

[Global Histories]

A student journal

Review: “The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death and Modern Queer Culture” by Heike Bauer

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.265>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Oct. 2018), pp. 179-183

ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

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The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture

By Heike Bauer, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017.
Paperback \$34.95, Pp. 236, ISBN: 978-1439914335

REVIEWED BY BEN MILLER

Just over 100 years ago, in a Berlin torn by war and electrified by revolution, Magnus Hirschfeld founded the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* in a villa just north of the Tiergarten. Hirschfeld was already, in the words of Dagmar Herzog, “one of the most important early advocates for the scientific study of sexuality as well as the development of a sexual morality based on self-determination and consent.”¹ As early as 1899, Hirschfeld’s Scientific-Humanitarian Committee was advocating for the decriminalization of sodomy and for a view of what we would now call gender identity and sexual expression as being based on a series of “intermediate steps” (*Zwischenstufen*) between fully opposite-sex-attracted man and fully opposite-sex-attracted woman; by 1904 they were sponsoring concerts, cultural events, and literary publications on homosexual and transvestite themes.² The Institute was Hirschfeld’s *magnum opus*, a fifty-room complex under the rubric of “knowledge leading to justice,” in two adjoining villas that housed patient clinics, a residence, an enormous library containing books on the history of sexual variation in humans and other animals, and an auditorium for readings and events.³ Few records exist from the space—the library was scattered and the documentary archive burned in Opernplatz, in one of the infamous and iconic Nazi book burnings—but it was one of the first nodes in an international network of spaces producing, developing, harboring, and arguing for the rights of same-sex-loving and gender non-conforming sexual minorities⁴.

The globality of this network has only recently begun to enter historical scholarship. Transnational or border-crossing histories of sexuality, starting with Foucault, have tended to be written on a macro scale. Recently, Merry Wiesner has argued for the productive possibility of mixing global history’s emphasis on connection and embeddedness with gender history’s tendency to make “categories of difference ever more complex.” Her call for “telescopes” has been taken up more readily, however, than her call for “microscopes.”⁵ Peter Drucker’s recent intervention into this field, to use just one example of a telescopic global sexual history, presents three evolving same-sex-loving identity formations, envisioned as aris-

¹ Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 52.

² Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Knopf, 2015), 106.

³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁵ Merry E. Wiesner, “World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality,” *Journal of World History* 18, no. 1 (2007): 54–55, 79, doi:10.1353/jwh.2007.0008.

ing from material relations of production and exchange and alongside attendant systems of racialization.⁶ Scott Spector has recently called for a turn to “intensive archeologies of particular relations at particular moments;”⁷ Helmut Puff, in the same collection, promotes a new kind of history of sexuality “promiscuously open to strategic intellectual alliances,”⁸ with chronologies that emphasize continuity and evolution over breaks and ruptures. Jennifer Evans, writing on queering German history, urges the use of a “queer methodology” that “emphasizes overlap, contingency, competing forces and complexity.”⁹

There are, however, as historian Ellen Fleischmann writes, “inherent complexities and challenges in attempting to write a history of cross-cultural interaction among groups perceived in their time to be marginal players in the encounter.”¹⁰ Heike Bauer, currently Professor of Modern Literature and Cultural History at Birkbeck in London, addresses these complexities admirably in *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture*. Her monograph analyzes the influence of colonial and gendered brutality and violence on the early homosexual rights movement in Germany, specifically the circle of activists around Magnus Hirschfeld and his Institute for Sexual Science.¹¹ The book closely reads his archives and writings, arguing that homosexuals were both “victims” of homophobic and gendered attacks and implicated in activism “imbricated in [the] everyday racism and colonial violence” of late Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. Consequently, Bauer demonstrates how “the emergence of homosexual rights discourse around 1900 was framed—and remains haunted—by not only antiques attacks but also colonial violence, racial oppression, and the unequal distribution of power within a society that denied full citizenship on grounds of gender” (p.2).

⁶ Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 8.

⁷ Scott Spector, Helmut Puff, and Dagmar Herzog, *After the History of Sexuality: German Genealogies with and beyond Foucault* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹ Jennifer Evans, “Introduction: Why Queer German History?” *German History* 34, no. 3 (2016): 371, doi:10.1093/gerhis/ghw034.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Readers seeking biographical or intellectual-historical analyses of Hirschfeld and his place within the broader Weimar movement for homosexual emancipation should see: Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Knopf, 2015); Ralf Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014); Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Robert Deam Tobin, *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Clayton John Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880–1945* (New York City: Harrington Park Press, 2016). Of particular interest due to its inauguration of the more critical school of interpretation of Hirschfeld and his work, but sadly only available in German, is: Andreas Seeck, A. *Durch Wissenschaft zur Gerechtigkeit? Textsammlung zur Kritischen Rezeption des Schaffens von Magnus Hirschfeld* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003). Elena Mancini’s biography of Hirschfeld, published in 2010 by Palgrave MacMillan, is to be avoided due to its many inaccuracies.

While some have suggested that global or transnational approaches to histories flatten subaltern voices and reproduce colonial violence, Bauer's approach is one of "spending time with ordinary victims whose lives have barely left an imprint in the historical archive" (p.2). While Bauer is a scholar of literature and German studies, her work has deep historical and archival implications, and demonstrates how global historians can center small voices while revealing the global networks of accumulation, exchange, and violence in which all histories are embedded. She "indexes...recent feminist, queer, transgender, and critical race scholarship on archives and archiving" (p.4) to center subaltern voices and to "reveal some of the fragile threads that held together queer lives...but also form part of a larger web of oppression" (p.12) that representational identity politics cannot unravel. It has been wryly noted that any history of Europe in the 19th or 20th century must necessarily be global, or ignore the deadly histories of racecraft and colonization that shaped (through collaboration, complicity, and resistance) virtually every aspect of European life during that period.

Two fundamental analytical concepts structure Bauer's analysis: the "queer angel of history" and the idea of "queer oblivion." The angel is a figure "conjured" by Bauer "to capture the complexities of the queer past...the paradoxical disjuncture between the sociopolitical gains that have improved queer lives collectively and the experiences of violence that nevertheless continue to mark the felt realities of queerness over time" (p.9). The allusion to Walter Benjamin and Paul Klee is intentional—and extends to a Klee angel serving as the book's cover—but unlike Benjamin's angel, which flies away from a receding past, Bauer's queer angel has a correspondingly queered relationship to time and progress, "pulled hither and thither...both part of and witness to shattering historical experience" (p.9). This angel, suggesting a stance of interpretation informed by slow theory and thick description, can help correct the "queer oblivion" (p.10) Bauer suggests resides deep within archives and narratives of queer progress and rights activism. Hirschfeld was, in Bauer's words, "apparent[ly] oblivious" (p.10) to many forms of gendered, racial, and colonial injustice. While straight histories are often oblivious of queerness itself, queer histories tend to be oblivious to the question of whose suffering and narrative is or was apprehensible to their presumed audience of modern queers. "Archival practices," Bauer reminds us, "are bound up with fundamental questions about power, resistance, and the legitimization or erasure of certain lives and practices" (p.4). Close reading is necessary to conjure useful suppositions from these troubled sources. Jennifer Evans has recently argued that "different methods of reading and engaging sources are needed to ... write queer social formations and desire back into history."¹² Bauer extends this methodologi-

¹² Jennifer Evans, "Sound, Listening and the Queer Art of History," *Rethinking History* 22, no. 1 (2018): 26-8, doi:10.1080/13642529.2017.1422584.

cal step to include an account of the violence and oblivions of those recovered social formations.

Following its theoretical introduction, the book is divided into five chapters. The first explores the colonial context of the emergence of homosexual rights activism. Articles published by Hirschfeld and colleagues in widely-circulated journals relied on a primitivist appropriation of Indigenous sexual forms through a stages-of-man theory of anthropology that aimed to divide the world into the civilized West and an otherized, backwards realm. This space could then be imagined as uninhabited and ripe for colonial domination and exploitation under a rubric of ‘development,’ with indigenous “nature people” (*Naturvölker*) standing below the “culture people” of Asian and Middle Eastern empires (*Kulturvölker*) and Western European civilization above all (p.25). Crucially, Bauer explores the influence of colonial realities and ideologies on the production of ideas, not simply stopping at naming and blaming endemic racism. An exploration of death and suicide in homosexual culture follows; Bauer links narratives of and statistics about today’s queer death and suicide to stories of the self-harm and self-mutilation of Hirschfeld’s subjects. The archive of his notes and recollections blame cultural “shockwaves” (p.39) for these deaths and make “visible the social norms that prompted many women and men to end their life because of the sense that their homosexual feelings and desires fundamentally denied their existence”(p.56).

The third chapter examines Hirschfeld’s writings about spousal and child abuse, aiming to narrow the gap between histories of sexuality and histories of sexual violence. Seeking to overcome “problematic” language associating predation on children with homosexuality (this writer would go further than Bauer and refer to this association as the queer equivalent of blood libel), Bauer reads the limits of Hirschfeld’s empathy in case notes and reactions to developments in family law in the Soviet Union (p.63). This brief mention of Communism points to one of the book’s key weaknesses—its lack of sustained engagement with class and the reproductive labor central to a materialist understanding of the history of sexuality. The fourth chapter offers one of Bauer’s most daring theoretical moves. In order to account for the archive’s full impact, Bauer examines both the homosexual and transgender self-archiving of Hirschfeld’s Institute for Science and the effect that the collection had on its Nazi destroyers. Lastly, the book’s conclusion examines Hirschfeld’s world tour and exile which Bauer uses to explore “the lingering influence of long histories of oppression even on those who overtly claim to reject racism and sexism” (p.124).

All histories of same-sex-loving people ghost the margins of archives. The prevailing tendency is to write, as described by Arunjali Arondekar in 2005, triumphalist histories in which queer experiences are recovered and presented to audiences seeking simply to find themselves in the past. This, in the context of colonialism, will not do. Bauer’s achievement is to take up Arondekar’s call to

“emerge not against the grain of archival work but from within it”¹³ to reimagine what Hirschfeld’s archive can be in the context of its colonial entanglements and to view the structural violence aimed at and committed by its erstwhile protagonists.

¹³ Anjali Arondekar, “Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2 (January 2005): 12.