

Suicidal Subjects

*Translation and the Affective Foundations
of Magnus Hirschfeld's Sexology*

HEIKE BAUER

Attention to translation between languages can offer glimpses at the elusive evidence of past emotions and the circumstance in which they are formed. Or, to phrase this differently, we might say that the process of translation has a vital dimension that links texts to bodies, and representation to subjectivity, and that can reveal some of the feelings and experiences that occurred when particular ideas were formulated. Judith Butler has pointed out that “the notion of the human will only be built over time in and by the process of cultural translation.”¹ The accounts of human bodies and experiences found in the sexological archive can similarly be understood as cultural translations that reveal not only how sexual subjects are produced but how they are denied and come undone across time. This chapter turns to translation to examine the writings on homosexual death and suicide by the Jewish sexologist and homosexual rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) and what they can tell us about both individual feelings of queer unlivability and their collective impact. It is prompted by the realization that while we know of many queer lives that have ended tragically as a result of legal persecution, violent attack, or the inability to cope with heteronormative social and emotional pressures, we know surprisingly little about the traumatic impact of these deaths on the lives of their contemporaries, and on the shaping of modern queer culture more broadly.² I use the word “trauma” here in the specific sense articulated by Ann Cvetkovich. She understands trauma “as a name for experiences of politically situated social violence [that] forges overt connections between politics and the emotions.”³

This conception provides a useful framework for an investigation of the impact of homosexual death, including suicide. It draws attention to the links between the social denial of homosexuality and the violence experienced by women and men whose desires were, or were seen to be, oriented away from the heterosexual norm.

Cvetkovich's concern with the relationship between feeling and politics allows us to think about homosexual suicide not merely in terms of individual suffering but as a collective experience. Hirschfeld's writings on homosexual death reveal some of the intersections between sex research and popular and cultural discourses about sexuality, and how they are linked to the lives of women and men who inhabit this archive. A second-generation sexologist famous for his homosexual rights activism, attention to transgender, and opening of the world's first Institute of Sexual Sciences in Berlin, Hirschfeld was also a chronicler of hate and violence against lesbians and homosexual men.⁴ His famous writings on homosexuality, for example, which were mainly written in German but occasionally also in English, include statistical surveys of lesbian and homosexual suicide. This material has received little critical attention. Yet it extends in specific ways our understanding of the fact that, to borrow the words of Heather Love, "the history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants."⁵ It shows not only that the sociopolitical, legal, and discursive denial of homosexuality profoundly shaped the lives of many individuals who felt, in Hirschfeld's words, "different from the others" (*anders als die anderen*), but that there is a tangible collective shape to this suffering. By paying attention to Hirschfeld's writings in German and English on homosexual suicide, its causes, and its reception, this chapter will show that lesbian and homosexual suffering caused emotional shock waves that rippled far across the geopolitical boundaries of the modern world.

Translating Suicidal Subjects

Reading the translations of queer existence in sexological texts and related writings on sexuality is often difficult. This is partly because of the elusive nature of contextual evidence about the lives of the women and men who inhabit the sexological archive, and partly because the emotional threads running through modern queer lives are frequently bleak. They describe feelings of despair and rejection as well as suicidal thoughts and evidence that these thoughts are sometimes acted upon. This material thus constitutes a problematic archive for queer historiography because it predominantly testifies to the negative experiences of women and men whose genders and desires did not fit the heterosexual mold and who were frequently persecuted, discriminated against, and rejected as a result.⁶ Such an archive is problematic

not only because it describes experiences that caused hurt and upset, but also because it associates same-sex sexuality with inevitable, abject misery. This damaging form of stereotyping has a great deal of currency in popular culture and the scientific and political efforts that shaped modern Western societies. It is therefore no surprise that lesbian and gay history and historiography has spent considerable effort on countering the pervasive and pernicious image of inevitable homosexual suffering. Scholars have both deconstructed the structures of oppression and excavated affirmative evidence of queer lives across time and space, evidence that shows how nonnormative forms of existence can thrive even in hostile social conditions.⁷ However, while the importance of such recuperative scholarship cannot be overstated, it is equally important to acknowledge that the excavation of affirmative histories alone cannot account for the full range of feelings and experiences that shape queer existence, nor can it explain fully the conditions that make possible the negation of same-sex life. Hirschfeld's writings on homosexual death are a poignant reminder that queer existence is subjected to real and imagined attacks, attacks that can be lethal.

Hirschfeld was by his own account prompted to switch from general medical practice to sexology after "the suicide of a young officer who shot himself on the eve of his marriage, bequeathing . . . Hirschfeld many of his notes and drawings."⁸ He repeatedly returned to this traumatic event in his writings, both to validate his sexology and to let speak the voice of a "*Selbstmörder*."⁹ The German word *Selbstmörder* has no single English equivalent, translating literally as "someone who murders himself," thus overtly casting the person in criminal terms. This linguistic particularity draws attention to the fact that suicide, not unlike homosexuality, occupies a stigmatized and criminalized role in Western history.¹⁰ Countries as politically diverse as the United States, England, Russia, and the German nations all had antisuicide laws that enabled posthumous punishment of a person who takes his or her own life, for instance by the annulment of the dead person's will.¹¹ In addition, Christian churches treated harshly those who had committed the "sin" of suicide, often denying the dead person conventional burial rites.¹² While over the course of the nineteenth century some of these laws were repealed—the German Penal Code of 1871 decriminalized unassisted suicide—and while religious attitudes softened, suicide remained a social taboo. One of the earliest histories of modern suicide by the English observer Henry Romilly Fedden illustrates this point. When "the comforts of Victorianism overlay the primitive horror of suicide and blunt the precise dogmatic teaching of the Church," he noted, "it [was] no longer the thing in itself that create[d] the scare, so much as what other people [thought] of it . . . [as] loss of fortune [was] substituted with the scourge of gossip."¹³ Fedden's observations on gossip chime with the tone of the suicide letter written by

Hirschfeld's patient, which emphasizes the desperate unspeakability of the man's suffering. The man explains that he will kill himself because he lacks "the strength" (*die Kraft*) to tell his parents "the truth" (*die Wahrheit*) and stop a marriage "against which nothing could be said in and of itself."¹⁴ Hoping that his parents will never learn about "that which nearly strangled my heart," an expression that, like the remainder of the letter, avoids giving "it" a name, the man implies that law, marriage, and family instituted heterosexual norms that made his life unlivable.¹⁵

The suicide letter suggests that unlivability and unspeakability are closely linked. Hirschfeld's choice of words further indicates that he did not consider the young man's suicide to be a voluntary act. For while *Selbstmörder* is the common German term for a man who committed suicide (a woman would be a *Selbstmörderin*), by the turn of the century the word had come to compete in critical and philosophical debates with Friedrich Nietzsche's recent conception of the "*Freitod*."¹⁶ Nietzsche celebrated "the free death, which occurs because I want it" (*den freien Tod, der mir kommt, weil ich will*), arguing that the ability to choose death is one of the characteristic features of the super-man.¹⁷ Hirschfeld was familiar with Nietzsche's work, considering him one of the thinkers "who at least theoretically fully understood homosexual love."¹⁸ This makes it all the more significant that he ignored Nietzsche's notion of the freely chosen death. The insistence on describing the suicide of his patient in the older language of *Selbstmord* reinforces that Hirschfeld did not consider this particular death a heroic choice but an act of despair.

Yet if for the young man naming his feelings was an unspeakable act, his letter nevertheless also conveys an awareness that there are others who feel the same way. Entreating Hirschfeld to listen to the "outcry of a desolate man" (*Aufschrei eines Elenden*), the man's final words implore his physician to dedicate his life to the homosexual cause: "the thought that you [Hirschfeld] could contribute to a future when the German fatherland will think of us in more just terms sweetens my hour of death."¹⁹ These concluding words alert us to the fact that suicide is only a "final" act for the person who takes his or her life. Its impact continues to be felt by others, a fact that is grammatically underscored in the suicide note by the use of the subjunctive, which turns the man's final wish into a command that will bind Hirschfeld's future.²⁰

The sense of connection between the suicidal man and his doctor is reinforced by the ambiguous demand for justice "for us" in the "fatherland." The word "us" evokes both a larger group of people and closeness between Hirschfeld and the man. By his own account, Hirschfeld was treating the young officer for severe depression around the time of this death. We cannot know for certain if the closeness evoked by the young officer refers to

an actual friendship between him and his doctor. However, this seems unlikely given the overall tone of the letter and the formal address of “*Sie*.” The psychic, emotional, and social pressures that led to the young officer’s suicide are ultimately unknowable to us, in the same way that there is no hard “proof” that the man’s posthumous opening up to Hirschfeld is linked to a recognition that Hirschfeld was himself attracted to men. Yet if the “truth” of events appears elusive partly because we have to rely entirely on Hirschfeld’s narration of events, this narrative nevertheless tells a particular story about the conditions that contributed to the end of a young man’s life. It constitutes, in Cvetkovich’s terms, a repository “of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in practices that surround their production and reception.”²¹ The poignancy of the story lies in the fact that the young man literally bestows on Hirschfeld a material record of the fears and unfulfilled desires that he is unable to discuss in their face-to-face meetings. The man’s unspeakable life is thus transformed into an articulate death, a death that would provide an affective motor for Hirschfeld’s subsequent professional practice.

Death and Professional Life

The narrative of the young officer’s suicide gained a relatively prominent role in Hirschfeld’s vast oeuvre due to the fact that he included it in various autobiographical reflections published over the course of his life.²² Hirschfeld used the story to legitimize his sexological practice, aiming to give it an emotional credibility and a political urgency that would distinguish his work from that of his colleagues. The 1922–1923 account of events, which was published in the homosexual journal *Die Freundschaft* (The friendship), shows that Hirschfeld used the suicide narrative in an attempt to gain professional credibility among the competing factions of early twentieth-century homosexual culture. Here he mentions the suicide in an article about the history of the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee; WhK), which was directed specifically at a homosexual audience and sought to promote Hirschfeld’s many reform activities. The WhK was cofounded by Hirschfeld in May 1897, shortly before Oscar Wilde’s release from prison, with the aim to increase public knowledge about, and acceptance of, homosexuality. Its best-known campaign was the petition for the revocation of Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which attracted many famous signatories. The WhK also played a key role in the publication of new sexuality research, competing with and overlapping with other journals in complicated ways. For instance, Sigmund Freud explained in a letter to Carl Jung in 1908 that an article of his had appeared in the new *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaften* (Journal of sexual sciences) due to “a

bit of skullduggery on the part of the editors [who had] originally solicited the piece for the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* [Yearbook of sexual intermediaries].” “I was not told until several months later,” he continues, “that it was to be published in the *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* which was just being founded. I asked for a guarantee that this new organ was not to be a chronicle of the W.h. Committee [WhK] in which case I preferred to withdraw my contribution, but received no answer.”²³ Freud’s words indicate the sometimes rapidly shifting allegiances of the early sex researchers. He had originally submitted his work to the *Jahrbuch*, knowing that it was closely aligned with the WhK. Shortly afterward, however, Freud turned his back on the WhK in a row over Hirschfeld’s use of a questionnaire to assess homosexual life. Freud’s article, meanwhile, in all likelihood as a response to the methodological quarrel, was passed from the editors of the *Jahrbuch* to the editors of the newly founded *Zeitschrift*, who then contacted Freud with their editorial queries.

The episode, which is barely more than a footnote in the history of sex research, nevertheless serves to illustrate how a complex web of professional disputes and personal rivalries shaped modern sexology. By the time Hirschfeld wrote his short history of the WhK in 1922, the organization had undergone further transformations as it became closely associated with the broader activities of the Institute of Sexual Sciences. The institute, which had been founded by Hirschfeld in 1919, had a significant popular reach, successfully drawing in large audiences through initiatives such as the Marriage Consultation Department and so-called Questionnaire Evenings where members of the public could anonymously deposit questions in a box, which were then answered by an institute physician.²⁴ If the popularity of these kinds of initiatives furthered Hirschfeld’s fame, they did not make him immune to competition from other homosexual organizations. Hirschfeld’s greatest rival in Berlin’s homosexual subculture was the so-called *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*, another homosexual society, which was led by Adolf Brand and Benedict Friedländer and heavily influenced by the anarchist writings of John Henry Mackay.²⁵ Founded in 1903, the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* supported Hirschfeld’s fight for the abolition of anti-homosexuality legislation but rejected his theorization of sexual intermediaries. Instead, Brand and Friedländer adapted the masculine ideals of Hellenic revivalism that had gained such popularity in nineteenth-century England, combining them with the physical pursuits of outdoor culture and an affirmative focus on homosexual virility that stood in stark contrast to Hirschfeld’s ideas about the infinite variations of gender and sexuality. Hirschfeld’s description of homosexual suicide implicitly counters the image of strong, masculine homosexuality with a reminder that there are many

unhappy men whose lives end prematurely because they are unable to free themselves from social constraint.

If the suicide of his patient had a traumatic impact on Hirschfeld, the telling of the story indicates how cultural conventions work themselves into the representation of his memory of the event. Cathy Caruth has argued that it is difficult to listen and respond “to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story.”²⁶ Hirschfeld’s repeated return to the suicide suggests that the event retained a haunting presence in his work, which reached beyond the realm of the well-rehearsed anecdote even as it was shaped by narrative conventions. Hirschfeld’s final mention of the suicide occurs in one of the last pieces he wrote, an “autobiographical sketch” published posthumously in 1936.²⁷ Unlike the 1922 account, the later “autobiographical sketch” was written in English. The two pieces tell a slightly different story about the events of the suicide. According to Hirschfeld’s 1922 version, the man died “immediately *after* his wedding.”²⁸ There is something particularly poignant about the idea that the young man went through the rituals of a wedding before he committed suicide, especially because this chain of events goes against the conventional conception of “wedding nerves,” which locates the moment of crisis *before* the wedding.²⁹ When Hirschfeld returns to the event at the end of his life, the conventional time frame is restored: here he writes that the man killed himself on the “eve of his marriage.”³⁰ Given the absence of other sources we cannot know the actual time of the death, but the temporal slippage in Hirschfeld’s accounts of the suicide alerts us to the ease by which cliché attaches itself to the narration of traumatic events.

Hirschfeld wrote the “autobiographical sketch” in English for the *Encyclopedia Sexualis* (1936), a compendium of key themes and figures in the sexual sciences edited by the American physician and historian of medicine Victor Robinson. Robinson had a particular interest in the stories that shaped scientific development, an interest that defined how he approached and wrote “history.” His subsequent account of *The Story of Medicine* (1943), for instance, which makes no mention of Hirschfeld or homosexuality, begins with the imaginative assertion that “the first cry of pain through the primitive jungle was the first call for a physician.”³¹ Robinson’s editorship may play a role in the conventionalized temporality of Hirschfeld’s English account of the suicide. However, even as the English narrative might suggest that the details of the event faded over the course of Hirschfeld’s life, the fact he repeatedly returned to the suicide over three decades also indicates the degree of traumatic stasis by which this tragic death retained a presence in Hirschfeld’s writings.

Suicide's Statistical Ends

Where, then, does this single death fit into Hirschfeld's work and the history of sexuality more broadly? For some critics, the question of whose life counts in the narratives that modern society tells about itself can inevitably be answered with reference to what they consider the seismic impact of nineteenth-century sciences on the regulation and expression of intimacy, desire, and the vagaries of identity. Karma Lochrie, for instance, takes for granted what she calls "the installation of norms first in statistical science and second in sexology."³² She argues that the emergence of these sciences marks a fundamental distinction between "normal" modernity and a pre-modernity, which, according to Lochrie, "is neither hopelessly utopian nor inveterately heteronormative."³³ Lochrie distills the complex observations on the institution of normativity articulated in the works of Michel Canguilhem and Michel Foucault into a neat narrative about statistics and sexology. According to her, these disciplines function as the harbingers of medico-scientific reductiveness, legal persecution, and related social norms that bring an end to the anormality she accords to premodernity. It is not difficult to find evidence of the damage caused by the process of disciplining sex—including in terms of its problematic conceptual and scientific legacies and the physical and psychic suffering caused by practitioners who actively tried to "cure" their homosexual or transgendered "patients"—and it is vital that we take account of this damage.³⁴ Yet I am uneasy about histories such as Lochrie's, which hinge on a clearly identifiable modern "invention" of sexual norms. The attribution of seismic structural shifts in power to one or two scientific developments problematically smooths over many of the edges that delineate the process of "disciplining sex," a process that sharpened queer lives across time and space. We therefore need histories that acknowledge that the grand narratives of oppression and liberatory struggle that frame queer history and historiography intersect with countless personal and fictional life stories, confused cultural fantasies, and fragmentary evidence of intimate relationships that sometimes support and sometimes undermine our understanding of their historical context.

Hirschfeld's complex role as a homosexual sexologist is a case in point. While he singles out the transformative power of the suicide of the young German officer, he also notes in his account of the event in 1922 that he had received countless other "farewell letters" (*Abschiedsbriefe*) in the intervening years.³⁵ If these words create a certain distance between Hirschfeld and the young officer who seems to slip into the realm of statistics, it would be mistaken to read Hirschfeld's evocation of the large number of queer suicides as an expression of a detached scientific concern. The tragic deaths and the socioscientific arguments Hirschfeld and others constructed around

them complicate the taxonomic efforts with which sexology is primarily associated today. The collation of statistics about homosexual suicide at the turn of the last century both raises awareness of the suffering of homosexuals at the time and flags up that as a group homosexuals were excluded from the burgeoning scientific literature on suicide.

From the later nineteenth century, suicide had begun to garner considerable and sustained interest in scientific and philosophical investigations. In Berlin, psychiatrists began to collect a huge archive of case studies of women and men who killed themselves.³⁶ The most famous and influential work on the topic would be Émile Durkheim's large-scale study *Le Suicide*, which was first published in 1897, around the same time that Hirschfeld published his first book, *Sappho und Sokrates*. *Le Suicide* is commonly seen as one of the founding texts of modern sociology. Durkheim conducted a comparison of the suicide rates among Catholics and Protestants, classifying four different "types" of suicide that according to him all originated from social factors.³⁷ Ian Marsh and others who have traced the shifting historical conceptions of suicide and its etiologies have shown that Durkheim's rejection of pathological models of suicide was not unique. Over the course of the nineteenth century, philosophers and thinkers increasingly turned attention to the social conditions that prompt suicide.³⁸ Karl Marx, for instance, had already noted in 1846 that suicide constitutes "one of the thousand and one symptoms of the general social struggle ever fought out on new ground."³⁹ It is not my concern here to trace the complex history of suicide or critique the methods by which it has been studied and "treated" by medical practitioners, psychologists, and lawmakers. Instead I want to pick up on a queer absence in nineteenth-century debates about suicide: the fact that before Hirschfeld began to count homosexual suicide—and despite the explosion of discourses around "sex" at the time—the "act whose author is also the sufferer" was rarely considered in relation to homosexuality.⁴⁰

The discursive absence of homosexuality in "mainstream" discussions of suicide reinforces how easily heteronormative assumptions work themselves into the fabric of social research. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for instance, who so famously sought to challenge the gendered as well as classed boundaries of modern society, also expressed strong anti-homosexual sentiments that seem at odds with their politics.⁴¹ In a letter to Marx written on June 22, 1869, Engels employed a derogatory older sexual vocabulary to discredit the emerging emancipatory efforts of men who love and desire other men. He observed that

the paederasts are beginning to count themselves and discover that they are a power in the state. Only power was lacking, but according to this source [Karl Heinrich Ulrichs's pro "Urning" pamphlets],

it apparently already exists in secret . . . *Guerre aux cons, paix aus trous-de-cul* [War on cunts, peace for arseholes⁴²] will now be the slogan. It is a piece of luck that we, personally, are too old to fear that when this party wins, we shall have to pay physical tribute to the victors. But the younger generation!⁴³

These words were prompted by Engels's encounter with the work of the lawyer and homosexual rights activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who in the lead-up to the unification of the German states was campaigning for adoption of an antidiscriminatory penal code in the new state.⁴⁴ Engels's expressed loathing for "paederasty" refuses to acknowledge Ulrichs's new terminology of "Urningism," which conceptualized love between men in affirmative terms, as a natural phenomenon with a long and positive cultural history. Anticipating the generic conventions of first-generation sexology, Engels turns to a foreign language—in this case French—to articulate what is otherwise unspeakable to him.⁴⁵ His outrage against the fact that "paederasts" are beginning to "count themselves" indicates the powerful sway of numbers, if not statistics, through which the emerging homosexual movement came to impact on the existing political landscape.

The unspeakability of homosexuality generally alerts us more specifically to the complicated place of both sexuality and suicide in defining a collective identity, even as the absence of studies of homosexual suicide raises questions about whose lives counted in the modern state. Katrina Jaworski has argued that "in relation to suicide, death is not power's limit, since norms, meanings and assumptions and the processes that are part of making sense of suicide will constitute knowledge before, during and after the act of taking one's life."⁴⁶ For Jaworski this realization is closely tied in to the difficult question of agency, which in her reading is overshadowed by the fact that "dead or alive, it may not be possible to be free of the operations of power."⁴⁷ With this in mind, Hirschfeld's attempt to draw statistical attention to homosexual suicide can be understood as a protest against the negation of homosexuality in life as well as death. It speaks to Judith Butler's concern with "the terms that govern reality," which allow or deny a sense of self.⁴⁸ Homosexual suicide statistics raise questions about the flip side of heteronormative political power: the negation of women and men whose sexuality discounts their existence socially and politically, with the effect that many of them felt that they had to end their life. Hirschfeld's collation of statistics on homosexual suicide, then, makes a real intervention in social matters. "Without doubt a large number of homosexuals feel prompted by their sexual particularity to voluntarily end their life," writes Hirschfeld in his magnum opus *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (The homosexuality of man and woman), which was published in 1914.⁴⁹ While

he claims that one of the reasons for suicide is the universal problematic of unrequited love, he also points out that homosexual suicides should not be seen as “voluntary” acts but as products of social rejection and legal persecution, caused by feelings of upset about homosexuality as well as by both active persecution and a pronounced fear of blackmail and scandal.⁵⁰

When Walter Benjamin looked back to the economic crises of 1840, he noted that it was during this time that “the idea of suicide became familiar to the working masses” who “despair(ed) of earning a living.”⁵¹ He observed that suicide gained a degree of cultural capital at the time, as indicated by the popular circulation of a lithograph depicting a suicidal unemployed English worker whose fate, according to Benjamin, provided inspiration to many others who, finding themselves in similarly hopeless financial straits, followed suit.⁵² Hirschfeld in turn suggested that homosexuality can similarly create feelings of hopelessness, emphasizing that “homosexuals don’t suffer because of their homosexuality, but because of the false judgement passed upon them by themselves and others.”⁵³ Hirschfeld thus argues that homosexual suicide is not the result of an inherent “defect” but that it is the product of the social pressures that attack and negate this “disqualified identity.”

Gendered Sexology

Hirschfeld’s intervention has its own, gendered, blind spots. While he ostensibly discussed both homosexual and lesbian suicide, his focus clearly lies on men who kill themselves. The only examples of women taking their lives appear in a section on unhappy love. Here he mentions the unsuccessful double suicide attempt of two young female factory workers whose relationship was threatened by the interference of their parents, and the successful suicide of two married women who shot each other, leaving a note asking, “please do not search for the reason behind this deed.”⁵⁴ Hirschfeld’s gendered evidence base indicates how closely the analysis of suicide remained tied in to conventional debates about sexuality and citizenship, debates that tended to marginalize women. Hirschfeld himself does not reflect on the fact that while lesbianism, unlike male homosexuality, was not criminalized, the social taboo of love between women and the pressures exercised on women to make them conform to heterosexual norms, created difficult living conditions for lesbians—to the extent that some women felt unable to continue their lives in this context. While Hirschfeld acknowledges the social factors of lesbian suicide, his focus on issues of unfulfilled love and tragic relationships does not address in any detail the gendered circumstance that doomed the lives of these women. Adrienne Rich has argued that “the destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory

for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sexuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal and pain.”⁵⁵ There is no evidence that Hirschfeld actively destroyed lesbian archives—and it is worth noting that he wrote about both female and male same-sex sexuality. Yet his relatively limited analysis and superficial treatment of lesbian suicide nevertheless illustrates what Rich has identified as the historical deprivation of lesbian “political existence through ‘inclusion’ as female versions of male homosexuality.”⁵⁶

Hirschfeld’s gender bias indicates the manifold ways in which women were pushed to the side lines of popular, professional, and political debates even by men such as Hirschfeld who supported the feminist movement. It also indicates that Hirschfeld heavily drew on personal experience in his work. When it comes to male homosexual suicide, Hirschfeld is explicit about his own personal involvement. Writing in 1914, he claims to have known personally over half of the one hundred homosexual suicides that had taken place in recent years. He explains that an analysis of the responses to his questionnaire, which was completed by around ten thousand homosexual women and men and their families, led him to estimate that around three in every one hundred “Urnings” successfully commit suicide. Of all the homosexuals alive, he claims, about a quarter attempt suicide while the remaining three-quarters have suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives.⁵⁷ In short, then, according to Hirschfeld’s findings homosexual existence is at least *felt* to be unlivable at some point. If this paints a grim picture, Hirschfeld also mentions that the figures are not necessarily accurate. He cites the work of a Dutch physician who had undertaken a similar survey and arrived at slightly lower numbers.⁵⁸ The figures are further compromised by the fact that they are based largely on accounts of visitors to the institute, many of whom had come to seek help in dealing with feelings of isolation, rejection, and despair. But the statistical accuracy of this data and the methodology that framed the investigation are not the main points of interest here. More significant is that Hirschfeld spoke publicly about the unlivability of queer existence (especially in relation to men); and that he did so at a time when homosexuality lacked rights, and, in the case of lesbianism—as Hirschfeld’s own work shows—recognition and visibility.

Words Attack Lives

It is, of course, important to note that not all homosexuals, female or male, in the early twentieth century killed themselves or even led lives that were full of suffering. Affirmative lesbian and gay histories have importantly recuperated evidence of happy and fulfilled lives in the past, not least to counter prevailing stereotypes of miserable, lonely homosexuality. While the politi-

cal—and often personal—importance of this affirmative scholarship cannot be overestimated, it is equally important to acknowledge that for some queer people unhappiness and suffering are the formative aspects of their lives. If it is ultimately impossible to explain why someone takes her or his life while someone else lives in circumstance that appear akin, we can nevertheless construct archives around negated identities that allow us to identify some of the terms that make these lives precarious. Thinking collectively about homosexual suicide makes graspable the force of heteronormative ideals and expectations.

Translations between languages are productive sites for investigating the very real and dangerous impact words can have on individual lives.⁵⁹ This is well illustrated by Hirschfeld's observations on the "consequences of persecution" (*Folgen der Verfolgung*), where he offsets German and English expressions against each other to critique the transmission of anti-homosexuality sentiments by the medical profession. He describes an encounter with an American patient who had told him that when he had asked his doctor back home in Philadelphia for advice about his homosexuality, the physician had responded that the man could only deal with his homosexuality in three possible ways: masturbation, voluntary commitment to a lunatic asylum, or suicide.⁶⁰ My choice of words for translating the three options offered to the man—masturbation, voluntary commitment to a lunatic asylum and suicide—provides a fairly literal rendering of Hirschfeld's German words, employing English terms that would have been in circulation in early twentieth-century North America.

However, the way Hirschfeld records the incident in the German text makes clear that issues of translation are crucial to the way he tells this story. He explains that the Philadelphian doctor had told his patient that there are only three options for the dealing with the man's homosexuality: "*Selbstbefriedigung* (use his right hand), *freiwilliger Aufenthalt in einer Irrenanstalt* (place himself in a madhouse) *oder Selbstmord* (or better commit suicide)."⁶¹ The passage includes the English expressions used by the Philadelphia-based physician. Set apart from Hirschfeld's own words by being reproduced in brackets, these English words tell their own story of the doctor's negative stance toward homosexuality. According to this information, the doctor had advised his patient to "use his right hand," employing a slang term for masturbation, which was a social taboo.⁶² Next, the patient was offered the option "to place himself in a madhouse," a choice of words that reinforces the derogatory tone of the doctor's advice as the clinical terminology of the "psychiatric hospital" had long since replaced the term "madhouse."⁶³ Most chillingly, the physician emphasized that the preferred cause of action for his homosexual patient would be to "*better* commit suicide." Hirschfeld does not translate the emphatic "better." However, his

decision to include the doctor's English words ensures that their devastating implications are not missed. From contextual evidence we know that Hirschfeld wrote for an educated audience that would have been able to read both German and English. By presenting alongside each other the original English words and their German translation, the sexological text here draws attention to the deadly climax of the Philadelphian doctor's words. Recording in parallel the German and English text, the passage undermines the professional objectivity of the Philadelphian doctor, alerting us to the complicity of certain medical discourses and certain doctors in perpetuating violence against homosexuals.

If the Philadelphian example constitutes a clear attack on homosexual life, the archive of suicide that can be found in Hirschfeld's writings is often difficult not simply because it contains evidence of such persecution, but because it shows that in a considerable number of successful suicides the social rejection that prompted them was imagined rather than real. Hirschfeld recounts, for example, the "unnecessary" suicide of a man from Baden in south Germany who had been arrested for homosexual conduct while on holiday in Berlin. The man hanged himself in his cell shortly after his arrest, without awaiting replies to the letters he had sent to Hirschfeld, his family, and the company that employed him, in which he notified them of his arrest. Hirschfeld notes that the bureaucratic process of sending the letters out of prison fatally delayed their receipt by five days, a time span that proved too long for the man who killed himself believing that "outside nobody wants to know him any longer."⁶⁴ Hirschfeld points out that this death is particularly tragic because the man's sense of rejection was unfounded: both his family and his employer immediately sent supportive replies, and the company further emphasized that the man could return to his post "even if he was found guilty."⁶⁵ In other words, while the man clearly suffered from legal persecution, the sense of isolation and social rejection that motivated his suicide was not borne out by the support expressed by his family and workplace.

By bringing together these tragic narratives and giving them a statistical frame, Hirschfeld's writings present individual suffering in collective terms. His work shows that homosexual persecution creates despair and shame that can make queer lives feel unlivable even if they are not overtly rejected. Hirschfeld mentions elsewhere that he often encountered on the bodies of his patients "scars left by suicide attempts" (*Suizidialnarben*).⁶⁶ The image of the scars indicates how the damage caused by social norms touched Hirschfeld's sexological practice in real terms, while his collection of data on homosexual suicide in turn helps to make visible the queer scar tissue that marks modern homosexuality.

Translation as a Vital Textual Politics

From our vantage point today, in an age of discursive explosions around difficult events and emotions, it is easy to forget that both extreme emotional experience and “everyday” suffering have not always been publicly speakable.⁶⁷ Hirschfeld’s archive of homosexual suicide serves as a poignant reminder that discursive realities have a real impact on whether or not lives are felt to be (un)livable. Gayatri Spivak, in her examination of translation as a tool for understanding the relationship between representation, the self, and the social, has argued that “language is not everything. It is only a vital *clue* to where the self loses its boundaries.”⁶⁸ However, for an investigation such as my own, which is concerned with the less tangible, emotional aspects of queer history, this linguistic body is often the only evidence we have of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that shaped identities and subjectivities in the past. In this chapter I have therefore shifted around the emphasis of Spivak’s words to argue that while language is indeed not everything, translation can provide vital insights into the way homosexual lives and discourses are connected across national boundaries.

By turning attention to the translations of (unlivable) lives in Hirschfeld’s work, this chapter has demonstrated that there are real links between popular discourses about sexuality and the lives of the women and men who inhabit the sexological archive. This examination is not about recuperating the *scientia sexualis* or about denying the damage caused by sexological norms and the devastating practices of doctors who tried to “cure” others of their unspeakable desires. Instead I have considered the translations in Hirschfeld’s work to address the difficult question of how we might understand emotional upset caused in relation to an identity—in this case homosexuality—that is discursively extremely restricted because of its lack of public legitimacy. My aim has been to pursue what I think of as a “vital textual politics,” a reading strategy inspired by Judith Butler’s concern with what she calls the “terms that govern reality.” In *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes about the importance of considering “how to create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or a suicidal life.”⁶⁹ Attention to translation in Hirschfeld’s suicide narratives helps to 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 “disqualified” them from living. These writings and their translations thus provide vital insights into the damaging terms that governed queer reality in the early twentieth century as they reveal the

powerful impact homosexual persecution and social rejection had on individual lives at the time.

NOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 38.
2. For excellent histories of violent queer histories, see Gail Mason, *The Spectacle of Violence: Homophobia, Gender and Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Günter Grau and Claudia Schoppmann, eds., *Hidden Holocaust: Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933–45* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Erwin J. Haeberle, “Swastika, Pink Triangle and Yellow Star: The Destruction of Sexology and the Persecution of Homosexuality in Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Sex Research* 17, no. 3 (1981): 270–287; Dagmar Herzog, ed., *Sexuality and German Fascism* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2005); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Lucy Bland and Laura Doan, eds., *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).
3. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.
4. See, for instance, Elena Mancini, *Magnus Hirschfeld and the Quest for Sexual Freedom* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008); Charlotte Wolff, *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology* (London: Quartet, 1986).
5. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.
6. See Love, *Feeling Backward*; Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*. Judith Halberstam’s more recent *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) challenges the alignment of failure with miserableness.
7. As examples of the range of this scholarship, see, for instance, Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
8. Magnus Hirschfeld, “Autobiographical Sketch,” in *Encyclopedia Sexualis: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia-Dictionary of Sexual Sciences*, ed. Victor Robinson (New York: Dingwall-Rock, 1936), 318.
9. Magnus Hirschfeld, “Die Gründung des WhK und seine ersten Mitglieder,” reprinted in *Magnus Hirschfeld, Von Einst bis Jetzt: Geschichte einer homosexuellen Bewegung 1897–1922*, ed. James Steakley (Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1986), 48.
10. For an innovative rethinking of the disciplining of criminality and sexuality, see Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

11. See Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, ed. George Simpson, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1979 [1897]), 326–360; Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Ron Brown, *Art of Suicide* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 146–193; Barbara Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987); Howard Kushner, *American Suicide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kevin Grauke, “‘I Cannot Bear to Be Hurted Anymore’: Suicide as Dialectical Ideological Sin in Nineteenth-Century American Realism,” in *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century US Writing and Culture*, ed. Lucy Frank (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 77–88; Helmut Thome, “Violent Crime (and Suicide) in Imperial Germany, 1883–1902,” *International Criminal Justice Review* 20, no. 1 (2010): 5–34; Thomas Joiner, *Myths about Suicide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

12. A good overview of English suicide laws and their Christian underpinnings can be found in Norman St. John-Stevas, *Life, Death and the Law: Law and Christian Morals in England and the United States* (Washington, DC: Beard Books, 2002 [1961]), 233–241.

13. Henry Romilly Fedden, *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study* (London: Davies, 1938), 247–248.

14. “gegen die an sich nicht das mindeste einzuwenden war.” Hirschfeld, “Die Gründung des WhK,” 48.

15. “was mir fast that Herz abdrücken wollte.” Ibid.

16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra? Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (Chemnitz, Germany: Schmeitzner, 1883).

17. Ibid., 109.

18. “der mindestens theoretisch volles Verständnis für die homosexuelle Liebe besaß.” Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes*, Nachdruck der Erstauflage von 1914 mit einer kommentierten Einleitung von E. J. Haeberle (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), 421.

19. “Der Gedanke, daß sie dazu beitragen könnten, daß auch das deutsche Vaterland über uns gerechter denkt, verschönt meine Sterbestunde.” Ibid.

20. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “conjunctive.”

21. Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 7.

22. Reiner Herrm, in conversation with me at the Dartmouth Humanities Institute 2013, has said that this particular suicide is an invention, a rhetorical means by which Hirschfeld justifies his sexology. If this view may seem supported by the fact that Hirschfeld published his first study under a pseudonym, it is difficult to establish the facts of the matter. More interesting to me is precisely the fact that Hirschfeld presents the tragic subject of homosexual suicide central to the justification for his sexological reform project.

23. Sigmund Freud to C. G. Jung, February 25, 1908. Reprinted in *The Freud-Jung Letters: The Correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung*, ed. William McGuire, trans. Ralph Mannheim and R. F. C. Hull (London: Hogarth, 1974), 125–127.

24. Hirschfeld, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 319.

25. Yvonne Ivory, "The Urning and His Own: Individualism and the Fin-de-Siècle Invert," *German Studies Review* 26, no. 2 (2003): 333–352 (esp. 338); James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1975).

26. Cathy Caruth, preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), vii.

27. Hirschfeld, "Autobiographical Sketch," 317–321.

28. "unmittelbar nach seiner Hochzeit." Hirschfeld, "Die Gründung des WhK," 48. My emphasis.

29. Peter Cryle, in an extensive survey of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French literature, has shown that male anxieties about the wedding night are deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination. Peter Cryle, *The Telling of the Act: Sexuality as Narrative in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Associated University Press, 2001).

30. Hirschfeld, "Autobiographical Sketch," 318.

31. "The first cry of pain through the primitive jungle was the first call for a physician," begins Victor Robinson's *The Story of Medicine* (New York: New Home Library, 1943), 1.

32. Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncracies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 24–25.

33. Ibid.

34. See, for example, Janice M. Irvine's excellent dissection of the issues at stake in *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Jennifer Terry, "Lesbians under the Medical Gaze: Scientists Search for Remarkable Differences," *Journal of Sex Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 317–339; Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

35. Hirschfeld, "Die Gründung des WhK," 49.

36. Thank you to Reiner Herrn for bringing this to my attention.

37. See Émile Durkheim, *Le Suicide* (Paris: n.p., 1897).

38. Ian Marsh, *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77–192; Robert D. Goldney, Johann A. Schioldann, and Kirsten I. Dunn, "Suicide before Durkheim," *Health and History* 10, no. 2 (2008): 73–93.

39. Karl Marx, "Peuchet on Suicide," in *Marx on Suicide*, ed. and trans. Eric A. Plaut, Gabrielle Edgcomb, and Kevin Anderson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 51.

40. Durkheim uses the expression "the act whose author is also the sufferer" in his *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, 42.

41. Hubert Kennedy traces their anti-homosexuality stance in "Johann Baptist von Schweitzer: The Queer Marx Loved to Hate," *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, no. 2–3 (1995): 69–96.

42. The English and French translations are available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/volume43/index.htm>. The translation captures the older connotations of the term "cons," which is derived from the Latin *cunnus* and was used in de Sade's work with the sense and the force of "cunt." Its strength was eroded in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as it came to be used as a common disparaging expression for stupid people. I am grateful to Peter Cryle for explaining this linguistic change to me.

43. Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, June 22, 1869, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, 43:295, available in English at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/volume43/index.htm>.

44. See Heike Bauer, *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion, 1860–1930* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 23–29.

45. Early sexologists such as, famously, Richard von Krafft-Ebing in the twelve editions of his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published between 1886 and 1902, turned to Latin when describing the details of “abnormal” and “unnatural” sexual practices.

46. Katrina Jaworski, “The Author, Agency and Suicide,” *Social Identities* 14, no. 4 (2010): 677.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 31.

49. “Daß eine große Anzahl Homosexueller sich im Zusammenhange mit ihrer geschlechtlichen Eigenart veranlaßt sieht, ihrem Leben ein freiwilliges Ende zu bereiten, steht außer Zweifel.” Hirschfeld, *Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes*, 902.

50. *Ibid.*, 905.

51. Cited in Kevin Anderson, “Marx on Suicide in the Context of His Other Writings on Alienation and Gender,” in Plaut, Edgcomb, and Anderson, *Marx on Suicide*, 7.

52. *Ibid.*

53. “Die Homosexuellen leiden nicht an der Homosexualität, sondern an ihrer unrichtigen Beurteilung durch sich und andere.” Hirschfeld, “Die Gründung des WhK,” 49.

54. “Bitte, nach den Motiven unserer Tat nicht zu forschen.” Hirschfeld, *Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes*, 914.

55. Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 649.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Hirschfeld, *Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes*, 902.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, 899.

60. I discuss the episode more fully in “Staging Un/Translatability: Magnus Hirschfeld Encounters Philadelphia,” in *Un/Translatables*, ed. Catriona McLeod (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).

61. “Der Arzt, den er in Philadelphia seiner homosexuellen Leiden halber um Rat gefragt habe, ihm geantwortet hätte: ‘es gäbe für ihn nur drei Möglichkeiten: Selbstbefriedigung (use his right hand), freiwilliger Aufenthalt in einer Irrenanstalt (place himself in a madhouse) oder Selbstmord (or better commit suicide).’” Hirschfeld, *Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes*, 899.

62. Paula Bennett and Vernon Rosario, eds., *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary and Artistic Discourses of Autoeroticism* (New York, Routledge, 1995), 1–19. See also Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003).

63. Andrew Scull, *Social Order / Mental Disorder: Anglo-American Psychiatry in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 96–118.

64. “draußen niemand mehr etwas von ihm wissen wollte.” Hirschfeld, *Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes*, 906.

65. “selbst im Falle seiner Verurteilung.” *Ibid.*

66. Ibid., 903.
67. Ann E. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Loss and Terror in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 2.
68. Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 179–200.
69. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 219.