindsight* reveal that Charlotte Wolff is a classic butch. On the subject of roles and cross-dressing, [however,] the author says nothing.”

All but one of the photos Cruikshank refers to (these are included as a glossy insert in the book) are of Wolff in the 1930s, so here she is not just saying Wolff *is* a ‘classic butch’ but that she *was* and had always been one – and thus that such a way of classifying others is applicable across different times, geographical spaces and social contexts, which it is not. The dismissal of *Hindsight* in two major gay and lesbian publications, the *Advocate* and the *Gay News*, is indicative of how distant Wolff’s ideas were from the hopes, expectations and beliefs of many gay and lesbian-identified people at the time, and reflects the difficulty of what she sought to achieve.

782 Margaret Cruikshank, untitled clipping from *The Advocate* (September 1982), WC PSY/WOL/6/4.
783 Ibid.
Both those reviews were filed away in Wolff’s archive: she had read them, and felt their effect.

There is a story in *Hindsight* that could be seen to meet the *Gay News*’ demand for a tale “tantalisingly on the edge of the Nazi pit” and the *Advocate*’s request for more on the subject of the gendered messages of clothing, but actually further troubles such expectations: Wolff’s description of the time she was harassed by Nazi guards on a train in Berlin, and narrowly evaded arrest.

I asked the Gestapo officer to show me his warrant, which he did. I asked why I was being treated like this: ‘You are a woman dressed as a man and a spy.’ I laughed in his face, sternly telling him to leave me alone. […] When we reached Hasenheide he pushed me on to the platform and led me to the guard’s cabin. The guard, seeing me in the hands of the Gestapo, exclaimed: ‘But that is Frau Dr. Wolff who treats my wife at the Neukölln Ambulatorium.’ He had saved me – for the time being.784

That description of events has resulted in several writers, across several fields, describing Wolff’s history as one in which she had faced Nazi persecution on the grounds of her sexuality, or, in slightly more nuanced accounts, her gender transgression.785 It would be unfair to accuse any of those writers of being wrong, as such – after all, that is what Wolff wrote in *Hindsight* – and this is not the point here. Later in *Hindsight*, though – and symptomatic of how the manuscript needed closer proofreading – the situation is different: when Wolff returns to that memory, she writes that the Gestapo officer accused her of being a “man in woman’s clothing.”786 This might seem a simple misprint, but later, in a German television interview, she revisits that story and again presents the accusation as having been that she was “ein verkleideter Mann.”787

That Wolff was by many people’s standards androgynous in appearance is a circumstance subject to multiple interpretations: Cruikshank’s “classic butch” is

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786 Wolff, *Hindsight*, 146.
Buerkle’s “obscured gender identity”, 788 and Brennan has succinctly phrased others’ encounters with Wolff’s appearance as one in which people “can easily read the subject as being ‘male’ or hesitate in assigning ‘gender’”.789 More than one journalist in the Hindsight era tried to convey this to readers with an intriguing array of comparisons of Wolff’s looks to those of famous men: “a manlier Cocteau”,790 “a projection of [English Labour politician] Denis Healey at 78”, 791 and, on a radio broadcast in Berlin, “ihr Gesicht erinnert an Rudi Dutschke.”792 Was she, on that subway train in 1933, perceived by the Gestapo officer as a man in women’s clothing, or vice versa? The contrasts in Hindsight, and then again in the televised interview, suggest she had perhaps forgotten which it was. This cannot be changed, and that does not matter. What matters is that Wolff’s memory was, in either case, not one in which her persecution was directly due to her having been a woman who loved other women. The history wanted and expected by those reviewers in the Gay News and the Advocate, a history in which a ‘classic butch’ has a ‘tantalising’ run-in with the Gestapo due to her marginalised sexuality, was not a history Wolff could take part in with any good conscience. It was not what she remembered. This is what Wolff had sought to explain in Hindsight.

790 Annan, “The importance of being gay.”
791 Cunningham, “Masculine and feminine within her compete…”
792 “Ich bin ich,” 29.
4.7 Augenblicke verändern uns mehr als die Zeit: abridgements in the German translation of Hindsight

Reviews are only one way by which a reader can emphasise their own interpretations of a text: the same can happen in the act of translation. This was certainly the case with the German translation of *Hindsight, Augenblicke verändern uns mehr als die Zeit*[^793] (henceforth referred to as *Augenblicke*), in which some descriptive passages were excised or shortened. In her study of Wolff’s interpretability as a female *flâneur*, Anke Gleber is alarmed by *Augenblicke*’s omission of many of the descriptive passages that locate *Hindsight* within the “important literary tradition” of *flâneuristic* reflections upon the city. To consider the significance of such a selective translation, she argues, “we need only imagine similar omissions from Benjamin’s reflections on his *Denkbilder*, [or] from Hessel’s perambulations in *Spazieren in Berlin*.”[^794] The absence of Wolff’s reflections on the city itself represents, to Gleber, “the implicit and decided discomfort that her ambitious movement produces in a society that regards her close, critical gaze as either a trivial marginality or a disconcerting threat.”[^795]

Oversight in line with the translator’s own idea of what constitutes a “trivial marginality” is the more likely explanation: tasked with the translation of *Hindsight* was the psychologist Michaela Huber, who had also interviewed Wolff for *Psychologie Heute*[^796] and was in regular correspondence with her. Through her correspondence with Charlotte Wolff around the time she would have been translating *Hindsight*, it is clear that Huber read and re-wrote *Hindsight* with full awareness of Wolff’s aversion to ahistorical discussions of her as a ‘lesbian in the 1920s.’ They were very much in agreement; Wolff’s archive suggests Huber was in fact Wolff’s most like-minded confidante on that particular subject. In 1982, anticipating an appearance on German television in an interview about *Augenblicke*, Wolff wrote to Huber expressing her concerns at how her life story would be framed: “In itself, I do not want to be put in a row with a series of German lesbians of the past. I am entirely

[^793]: This title comes from the French quotation Wolff had chosen to preface the book. This was taken, significantly, from Natalie Barney’s *Un Panier de Framboises* – immediately locating the work as somehow relatable to Barney’s connections to literary histories, histories of lesbian identities and, bearing in mind Barney’s retrospectively dubious politics as made explicit by Janz and Dworkin (see note 426 on page 135), even the importance of “disloyal historiography” as per Halberstam (*The Queer Art of Failure*).
[^794]: Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk*, 211.
[^796]: Wolff and Huber, “Für mich ist die Frauenbewegung...”
myself, and lived, as I told her, on a different ‘planet’, with the thinkers and poets of
the time, as well as my intimate women friends.” Huber even did a public reading
from her translation and fielded questions from the audience afterwards, reporting
back to Wolff: “Eine Stunde lang habe ich – vorwiegend aus dem Bereich ‘Berlin in
der 20er Jahre’ vorgelesen, wobei man eine Stecknadel hätte fallen hören, so gespannt
haben die etwa 50 anwesenden Frauen zugehört. […] Danach kamen Fragen nach
Deinen Eltern, nach den Studienbedingungen, nach Deinem Selbstverständnis als
lesbische Frau (wie ich diesen Ausdruck hasse!).”  Huber, as a fellow psychologist
and as a thinker in tune with Wolff’s own ideas on sexual identity categories,
translated Hindsight with emphasis on its narrative aspects which challenged
straightforward, essentialist accounts of lesbian history. She did not prioritise the
book’s potential contributions to literary history.

Huber’s omissions affect Wolff’s work in terms of its content as well as its
style. Alongside the excision of descriptive, flâneuristic passages in which Wolff
explores cities, an equally striking omission on the level of content is Huber’s
decision not to include Wolff’s description of translating Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du
Mal during the 1920s. Other elements of that part of the narrative are retained – as
outlined in Chapter 2, these translations took place at a turbulent point in an intensely
romantic relationship – but in Huber’s translation, Wolff seeks no solace or creative
outlet through poetry. German-language readers are denied a dimension of the story;
Wolff is denied the chance to come across as an engaged reader, translator and poet to
the extent she had tried to in her autobiography. Hindsight, today, is still in need of an
unabridged German translation.

On the surface, it seems safe to assume Wolff had no issue with the
prioritising of socio-historical concerns over literary history in Huber’s translation:
the publication details of the first edition describe it as a “von der Autorin
durchgesehene und autorisierte Ausgabe,” and this is accompanied by a foreword in
which Wolff expresses her happiness that the book now exists in German, as she had
made new contact with the land of her birth, and new friends there, after more than
forty years’ absence. She thanks Beltz Verlag and she thanks Michaela Huber “sehr

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As already discussed in terms of Wolff’s reactions to the translations of The Human Hand and An Older Love, though, she was known for expressing mixed, even contradictory and sometimes very barbed opinions about the quality and content of German translations of her work. Despite the friendly and sympathetic correspondence she exchanged with Huber, and despite the endorsements presented in the opening pages of Huber’s translation, Wolff wrote this to Gudrun Schwarz later in 1982: “I did not read [Huber’s] translation myself. I generally don’t. In this particular case, I looked at about 5 pages here and there and saw mistakes on every one of them. But I decided to leave the whole thing alone.”

Here we have the strongest example yet of the vast distance between how Wolff wished others to see her reaction to the experience of being translated, and how she actually felt. All these reactions of Wolff’s could be viewed collectively as symptomatic of a difficult struggle with conflicting thoughts around Germany, the German language, the past and a sense of helplessness at the thought of her work being interpreted and translated – but to do so would detract from the fact that, in the case of Augenblicke, there are significant differences between this translation and its English original, and that these result in the elision of her flâneur-like sensibility and much of her involvement with poetry. Hindsight sought to explain the backstory of Wolff’s disagreement with ideas she encountered regarding sexuality and its writing into history, and Huber certainly does justice to this aspect of the book – but this, at times, happens at the expense of other important elements.

The relative swiftness and economy of descriptiveness in Huber’s translation could however also partly explain why Augenblicke verändern uns mehr als die Zeit has been republished several times, as recently as 2003, whereas Hindsight only ever had one edition in print. Aside from this, though, at the heart of Augenblicke’s enduring resonance – in contrast to Hindsight’s lukewarm reception – is of course the fact that Wolff wrote the book in response to her experiences in Berlin and, to a remarkable extent, in a direct attempt to further explain and clarify her ideas following the ideological clashes which typified her encounters with her German

800 Wolff to Gudrun Schwarz, 11 August 1982. WC PSY/WOL/1/4.
801 See reference list for the full details of these replications.
readership in the late 1970s. To a significant extent, as explained earlier in this chapter, the book was written for them.

It was certainly written about them. The strange sensation of being historicised in *Hindsight* was observed by one particularly astute critic among Wolff’s Berlin readership, the painter Doris Rector. In a review of *Augenblicke* published in *die tageszeitung*, she wrote:

[Wolff’s] emotionale Bewegtheit über ihre Rückkehr in “ihr” Berlin und das Zusammentreffen mit “selbstbewußten jungen Lesben”, “berufstätigen ‘reiferen’ Lesben”, anderen Feministinnen und und die Fähigkeit der Erinnerungen an winzige Details, gemischt mit sachlichen Informationen über die “Scene”, geben ihrer Autobiographie eine erstaunliche Wendung, hin fast zum Dokumentarischen. Ja, vielleicht ist es das, das ungewohnte Gefühl, ein Dokument über sich selbst und die Frauen gemeinsamer Arbeit der letzten Jahre in Händen zu halten, was mich so befremdet.802

In a review published in *Feministische Studien*, Eva Rieger views the book as instructive through the challenges it poses to preconceived ideas of sexuality, gender and history, stating that Wolff “vermeidet die geradlinige Aussage […] weil sie die vielschichtige Realität akzeptiert und Kategorisierung mißtraut.” She concludes by recommending it as a pleasurable read for any woman, of any age or “sexuellen Disposition” – as long as they are prepared to learn from it.803 Claudia Schoppmann’s review in *Lesbenstich* is more critical. Some of Schoppmann’s observations are cautious precursors to the line of enquiry Ulrike Janz would open up years later in ‘Zwiespältige Ahninnen’: she expresses discomfort at the translation’s use of the term “Rasse” and its adjectival variations804 to describe Wolff’s sense of Jewish identity and community.805 Schoppmann is unsure if this same questionable phrasing exists in the English original of the book: it does, and is one of several moments in the text where Wolff’s choice of words and phrasing locates her somewhere in the ideological landscape of her past, somewhere quite foreign and potentially very problematic to many of her readers.

802 Doris Rector, “Charlotte Wolff und wir.”
803 Eva Rieger, “Charlotte Wolff: *Augenblicke verändern uns mehr als die Zeit*” [book review], *Feministische Studien* 2, no. 1 (1983), 180-181. Rieger was another of Wolff’s correspondents and good friends among her young Berlin audience; their letters reflect a good level of mutual understanding and influence.
At the close of her review, Schoppmann describes Wolff’s portrayals of the lesbian-feminist communities she encountered in Berlin as “amüsant und liebevoll bis bissig”\textsuperscript{806} – an apt summary of how the dynamic between those two sides involved warm, intellectually stimulating exchanges but also tense ideological clashes. These clashes – in which Wolff felt she had to defend not only her thoughts on gender and sexuality, but also her own memories of the past – were certainly a creatively fertile ‘shock’ for Wolff: they drove her to write *Hindsight* in direct response. Her active and critical role as a public figure intent on representing the past in her own terms did not end there: the ‘new lease of life’ spanning from *Hindsight’s* publication to Wolff’s death in 1986 saw her approach this task with even more directness and determination.

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{806} Schoppmann, “Neue Autobiographie,” 43.}

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5. **Beyond Hindsight: concluding thoughts on Charlotte Wolff’s ‘late style’**

*Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present.*

Edward Said 807

*Ich bin im Alter in vieler Hinsicht jünger geworden.*

Charlotte Wolff in a letter to Christa Wolf 808

Following Adorno’s work on Beethoven, Said’s *On Late Style* contemplates the “against-the-grain” aesthetic of several writers’ and composers’ works written in the years of illness or very old age which immediately preceded their deaths. Rather than serene acceptance or resignation in the face of one’s impending fate, Said is interested in the creative potential of ‘late style’ as detectable in his subjects’ final works: as a “renewed, almost youthful energy”, as “self-imposed exile from what is generally acceptable,”809 as a “nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and, above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going against…”810 Charlotte Wolff, after the publication of *Hindsight* and its German translation, was in her eighties and increasingly frail and unwell. She knew she did not have much time left, but remained determinedly productive: her intellectual engagement with the present continued through correspondence and interviews, and her concern with how the past was being written into histories also took the form of an exhaustively researched biography of Magnus Hirschfeld. Her argumentative stance sharpened; she went against the grain more than ever before. To appropriate a line of Said’s, Wolff in the 1980s could certainly be seen as a “figure of lateness itself, an untimely, scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present.”811

One such catastrophe was the complete erosion of trust and understanding between Wolff and British gay and lesbian communities, presumably in the wake of *Gay News’* scornful dismissal of *Hindsight* as a book and Wolff as a public figure. In

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808 Wolf and Wolff, *Ja, unsere Kreise berühren sich*, 75.
809 Said, *On Late Style*, 16
preparation for a talk she was due to present for International PEN in 1982, Wolff went as far as to write to their general secretary stating she “would be much relieved if [the secretary] would exclude Gay News. The same holds good for any representative of the female homosexual fraternity, as for them [Wolff is] also like a ‘red rag to a bull’ for exactly the same reason” – that reason being, by Wolff’s diagnosis, their approach to “homosexuality as monomania – threatened by bisexuality.”

Importantly, the talk she was giving to International PEN was on the subject of ‘bisexuality’ in Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*: here Wolff took the same ideas she expressed in *Bisexuality* and applied them to two literary works written when she herself was young and which had since been enthusiastically claimed as classic works in a canon of lesbian literature. She credited both authors as having written about lesbian and bisexual women “in einer Weise […] mit der sich keine Schriftstellerin von heute vergleichen kann,” implying that readers and critics in 1982 needed to pay closer attention to the past.

Wolff takes issue with a perceived tendency towards celebration of Woolf as a feminist and possibly even lesbian figure, declaring Woolf was neither feminist nor lesbian, but an “androgyne Persönlichkeit.” Wolff’s foray into literary criticism was insightful: *Nightwood* and *Orlando* are understood today in terms which generally align with her ideas. It also reflects her intensified determination to actively oppose the construction of a lesbian history which unquestioningly considered itself such: having excused herself from being part of that history by writing *Hindsight*, Wolff then extended the gesture to include other writers. Wolff knew this would have been very confrontational to many among Barnes’ and Woolf’s readers at the time: those who saw their works as part of a historical canon of lesbian literature. Chapter 2 has shown how such an intervention into histories of sexualities through literature is also possible through analysis of Wolff’s own early literary work.

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812 Wolff to Josephine Pullein-Thompson, General Secretary of PEN International, 1 October 1982. WC PSY/WOL/1/11/1.
813 For a discussion of this and Barnes’ strongly negative reaction to this reception of her work, see Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 151-152.
814 “… in a manner which no writer today could compare herself to.” Wolff uses the feminine, ‘Schriftstellerin’, but this is not to imply male writers have done a better job so much as to imply they are not even part of the discussion. Wolff’s seminar was rewritten as an essay in German and published as ‘Lesbianismus und Bisexualität in den Werken von Djuna Barnes und Virginia Woolf’ in *Lesbenpresse* 11 (1982), 9-14.
intent as she was on being listened to by her audiences by the 1980s, it seems she saw the well-known works of Barnes and Woolf as a more productive venue for her arguments.

Wolff’s refusal to read from Augenblicke at the Berliner Museum’s monumental 1984 exhibition of Berlin gay and lesbian history on the grounds that she “loath[ed]” all sexual identity categories817 – and the ideologies implicit in their use – is a good example of the function of “deliberately unproductive productiveness,” to use Said’s phrase, in Wolff’s final creative period. It resulted in her significant absence from the exhibition, and thus was unproductive on its surface, but it also encouraged the nuanced approach to the past that Wolff had been wishing to see all along. The recipient of Wolff’s barbed and impatient refusal of that invitation, Christiane von Lengerke, contributed an article to the exhibition’s catalogue: here, Wolff’s presence is felt in a manner much more in accordance with her ideas than a reading from the 1920s episodes of Augenblicke could ever have been.

Von Lengerke’s piece, “‘Homosexuelle Frauen’: Tribaden, Freundinnen, Urminden”,818 is a well-considered essay on the difficulty and questionability of writing lesbian identity into history. Grounded in the task of locating and citing sources from the past such as the letters exchanged between Rahel Varnhagen and Pauline Wiesel as well as those of Bettina von Arnim and Caroline Günderrode, von Lengerke refuses to categorise these figures in terms of their sexuality at all. She implores readers to think carefully about the usefulness of doing the same to themselves, citing Kate Millett’s 1974 assertion – via the German translation of Wolff’s Bisexuality – that “homosexuality was invented by a straight world dealing with its own bisexuality”819 before asking, in her own words, “wann können wir – auch – auf den Begriff ‘Homosexualität’ verzichten?”820 Interestingly, an overview of von Lengerke’s life, with all information drawn from an interview conducted recently for a European Commission project on the lives of older women in Europe,821 lists Charlotte Wolff as the strongest influence on her own approach to lesbian-feminist

817 See Chapter 1, page 12.
819 Kate Millett, Flying (1974, republished University of Illinois Press, 2000), 97
820 “When can we – too – relinquish the term ‘homosexuality?’” Italics in original.
thought. It is to von Lengerke’s own credit that her contribution to the exhibition catalogue stands alone in its concern with method over material; Wolff’s contribution was through her refusal to compromise and the influence this strength of conviction must have had.

Wolff was not content to influence scholarship from behind the scenes, however, and by 1982 she had begun in earnest to research her biography of Magnus Hirschfeld which was eventually published in 1986. Toni Brennan and Peter Hegarty have compared Wolff’s approach to writing the life of Hirschfeld with that taken by a younger German historian, Manfred Herzer, whose research coincided with Wolff’s. Herzer had been in collaborative correspondence with Wolff early in the process of their research, but Wolff eventually came to treat Herzer as a threat and rival rather than with any spirit of collegiality. Brennan and Hegarty suggest this dramatic shift in attitude is best understood as territorial defensiveness: Herzer, as a young man, was in a position where he could anticipate being involved with many years of Hirschfeld scholarship to come, whereas Wolff saw her own Hirschfeld project as a parting gesture, a definitive legacy. This could certainly be true, but one equally significant factor to consider is this: Herzer believed it was important to describe Hirschfeld as a gay man. Brennan and Hegarty see Hirschfeld’s reluctance to describe himself as homosexual as indicative of a professionally strategic but somewhat hypocritical concealment of truth, rather than of disdain for categorisation. In fairness, Hirschfeld’s situation likely involved elements of both.

Herzer felt that Hirschfeld “would have been horrified to see himself labelled in the subtitle of the biography as ‘Jewish’ and as ‘gay’” but still believed that was the most fitting emphasis for his biography. This is where Wolff’s sudden coldness towards Herzer can clearly be seen as the result of more than just territorial defensiveness: it was to do with his approach to writing sexualities into histories. As we now know, the year in which Herzer and Wolff corresponded about their Hirschfeld research – 1982 – was a year during which Wolff frequently tried

822 Brennan and Hegarty, “Magnus Hirschfeld,” 24-46.
823 Brennan and Hegarty, “Magnus Hirschfeld,” 33.
824 Herzer’s biography of Hirschfeld was eventually published as Magnus Hirschfeld: Leben und Werk einer jüdischen, schwulen und sozialistischen Sexologen (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1992).
825 Hirschfeld’s chastisement of a young man for labelling himself “schwul” is evoked by Brennan and Hegarty (29) but is not linked to any of his published aversions to the formulation of sexuality as descriptor or identity, such as his foreword to Berlin’s drittes Geschlecht.
826 Brennan and Hegarty, “Magnus Hirschfeld,” 29.
explaining to historians and other scholars why she really did feel horrified at the thought of seeing herself portrayed in various media primarily as a lesbian. The exact months during which she was in contact with Herzer were the same months in which she had requested no gay or lesbian media presence at her talk for International PEN,\(^{827}\) the same months in which she had heard of calls from one British lesbian magazine to boycott Bisexuality on the grounds it was “pornographic,”\(^{828}\) the same months in which she wrote to Michaela Huber that she “would not agree to be presented as a ‘lesbian’” in an upcoming television interview.\(^{829}\) Manfred Herzer simply had the misfortune of representing, to Wolff, exactly the approach to sexual identity’s place in the writing of histories which she felt oppressed by at the time.

With this in mind, consider the following passage from Wolff’s *Magnus Hirschfeld*:

Hirschfeld has been classed as a homosexual, and it was even suggested that he was also a transvestite. But nobody ever imagined him in an intimate relationship with a woman. I have already pointed out that Hirschfeld admired ‘powerful’ women, but my interviewee mentioned that he also had some physical contact with the androgynous dancer Anita Berber, who acted in *Anders als die Andern*. […] This is] of interest as it shows that the fixed idea of Hirschfeld’s exclusive homosexuality is probably a fallacy.\(^{830}\)

In this passage, Wolff mines deep into biographical detail in search of any sign the objects of Hirschfeld’s affections were not entirely dictated by gender – and she does so directly in response to a “fixed idea” she has perceived in the work of others. Writing Hirschfeld’s biography was Wolff’s way of casting herself in an active role as historian while simultaneously struggling with the ways in which others were trying to write her into history: she sought to write Hirschfeld’s history the way she wished others would write her own.

All these aspects of Wolff’s determinedly confrontational approach to literature, history and sexuality in the 1980s are visible in her letters to the German author Christa Wolf. Their correspondence, recently published as a collection,\(^{831}\) was sparked by Wolf reading *Augenblicke* and discovering it contained a description of

\(^{827}\) Wolff to Josephine Pullein-Thompson, General Secretary of PEN, 1 October 1982, WC PSY/WOL/1/1/11.

\(^{828}\) Wolff to Doris Rector, 29 October 1982, WC PSY/WOL/1/4.

\(^{829}\) Wolff to Barbara Scharioth, 14 July 1982, WC PSY/WOL/1/7.

\(^{830}\) Wolff (1986), 435.

\(^{831}\) Wolf and Wolff, *Ja, unsere Kreise berühren sich.*
how Wolff’s early poem “Jesaias” strongly resembled a passage in her own book *Kein Ort. Nirgends* ⁸³² – and it continued for the rest of Wolff’s life. Wolff’s letters to Wolf contain elaborations upon her theories on sexuality and gender, ⁸³³ as well as articulations of the intent behind her Hirschfeld biography and her exhaustion upon nearing its completion. She wrote to Wolf that that she saw value in Hirschfeld’s sexological work only as a historical document, and that her project was intended as a contribution towards securing a place for Hirschfeld in histories of social thought on sexuality. ⁸³⁴ As noted earlier, Wolff’s *Magnus Hirschfeld* achieved this; one recent critic declared it is yet to be surpassed in this regard. ⁸³⁵

A mistrust of scientific ‘progress’ emerges at times in Wolff’s letters to Wolf: in one letter she writes about watching the Greenham Common peace protesters on television, worrying about atomic warfare, but deciding that her apprehension ultimately rests with “technology per se.” ⁸³⁶ In themselves, these fears could be read as typical of a sense of isolation from a society much younger, on average, than oneself, but viewed alongside her 1981 interview with James Steakley ⁸³⁷ it emerges that Wolff, over time, lost all trust she ever had in the concept of science: “Then and now, science is so connected with politics. […] I have drawn the lesson that no development, as progressive as it is, can be, could be, is ever safe.” ⁸³⁸ Her mistrust of science is historic and deep: Chapter 3 explored Wolff’s past engagement with branches of science later rendered dangerous and obsolete, and we have seen how she struggled to reconcile herself with this past in her later work. At the close of the Steakley interview, Wolff speaks at length of how she perceives the connection between the dangers of science, her own theories on sexuality, and her feeling of being very much ‘against the grain’ of society:

Yes, the heterosexuality of human beings is an enormous mass suggestion. Why? Because of the interest of society in having cannon fodder, in having procreation and power, power, power. I believe in a bisexual society – again, a rather surrogate word – which I think is coming in perhaps fifty or one hundred years, unless we are not politically conscious and allow the evil to

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⁸³⁴ Wolff to Wolf, *Ja, unsere Kreise berühren sich*, 132-134.
⁸³⁵ See page 158 for Domeier’s remarks in his recent overview of Hirschfeld scholarship.
⁸³⁷ Wolff with Steakley, “Love Between Women.” See note 39 on page 13 for Wolff’s appraisal of the Steakley interview as the best she ever had; viewed in light of this study’s findings, I agree with her.
bury us. Only in a bisexual society can we avoid the atom bomb which means the end of our planet. If the patriarchal relationship and the need for power grow more and more, we will get the atom bomb. There is absolutely no question. Then, all of us will be in trouble. It’s only possible to avoid this through a complete equality which, I think, comes in our acknowledgement of everyone’s basic bisexuality. If we act rightly as political people, which we are or must become, then this planet is going to survive.\textsuperscript{839}

Wolff’s oeuvre of life writing shows how her interest in engaging with others’ understandings of history intensified over time; through this final phase of her work as a writer and public figure we can see how her interruptions of the writing of sexual identities into histories was only the surface of her concern. She tried to protect the past from being misunderstood, but her aversion to sexual and gender categorisations also looked toward her fears for the future.

Wolff had hoped to make even more of her ‘late style’: in one interview she announced she would begin work on another life writing project as soon as she had finished the Hirschfeld book. This was to be a memoir of the years she spent in exile in Paris, in between fleeing Berlin and settling in London.\textsuperscript{840} Perhaps this book would have told us more about what she thought about her hand reading work and its ideological implications so many years later; perhaps it would have contained untold stories about her encounters with people like Natalie Barney. It may have given her another venue for further thoughts on the years preceding her exile, and she might have finally felt prepared to share the poems she had kept filed since the 1920s, with new reflections on their meaning – perhaps with an approach similar to how she wrote about Woolf and Barnes. None of this had time to happen: Wolff died of a heart attack in 1986, only months after \textit{Magnus Hirschfeld} was published.

The papers she bequeathed to the British Psychological Society, today held at the Wellcome Collection in London, give us the opportunity to take a closer look at Wolff’s early life and its echoes in the later years she spent as a writer and public figure. Her early poetry, published and unpublished, documents her experiences of a milieu where the lines between love and friendship, between orthodox and unorthodox expressions of gender and sexuality, were not drawn the same way many people later assumed they were. Her translations of Baudelaire write her into a

\textsuperscript{839} Wolff with Steakley, “Love Between Women,” 81.
forgotten literary history: one where her friend Walter Benjamin was not only thinking theoretically when he wrote about the figure of the lesbian in modernity, and where the flâneuristic art of taking a walk was open to Wolff, too. The archives of her years spent researching the human hand will offer much more to researchers in future once their embargoes are lifted; even in an only partially accessible state they show us details of a period in her career which Wolff never could fully reconcile herself with once she became recognised as a “period piece” of better but doomed times. The archives of how she first turned to life writing tell us much about the importance of Wolff’s own personal sense of history to her identity, and signpost a way towards our better understanding of just how deeply invested she was in protecting her remembered past from being co-opted by an approach to history that did not reflect her own memories.

Following this, Wolff’s archives of correspondence from the 1970s and 1980s, found in her papers at Wellcome and also at Spinnboden in Berlin, can be viewed alongside her life writing and the published traces that remain of the reception of her works to form a convincing illustration of just how dialectic Wolff’s oeuvre of life writing became. Her difficult decision to return to Berlin in 1978 upon the invitation of L74 sparked the lively collaborations and conflicts which inspired Wolff to engage even more with her audiences, as made very clear by the structure and the focus of Hindsight. She saw a need to explain her past on her own terms, and so she did – before venturing to do the same for other figures of the past with her work on Magnus Hirschfeld, Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes. She did so not out of vanity, but out of a genuine and justified concern as to what kinds of histories could possibly be produced with an insistence on categorising people of the past with the terms of the present, and without a milieu-specific approach. Charlotte Wolff’s life writing was not without its flaws and inconsistencies. Viewed in light of its context alongside her presence as a public figure, however, and considering her close attention to the reception of her work, Wolff should not be dismissed as deluded regarding the potentials and freedoms of her past. Instead, she can be seen as a devoted and astute campaigner against exactly those same approaches to the historicising of sexuality and gender as historians today would be wary of.
Several recent works which pose questions about the relationship of queer identities to a sense of history have made extensive use of Walter Benjamin’s idea of the “angel of history.” 841 Here is Benjamin in his own words:

Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das Angelus Novus heißt. Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausgespannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor uns erscheint, da sieht er eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablössig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradise her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist dieser Sturm. 842

Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’ is fixated on the past as a swift storm flings it forward into the future; the past it was still processing is further in the distance by the second. This thing we call progress, but which is not necessarily so, renders the past only imaginable and interpretable, but never again to be touched. Heather Love’s work on the politics of queer history conceives of Benjamin’s angel as a figure which, “while most people are content to forget the horrors of the past and move on toward a better future, […] resists the storm of progress. […] He is damaged both by the horrible spectacle of the past and by the outrage of leaving it behind.” 843 Charlotte Wolff, however, knew this thing we call progress is not always so. Her outrage at leaving the past behind was only in part due to its horrors; it was equally directed at others’ assumptions the past was solely a place of horror and the future a place of liberation.

As a young student and poet, Charlotte Wolff saw “Angelus Novus” on her friend Walter Benjamin’s wall. In On the Way to Myself she recalls the painting as a

841 A thorough outline of these recent appropriations of Benjamin can be found in Shahani, Queer Retrosexualities, 11-15; see also Nealon, Foundlings, 174-175; Love, Feeling Backward, 147-149.
“There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees on single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.”
frequent focus of his attention and devotion: “To him the picture was a living being, and he referred to it as if it were a person.”

It was still on her mind a decade later, when she wrote *Hindsight*:

[Walter Benjamin] had a personal relationship with this picture, as if it were part of his mind. I was not enthusiastic about it at first though I felt the sensitivity in what seemed to me an unassuming geometry. But in time I understood that it expressed a lucidity in composition and ‘touch’ which is the essence of the creative process. I then understood why Walter loved the “Angelus Novus.” Klee, this sensitive visionary, appealed to Walter who was a visionary himself. He was a poet by nature, and his talk was like no one else’s.

She offers no interpretation on the meaning of the painting, nor any indication that she has read Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Concept of History.’ The description she gives in *Hindsight* seems incomplete and evasive – and yet she declares that, over time, she came to understand ‘Angelus Novus’. Still remembering her own distant past while surrounded in the present by misinterpretations of it, and faced with the task of sculpting a chronological narrative out of memories capable of overlapping or even contradicting each other like wreckage upon wreckage, Wolff must have eventually come to empathise with the ‘angel of history’ more than she ever admitted. Toward the end of her life, flung forward but staring backward, doubtful as to whether ‘progress’ was as it seemed, she played the same role. We have her books and her archive as testament to this. Future studies of queer historiography will likely continue to use Benjamin’s angel as a symbol; from here it is hoped they will also use Charlotte Wolff as a subject. The importance of her work for histories of literature, sexuality, science, identity and psychology is yet to be fully recognised.

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APPENDIX A: The ‘Feuerlilie’ cycle

Untitled cycle of poetry referred to in Chapter 2 as the ‘Feuerlilie’ cycle, reproduced here as it is printed in Vers und Prosa 6 (1924): 198-200.

Neigen wir unsre Stirnen
Fängt wo ein Wind an
zu zittern

Tasten wir Häuser und Menschen
Immer stehen wir beide
vor Gittern

Finden sich einmal die Hände
Wird ein trennloser Hauch uns
umwittern

Du erblichest mir immer
Die süßen Trauben wurden
zu bittern

Wird uns einmal das Lied
Der Kuß uns einmal die Blüten
erschüttern

Werden heimlich die Blätter
In Frühlingsnächten
zittern.

**
Hast du nie mich gerufen
Kehrte ich nie bei dir ein
Blieb ich auf Nebelstufen
Immer und immer allein?

Sind wir einsame Inseln
In einem tönenden Meer,
Wirft ein Wind denn mein Winseln
Wie Hagel über dich her?

Liebst du das Schicksallose,
Nur, das kristallene Gut,
Das, eine Feuerrose,
In deiner Stirne ruht?

Über die wehrlosen Brüste
Schlägt unbehinderte Flut;
Schleicht ein Kind ohne Lüste,
Ist sein Spiel ohne Blut.

Rette dir deine Freude,
Schwarze Sterne stehn,
Suchen nach neuem Leide,
Werden sich zu dir drehn.

**
Vor Menschenblick verbergen
Will ich für dich meinen Glanz
Mit sanft geschlossenen Lidern
Durchtaste ich die Nacht.

Ob du mich einmal riefest
Hütest du scheues Licht
Verborgen, mit dunkelndem Auge,
Das mir die Heimat gibt?

Stirn und Mund und Hände
Wende nicht zu dir zurück,
Wir müssen dann beide erkalten
Und alles Leben lügt.

**
Weil du niemals kamst
Weil in keinem Schritt
Du mich zu dir nahmst
Bis ich langsam glitt
Hintenübersank

Meine Kehle preßt
Eine Träne scheint
Wen sein Stern verläßt
Der ist keinem Freund
Und vor Heimweh krank.

**
Gesicht wird Glas
Die Öde dörrt
Schnee macht mich bunt
Ich werde verwehen

**
Du hast die Seele
Stumm und weiß gemacht
Gib sanfte Decke
Deiner Hand
Der Feuerlilie
Vor den Pforten.

**
Nicht Leidenschaft, nicht der Opfer Müh’n
Neiget den Stern
Der Mensch allein, der die Gnade verliehn,
Formt uns von fern.

Atmet sein Mund alle Tiefe ein,
Die uns enthält,
Sind wir schauernd vor Blüh’n und klein’
Kindern gesellt.

**

Ich werde ganz verloren sein
Mein Atem steht quer
Das Auge zieht sein Feuer ein
Der Kopf hängt schwer.

Er stößt an den Laternenpfahl
Die Hand greift leer
Auf der Stirn ein rissiges Mal
Brennt sehr.

Wie ist nun mein Sommer lau
Frühling verpaßt
Wie ist meiner Träume Bau
Morsch und verblaßt.
APPENDIX B: Wolff’s translations of Baudelaire

‘Die Seele des Weins’

Wolff’s translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Le Vin des amants.’ Published in *Vers und Prosa* 8 (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1924), 272-274.

Wie leuchtet heute der Raum
Ohne Sporen, Leine und Zaum
Reiten wir auf dem Wein
In den Feenhimmel hinein.

Wie zwei Engel erregt
Von einer Glut unentwegt
In des Morgens Kristallgefeld
Folgen wir fernen Bild

Gewiegt auf dem Flügel dem weichen
Des Windes der klug uns führt
Wir beide Schwester vom gleichen

Rausch Seite an Seite entführt
Fliehen wir ohne Säunen und Ruh
Dem Paradies seiner Träume zu.
‘Der Balkon’

Wolff’s translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Le Balcon.’ Published in Vers und Prosa 8 (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1924), 272-274.

Schoß des Gedenkens, Herrin unter den Frauen,
O Du, wo all meine Freuden, all meine Werke münden,
Du wirst wieder die Schönheit des Kosens schauen,
Wenn stiller Herd uns und süßer Abend verbinden.
Schoß des Gedenkens, Herrin unter den Frauen.

Und Abende waren von heimlicher Wärme verglänzt,
Und nachts der Balkon atmete duftend uns an,
Wie waren die Brüste mir süß! Dein Herz hat an meines gegrenzt.
Worte erschienen uns oft, die nichts verlöschen kann.
Und Abende waren, von heimlicher Wärme verglänzt.

Welch tiefes Licht das heiße Dämmern uns zeigte!
Geweitet der Raum! In uns welche Glut!
Angebetete, wenn ich zu Dir mich neigte,
Konnte den Duft ich atmen aus Deinem Blut.
Welch tiefes Licht das heiße Dämmern uns zeigte!

Zu einer Wolke verdichtete sich die Nacht!
Mein Auge hat das Deine im Dunkel erkannt.
Ich trank Deinen Atem, aus Süße, aus Gift gemacht,
Dein Fuß entschlummerte in meiner Bruderhand.
Zu einer Wolke verdichtete sich die Nacht!

Ich kann des Glückes Steigen widerbeschwören,
Und das Gelebte erschimmert an Deinen Knien.
Ich find ja nur Deine Wunder, die mich betören,
In Deinem sanften Blut, in Deines Körpers Blühen.
Ich kann des Glückes Steigen widerbeschwören.

Dein Schwur, Dein Duft, Dein Kuß, all dies
Steigt aus dem Verborgenen auf,
Wie die Sonne, die unsern Himmel verließ,
Aus dem Meere taucht zum Tages-Lauf,
Dein Schwur, Dein Duft, Dein Kuß, all dies.
‘Verdammte Frauen’

Wolff’s unpublished translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Femmes damnées.’ Sourced from the Wellcome Collection archive under PSY/WOL/7.

Wie sinnende Tiere lagern sie auf dem Sand
Und wenden den Blick zum Horizont der Meere
Es tastet Fuß sich zu Fuß und Hand zu Hand
In schmerzlichen Zittern und einer süßen Schwere.

Die einen öffnen ihr Herz zu trutem Gespräche
In versteckten Büschen wo Quellen steigen
Ziehen and Licht die Liebe und fürchtsame Schwäche
Der Kindheit und schreiben in das Holz von Zweigen.

Andre wandern wie Schwestern ernst und schwer
Durch die Felsen, von seltsamen Formen voll,
Wo Sankt Anton wie aus einem Lavameer
Der Purpur nackter Brüste entgegenquoll.

Und auch solche, denen die Fackeln abbrennen
Die in der Stille alter Götterhöhlen
Dich, o Bachus, der das Fieber stillt, erkennen,
Der Schlaf gibt allen, die ewige Nöte quälen.

Andre gibt es, die Priesterbinden verehren
Und verborgene Geißeln tragen an ihrem Bein
Die mischen im Düster des Waldes, in den leeren
Nächten den Schaum der Freuden zu Tränen der Pein.

Frauen Dämonen Ungeheuer Märtyrer
Euer starker Geist bezwingt diese Welt
In Demut seid Ihr unendlichen Feuers Schürer
So oft von Schufern so oft von Tränen gequält.

Ich folgte Euch in Eure Hölle mit meinem Herzen
Arme Schwestern, ich liebe Euch mitleidig und weich
Für die Unersättlichkeit, für das Düster der Schmerzen
Und der Liebe Urnen in Eurer Seele Reich.
‘Femmes damnées: Delphine & Hippolyta’

Wolff’s unpublished translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte.’ Sourced from the Wellcome Collection archive under PSY/WOL/7.

Bei der müden Lampe letztem fahlen Fluten
Auf tiefen Kissen ganz und gar von Duft erfüllt
Träumte Hippolyte von dem Gluten
Die den Schleier ihrer reinen Jugend enthüllt.

Sie suchte von dem Blitz verwirrt und wie geblendet
Den Himmel ihrer Unschuld, der schon allzu fern,
So wie ein Wanderer, der die Blicke wendet
Nach dem hinter ihm verblassenden Morgenstern.

Die verloschenen Augen mit den müden Zähren
Die Blässe, die Dämpfheit, die dunkle Gier,
Die Arme, Waffen die nicht Schutz gewähren,
All dies diente der Zarten Schönheit zur Zier.

Ihr zu Füßen liegend, ruhig und in Freude
Verschlang Delphinens Blick sie voller Sehnen
Wie ein wilden Tier, das bewacht eine Beute
Nachdem es sie zuvor gezeichnet mit den Zähnen.

Vor der Zarten Schönheit so die starke liegt
Stolz schlürfte sie in wildem Übermut
Den Wein aus ihrem Siege, hin zu ihr sie fliegt
Um sich sanften Dank zu holen für die Glut.

Sie suchte in dem Auge des Opfers, des bleichen
Diesen stummen Gesang, den die Freude tönt,
Und diese Dankesstrahlen unendlichen weichen
Die aus dem Auge zielen, wie ein Seufzer stönt.

Hyppolyte, Liebling, wie fühlst Du diese Dinge?
Verstehst Du nun, daß man nicht reichen darf
Das geweihte Opfer der Rosen-Erstlinge
Den Winden, den Winden, die sie vernichten, beißend uns scharf?

Meine Küsse sind zart wie jene Schatten
Die abends schillern auf jenen Seen
Wie Spuren von Wogen werden die Deines Gatten
Farben und wie brechende Pflüge gehen.

Sie werden über Dich stürmen, schweres Gespann
Von Pferden und Ochsen ganz schonungslos
Hyppolyte, meine Schwester, schaue mich an
Du mein Herz meine Seele mein All und mein Los.
Gib mir Deiner Augen Himmel und Sterne!
Für einen dieser Zauberblicke, göttlichen Duft
Löse ich die Schleier wilderer Freuden Dir gerne
Und bette Dich in endlosen Traumes Gruft.

Doch Hyppolyte erhob darauf ihren Kopf und sprach:
Sieh, icht undankbar bin ich, es reut mich nicht
Meine Delphine, doch mir ist unruhig und schwach
Wie nach einem zu schweren Nachtgericht.

Dumpf fühle ich, wie sich Schrecken regen
Und eine dunkle Schar von Schatten aufschießt
Die mich führen wollen auf Abgrundwegen
Die ein blutiger Himmel von allen Seiten einschließt.

Haben wir denn so seltsames getan?
Erkläre, wenn Du kannst, mir dieses wirre Erschrecken
Sagst Du zu mir "mein Engel" so schaudert es mich an
Und doch muß meinen Mund immer zu Dir recken.

Du, mein Gedanke, blicke mich nicht so an
Du, die ich liebe, meine Schwester der Wahl
Wenn Du auch wärest ein verhüllter Satan
Und der erste Schritt zu meiner Qual.

Delphine, die schüttelt ihr Haupt, gemalt
Von Schicksal, wie auf des Dreifußes Schwelle
Sagt herrisch mit einem Blick, der unheimlich strahlt,
Wer wagt vor der Liebe zu sprechen von "Hölle"?

Verdammt soll auf ewig sein der Träumer der blöde
Der als erster wollte in törichtem Beginnen
Sich erzählend ein Rätsel sowohl unlöslich als blöde
In Dinge der Liebe verwirrt die Tugend spinnen!

Wer verbinden will zu einem mystischen Klang
Den Schatten mit der Hitze und die Nacht mit dem Licht,
will nimmer seinen Körper wärmen, nervenkrank,
An der Liebe, der roten Sonne Licht.

Geh, wenn Du willst, und such Dir einen stumpfen Gatten
Breite eilig ein reines Herz für seine Lust
Und mit gequälten Zügenentsetzen und matten,
Wirst Du mir wiederbringen Deine gegeisselte Brust.

Hienieden kann man dienen nur einem Meister allein,
Doch das Kind in seinem unendlichen Schmerz
Schrie plötzlich auf: Ich fühle in meinem Sein
Klaffenden Abgrund – er ist mein Herz!
Brennend wie ein Vulkan, tief wie die Leere,
Durch nichts wird dieses stöhnende Untier in mir gestillt
Und dem Eumeniden löst nichts des Durstes Schwere,
Der, in der Hand die Fackel, sein Blut brennend füllt.

Wie des Vorhangs Schutz uns von den andern trennt
Und wie wir beide schlaff in die Ruhe münden
Ich will vergehen an Deiner Kehle, die brennt
An Deiner Brust den Geruch der Gräber finden.

Ihr Beklagenswerte, wendet hinab
Hinab zu der Hölle Ewigkeit
Dort wo alle Laster in eines Abgrunds Grab
Gepeitscht von Winden, die kein Himmel leiht.

Wirbeln, ein Orkan, dort taucht ein.
Törichte Schatten, stürzt zu Eurer Wünsche Ziel
In Euer Toben ziehen keine Seligkeiten ein
Stets folgt die Zerstörung solcher Liebe Spiel.

In Eure Höhlen fällt kein junges Blühn
Durch die Spalten der Mauern Fieberbazillen
Sickern hinein, die wie Laternen erglühn
Und Eure Leiber mit grausamen Düften füllen.

Ewig unfreuchtbar bleibt für Euch der Genüß
Er steigert nur den Durst und erschlafft Eure Haut
Und der wütende Wind in Eurem Kuß
Klatscht Euren Leib mit einer alten Fahne Laut.

Verdammte, irrt Ihr fern von der Menschen Leben
Eilt wie die Wölfe durch Wüstenland!
Erfüllt Euer Schicksal, das Euch Verwirrung gegeben
Und flieht das Grenzenlose, das Ihr in Euch gebannt.
‘Lesbos’

Wolff’s unpublished translation of Baudelaire’s ‘Lesbos.’ Sourced from the Wellcome Collection archive under PSY/WOL/7.

Mutter lateinischer Spiele und griechischer Wonnen
Lesbos, wo Küsse sehnsuchtig oder voll Glück
Frisch wie Melonen, so heiss wie die Sonnen
Zierde der Nacht sind und ruhmvoller Tage Geschick
Mutter lateinischer Spiele und griechische Wonnen.

Lesbos, wo die Küsse wie Wasserfälle sprühen
Die sich furchtlos werfen zu den Abgrunds Schoss
Und schlüchzend in Stößen ummurmeln, hinziehen
Geheimnisvoll und wild, unaufhörlich und gross,
Lesbos, wo die Küsse wie Wasserfälle sprühen.

Lesbos, wo die Phrynen einander begehren
Wo kein Seufzer ohne Echo verhallt,
Du, das die Sterne ebenso wie Paphos verehren
Wo mit Recht Venus beneidet der Sapho Gestalt
Lesbos, wo die Phrynen einander begehren.

Lesbos, Du Erde der heißer, sehnsüchtigen Nächte
Wenn vor ihren Spiegeln, unsinnige Lust
Die Mädchen mit hohlen Augen des Körpers Prächte
Liebkosen, die reifenden Frucht ihrer Brust
Lesbos, Du Erde heißer sehnsüchtigen Nächte.

Mag der greise Plato strenge Blicke senden;
Dir wird Verzeihung aus den Küssen ohne Mass,
Königin von schönen, stillen und edlen Geländen
Wo feine Reize spielen ohne Unterlass.
Mag der greise Plato strenge Blicke senden.

Dir wird Verzeihung aus des Leides Dauer
Das immer wach in strebenden Herzen ersteht
Die fern von uns strahlenden Lächelns Schauer
Anzieht, das lockend von andern Himmeln weht.
Dir wird Verzeihung aus des Leides Dauer!

Wer von den Göttern wollte Dich wohl wagen
Zu richten, Deiner Stirn zu fluchen, von Mühe schwer,
Eh’ nicht der Tränen Flut ihre goldenen Wagen
Massen, die deine Flüsse stürtzte zum Meer?
Wer von den Göttern wollte dies wohl wagen?

Was kümmern uns die Gesetze des Guten und Bösen?
Mädchen edelsten Bluten, dieser Insel Ruhm,
Eure Religion ist heilig wie eine andre gewesen
Und die Liebe wirft Himmel und Hölle um.
Was kümmern uns die Gesetze des Guten und Bösen?
Denn Lesbos hatte mich vor allen erlesen
Um das Geheimnis der blühenden Mädchen zu künden
Ich bis von Kindheit zum Kult befohlen gewesen
Wo zügellose Freuden in Tränenflut münden.
Denn Lesbos hatte mich vor allen erlesen.

Seitdem wache ich auf dem Gipfel den Leucate
Um wie ein Posten mit sichern Blicke zu wittern
Gebe acht Tag und Nacht auf Brigg, Boot oder Fregatte,
Deren Formen ferne am Himmel erzittern
Seitdem wache ich auf dem Gipfel des Leucate.

Um zu erkünden, ob das Meer sie noch immer liebt,
Unter Seufzern, die der Felsen widerhallt,
Wird ein Abend nach Lesbos, das Verzeihung gibt,
Führen der verehrten Sapho tote Gestalt
Um zu erkünden ob das Meer sie noch immer liebt

Der Sapho von männlicher Art, die Liebende, der Dichter,
Die schöner als Venus in dunkler Blässe strahlt!
Das schwarze Auge besiegt die blauen Lichter,
Das die dunklen Ringe beschattet, vom Schmerz gemalt
Saphos, von männlicher Art, die Liebende, der Dichter.

Schöner als Venus reckt sie sich gegen die Welt
Sie giesst den Schatz ihrer Freude beglückt
Und das Strahlen, von ihrer Jugend erhellt
Auf den Vater Ocean, den seine Tochter entzückt,
Schöner als Venus reckt sie sich gegen die Welt.

Der Sapho, die am Tag ihres Frevels verschied
Als sie, zerstörte Sitte und alten Kult
Ihren schönen Körper für die Lüste vorriet
Eines Barbaren, der rächte die Schuld
Derer, die am Tag ihres Frevels verschied.

Und seitdem Zeit tönt Lesbos von Klagen
Trotz aller Ehren, die ihm das Weltall erweist
Erschöpft jede Nacht sich am Schrei der Plagen
Den sein Ufer zum Himmel stösst, ganz verwaist.
Und seitdem Zeit tönt Lesbos von Klagen.


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