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Lines that Reduce Biography, Palms, Borders

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ABSTRACT: Through various cases and instances, this essay opens with the question of biography and the demands of its form: that is, biography's attempt to reduce historical totalities to the page in moments of sudden condensation. It then introduces the figure of Charlotte Wolff (1897–1986), a doctor and later hand reader and sexologist, who appears on a diagram, constructed by Walter Benjamin in 1932, to map his life through his 'Urbekanntschaften' (primal acquaintances). It then seeks to transpose Benjamin's diagram into other linear forms, such as a family tree, a diagram of chemical affinity, and an astral chart, to add one: the diagram as a map of the hand. This opens up a number of temporal, historical, and epistemic reductions, or cases of reduction, in Wolff's work and beyond. It concludes with a particular moment in Wolff's biography — her arrest in 1933 and her escape to Paris — as a final instance of the line, as border.

KEYWORDS: Lines; Wolff, Charlotte; Benjamin, Walter; Palmistry; Borders; Boundaries; Reduction; Reductionism; Biography

Lines that Reduce

Biography, Palms, Borders

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PART ONE: BIOGRAPHY AS REDUCTION

Or, reduction as condensation,
reification, containment, truncation,
abbreviation, accumulation.¹

The cover of Bronez Purnell's semi-autobiographical *100 Boyfriends* (2021) features a hand on its cover, etched on a dark background. Symbols for waves, like those on a weather map, appear outside the hand's outer reach, transforming it into a land mass: its fingers into peninsulas or jetties, its crease lines into roads or district boundaries. Gold objects and numbers are scattered in the spaces on the hand, to

* This essay traverses a number of canons and permits some anachronisms in the spirit of the conversations that have taken place between staff and fellows at the ICI Berlin over the time of this core project.

1 These interludes are drawn from a shared document assembled in June 2020 by the ICI Fellows and Staff around the motif of 'reduction as X'.

evoke something of the contents of the novel: a heart, a safety pin, a bottle of poppers, a pentagram star, an outline of the Golden Gate Bridge. I wrote to Purnell to ask him about the cover and he replied that the designer Na Kim ‘obvs knew I was a witchy Lady.’²

Towards the end of the novel, after a hookup, Purnell writes:

I put my clothes on and walked out the door and turned to see him standing in the doorway waving at me. I looked at him and saw the same thing I saw when I looked at my right hand: a lifeline, running strong and clear through the center.³

Known as the ‘lower transverse line’ in palmistry, the lifeline curves around from the upper base of the thumb, down towards the wrist, and relates to health, constitution, and longevity. On the hand, the lifeline is something to be traced, examined, or glanced over. On the cover of *100 Boyfriends*, it is part of the city, something to be traversed, navigated, or passed over.

Robert Glück’s 1994 novel *Margery Kempe* interweaves four lives split between a number of centuries. Partly set in San Francisco (one of the settings for Purnell’s novel), Glück’s own life during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and his love and encounters with L. are interwoven with the life and work of the fifteenth-century mystic Margery Kempe, who recorded what is thought to be the first autobiography in English, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1501). Glück concludes his novel with the lines:

A failed saint turns to autobiography.

Then:

I want to contain my rambling story in a few words.
*exult, exasperate, abandon, amaze*⁴

Authorship in Glück’s *Margery Kempe* is forever slipping. The ‘my’ of ‘my rambling story’ that demands containment in four words, could

2 Personal correspondence from January 2022.

3 Bronez Purnell, *100 Boyfriends* (New York: MCD x FSG Originals, 2021), p. 115. Thank you to Ben Nichols for pointing me to this book.

4 Robert Glück, *Margery Kempe* [1994] (New York: NYRB Classics, 2020), p. 162.

be Glück's or Kempe's along with their many companions and interlocutors. For authorship, as something that might denote singularity, separation, or autonomy, had already slipped in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, or had not yet formed as a subjective or artistic possibility.⁵ The book might be named as the first autobiography but it also defines the impossibility of that form. In the introductory poem, Kempe writes:

Thys boke is not wretyn in ordyr, every thyng aftyr other as it wer don, but lych as the mater cam to the creatur *in mend* whan it schuld be wretyn, for it was so long er it was wretyn that sche had forgetyn the tyme and the ordyr whan thyngs befellyn.⁶

This is rendered by Anthony Bale, Kempe's most recent translator, as:

This book is not written in order, each thing after another as it was done, but just as the story came to the creature *in her mind* when it was to be written down, for it was so long before it was written that she had forgotten the timing and the order of when things happened. Therefore she wrote nothing other than that which she knew full well to be the whole truth.⁷

This *creature in her mind* is a possession, given the text, according to Bale, is constructed of visions that are divinely ordained, and ultimately authored by God, from Kempe's perspective.⁸ The creature is a divine possession or occupation of Kempe's mind or else a displaced or estranged form of it, crouched before and possessed by a larger totality: the divine.⁹ For Carolyn Dinshaw, there is another degree of

5 Walter Benjamin claims the novel to be the moment when authorship congeals in the bourgeois age. In *One Way Street* [1928], trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael Jennings and others, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004–06), 1 (2004), pp. 444–88 (p. 444), he writes of the 'archaic stillness' of the book and the 'pretentious universal gestures' it carries. The novel isolates not just the writer but the reader, creating not just a reader but a sitter, in a library, in an armchair, in silence, not to be disturbed.

6 Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* [1501], ed. by Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), p. 49. Emphasis mine.

7 Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* [1501], ed. and trans. by Anthony Bale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6. Emphasis mine.

8 *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

9 A parallel with this understanding of the creature can be drawn with Benjamin and Kafka. See Carlo Salzani's 'Kafka's Creaturely Life', in *Kafka: Organisation, Recht, und Schrift*, ed. by Marianne Schuller and Günther Ortman (Weilerswist Metternich: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2019), pp. 396–407.

possession: Kempe is a creature not just in another time but a creature 'with another time *in her*'.¹⁰

In addition to this divine mode of possession, of creatureliness, *The Book of Margery Kempe* has other figures written within or between its lines. Kempe had scribes and 'listeners', who, according to Bale, would transcribe Kempe's dictation. The first of these figures was an acquaintance, possibly her son, who had lived in Germany, who died before they could complete the work. A priest then looked at the manuscript but found it 'ill-written' and incomprehensible. As the 'Proem', or introduction states:

When the priest first began to write this book his eyesight failed so much that he could not see to form his letters, and he could not see to mend his pen. He was able to see all other things well enough. He set a pair of spectacles on his nose but then it was much worse than it was before. He complained to the creature about his illness. She said that his enemy envied his good deed and would hinder him if he could, and she urged him to do as well as God would give him grace and to not leave off. When the priest came back to this book, he could see as well (he thought) as he ever had before, both by daylight and by candlelight.¹¹

Though the priest had stalled for four years and eventually told Kempe to seek other help from another person, who became the third person in the equation, the priest prayed for assistance, and found the text easier to comprehend as a result. This returns the question of possession to the divine: for prayer delivers coherence or permission that transform the priest's vision and cognition. It gives, according to Bale, the book a 'godly seal of approval', suggesting a divine, as much as a human, authorship.¹²

Biography forever holds onto this tension: how to write an account of a life when that life is forever displaced, estranged, and multiple, when it can easily not be written, or even comprehended, when authorship is forever murky. The 'my' of 'my rambling story' is a possessive

10 Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Temporalities', in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. by Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 107–23 (p. 108). Dinshaw extends her reading to an argument about queerness, historical method, anachronism, and temporality in relation to Margery Kempe. Thank you to Virgil B/G Taylor for alerting me to this piece.

11 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. and trans. by Bale, p. 6.

12 *Ibid.*, p. xix.

pronoun that is already multiple: it could be Glück, Kempe, Kempe's first helper (perhaps her son), the priest, Kempe's second helper, the creature inside her head, God, Glück's lover, or the son of God. And this cast of characters is redacted, or condensed, into a single possessive pronoun: the 'my' of 'my rambling story'.

Glück's account too is reduced to a 'few' words: '*exult, exasperate, abandon, amaze*'. The omission of a final punctuation mark at the novel's close leaves open that which was interwoven, accumulating, rambling. The finite form of the book, the demand to contain its writing between a front and a back cover, forces this moment of condensation or containment. Just as the priest gets up, unable to process the work in front of him, so too Glück might have done the same, without even leaving a punctuation mark.

The demand of containment is made in and of film as much as in relation to the book. In *The White Dress* (2018), Nathalie Léger recounts a story in which her mother evokes an exercise developed by the director Claire Simon, when she works with students: to tell an entire story contained in one minute, like the film made by the Lumière brothers at the factory gates in 1895. Léger follows this reference with a number of questions:

Where are you going to position yourself to look, what story are you going to tell, how are you going to tell it? One minute for the battle of Bordino, one minute for the closing of the Dubigeon shipyard in Nantes, one minute for a woman's life. I ask her [Léger's mother] what she would say, in one minute, how she would tell her story, her life, in what place, along what axis, beginning with what image?¹³

Can the act of biography, or autobiography, ever escape the tension between that which is rambling and that which is truncated, between four words, one minute, or a duration exact to the length of life itself? As Dilip Menon put it, how to write about everything when the act of writing is also an act of reduction?¹⁴ How to address totality when our tools are always sabotaging that address? Can the category of biography be held on to, and if so, what is the point, if not to enact its failure?

13 Nathalie Léger, *The White Dress* [2018], trans. by Natasha Lehrner (New York: Dorothy, 2020), pp. 21–22. Thank you to Andrew Witt for pointing me towards this reference.

14 This was something said by Dilip Menon in our seminar in early 2022.



I first encountered the name ‘Lotte Wolff’ in the apparatus to Walter Benjamin’s autobiographical work ‘Berlin Chronicle’ (1932), an attempt he made, of many, to condense an account of his life. He begins the text: ‘I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life [Raum des Lebens] — *bios* — graphically on a map [Karte].’¹⁵ This impulse first plays out figuratively: he channels a number of memories of the city and recalls a number of guides who widened its experience. About half way through the manuscript the mapping becomes more literal. He recalls a moment, a number of years prior, sitting at the *Café des Deux Magots* in *Saint-Germain-des-Prés*:

Suddenly, and with compelling force, I was struck by the idea of drawing a diagram of my life [graphisches Schema meines Lebens].¹⁶

And he adds:

With a very simple question I interrogated my past life, and the answers were inscribed, as if of their own accord, on a sheet of paper that I had with me.¹⁷

Benjamin goes on to lose this sheet of paper and with it the diagram. ‘I was inconsolable [untröstlich]. I have never since been able to restore it as it arose before me then.’ He tries to reproduce it, within the translucent pages of the *Pergamentheft*, the parchment notebook.¹⁸ This reconstructed map, the one that survives, is made of forty-eight names, connected to each other by lines, dashes, and splodges.

Benjamin describes those named on the diagram as his ‘*Urbe-kanntschaften*’ (primal acquaintances): people he met not *through*

15 Walter Benjamin, ‘Berlin Chronicle’ [1932], trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael Jennings and others, II.2 (2005), pp. 595–637 (p. 596); ‘Berliner Chronik’, in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, 21 vols (2008–), XI.1: *Berliner Chronik / Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner and Nadine Werner (2019), pp. 7–102 (p. 10).

16 Benjamin, ‘Berlin Chronicle’, p. 614; ‘Berliner Chronik’, p. 41.

17 Ibid.

18 For more on this notebook see: Ursula Marx and Erdmut Wizisla, ‘Zarteste Quartiere: Walter Benjamins Notizbücher. Mit einem Blick in das Jerusalemer “Pergamentheft”’, *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies*, 6.1 (2019), pp. 147–69.

others, but in their own right, by chance encounter or circumstance: 'through neighbourhood, family relationships, school comradeship, mistaken identity, companionship on travels, or other such hardly numerous-situations.'¹⁹ The account of the diagram breaks off with its retelling. He gets distracted, turns to a recollection of a story of a number of rings bought and exchanged by a number of figures on the diagram prior to the First World War, that also breaks off, again, without punctuation: 'To your finger constantly encircled.'²⁰ To write a life is to also get distracted, overwhelmed, derailed.

'Lotte Wolff' is a name that extends to 'Charlotte Wolff' and Charlotte Wolff was an early friend of Benjamin's — first, she was a doctor of reproductive medicine and electro-therapies in Berlin, later a hand reader and writer in Paris, and later still a sexologist and psychiatrist in London.²¹ Wolff sits on Benjamin's reconstructed diagram between the radio producer and composer Ernst Schoen and the fashion journalist Helen Grund (whose hand Wolff read).

Alongside work on hands and sexuality,²² Wolff wrote a number of works related to the narration of life: *On the Way to Myself: Communications to a Friend* (1969) and *Hindsight: An Autobiography* (1980).²³ She produced a *Lebenslauf* (literally a curriculum vitae, or 'life-course') in 1957 in her attempt to gain compensation from the post-war German state for what happened to her at the start of the previous German state.²⁴ She was also a biographer. In 1986, the year of her death, she published a vast work *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology* in English.²⁵

19 Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', p. 614; 'Berliner Chronik', p. 42.

20 Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', p. 616; 'Deinem Finger, dem sie sich vertraut', in 'Berliner Chronik', p. 45.

21 See Charlotte Wolff, *Hindsight: An Autobiography* (London: Quartet Books, 1980), p. 69.

22 On sexuality/gender: Charlotte Wolff, *Bisexuality: A Study* (London: Quartet Books, 1977); *Love Between Women* (London: Duckworth, 1971). On hands: *Studies in Hand-reading* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936); *The Hand in Psychological Diagnosis* (London: Methuen, 1951); *The Human Hand* (London: Methuen, 1942).

23 See Charlotte Wolff, *On the Way to Myself: Communications to a Friend* (London: Methuen, 1969), and *Hindsight*.

24 See Wolff's compensation file in the office of the Entschädigungsamt Berlin: 341.655.

25 Charlotte Wolff, *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology* (London: Quartet Books, 1986).

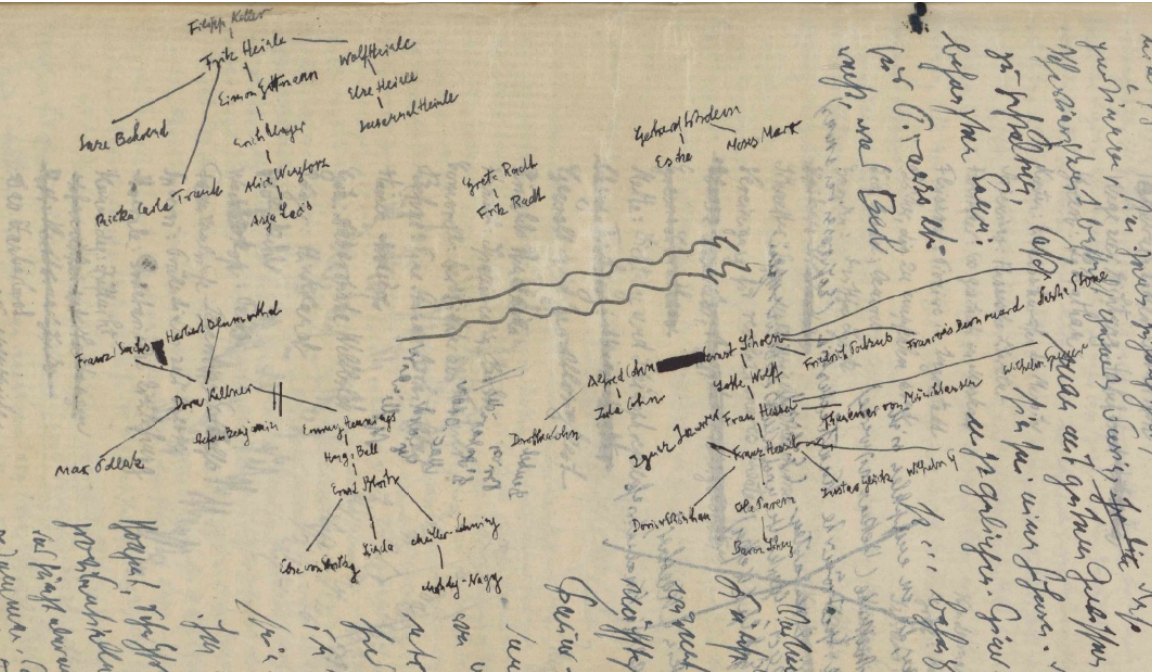


Figure 1. Walter Benjamin, Parchment Notebook (*Pergamentheft*): National Library of Israel, ARC. 4, 1598/75 (detail).

When I eventually got hold of the manuscript of Benjamin's diagram rather than its transcription,²⁶ I was able to better think through the diagram as a form, and the lines in particular: their shapes and sizes, textures and speeds. I was able to better think of it as a 'form' that could carry over into other 'forms' — in line with the Latinate root of 'reducere', to bring something back to something else.²⁷

26 The transcribed forms exist currently in three places, though all with errors: Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik / Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, xi.1, pp. 390–91; Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 'Anmerkungen der Herausgeber', in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–91), vi (1991), pp. 623–828 (p. 804); Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 43.

27 I take this notion from the ICI's original statement on the topic of reduction: ICI Focus, *Reduction, 2020–22* <<https://www.ici-berlin.org/projects/reduction-2020-22>> [accessed 1 March 2022].

Benjamin identifies a number of associations within the text around the diagram, as metaphors and analogies that also slip and transform. 'First', he writes, 'I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff's map [Generalstabskarte] of a city centre, if such a thing existed.'²⁸ The personal names slip into place names, to be navigated, constellated, traversed. The lines become lines of encounter, routing, and diversion. Benjamin then calls it a series of 'family trees' (Stammbäumen), where the lines between their names become lines of ascent or descent, branch and stem, within an ontogenetic or phylogenetic schema.²⁹ But the sentence goes on: He says it no longer resembles 'a series of family trees' but, in its reconstructed form, he writes that he 'would instead speak of a labyrinth [Labyrinth]'.³⁰ He adds: 'I am concerned here not with what is installed in the chamber at its enigmatic centre, ego or fate, but all the more with the many entrances leading into the interior.'³¹

Other forms of association can easily be found or formed. For instance, Benjamin's diagram can be transposed into a table of elective or chemical affinities, following the schema of Torbern Olof Bergman's dissertation from 1775, which became the basis for Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) (1809), about which Benjamin wrote an essay, where people are drawn to or repelled from each other as much as substances are.³² In the novel this is between Eduard, Charlotte, the Captain, and Otilie, and Benjamin had his own love triangles as much as squares on the diagram.³³

28 Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', p. 596; 'Berliner Chronik', p. 10.

29 Ibid., p. 614; p. 42.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Torbern Olof Bergman, *A Dissertation on Elective Attractions* [Disquisitio de Attractionibus Electivis, 1775] (London: Routledge, 2014); Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities* [1809], trans. by David Constantine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' [1924–25], trans. by Stanley Corngold, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings and others, 1, pp. 297–360. Bergman's text was first published in English in 1785 after being translated from the original Latin in 1785 by Thomas Beddoes. It is possible that Goethe read the *Dissertation* in the original Latin, but also from Heinrich Tabor's German translation, which appeared in the same year as the English, in 1785.

33 For an account of this see Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 117–76.

One might also add a maps of the stars — constellations abound, as they do throughout Benjamin's writings on astrology, but in his 'epistemological' frameworks too: 'Ideas are to objects as constellations to stars', he writes in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to his book on German mourning plays, or *Trauerspiel*.³⁴ In the constellation, for Benjamin, truth arises not from its reduction to the single and isolated thing, but through a whole mediated by an image that might appear suddenly, in a flash, that also transforms.³⁵

One could add another form: the diagram as a piece of radio infrastructure; a network, or circuit, perhaps familiar to Ernst Schoen, Wolff's neighbour on the diagram, with wires, switches, resistors, all occupying the space between the names.³⁶ And perhaps there's a further transposition of the diagram that can be developed *via* Wolff: the diagram as a handprint. My question here: what would happen if a palm reader read the diagram in a naive manner, if they were to mistake it for a hand? If the etymology of 'biography' points to a writing (-*graphia*) of life (*bios*), then can the hand (if not the body) be understood as such a record or ledger of accrued experience? Can the hand reader therefore be granted, even if too literally, the category of a biographer?

Within the account of the diagram, Benjamin posed questions in relation to fate and character that are also of interest to the palmist:

Whether cross-connections are finally established between these systems also depends on the intertwinements of our path through life [Verflechtungen unseres Lebenslaufes]. More important, however, are the astonishing insights that a study of this plan [the diagram] provides into the differences among individual lives.³⁷

Then a number of questions follow:

What part is played in the primal acquaintanceships [Urbe-
kantschaften] of different people's lives by profession and

34 See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 10.

35 See Andrea Krauß, 'Constellations: A Brief Introduction', *MLN*, 126.3 (2011), pp. 439–45.

36 These claims are explored further in Sam Dolbear and Esther Leslie, *Dissonant Waves: Ernst Schoen and Experimental Sound in the Twentieth Century* (London: Goldsmiths Press, forthcoming 2023).

37 Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', p. 615; 'Berliner Chronik', p. 42.

school, family and travel? And above all: Is the formation of the many offshoots governed in individual existence by hidden laws? Which ones start early in life, and which ones start late? Which are continued to the end of life, and which peter out? 'If a man has character,' says Nietzsche, 'he will have the same experience over and over again.'³⁸

This Nietzsche quote appears in Benjamin's essay 'Fate and Character' (published in 1921): "If a man has character, he has an experience [Erlebnis] that constantly recurs." This means: if a man has character, his fate is essentially constant.³⁹ The movement is circular: if one has fate, one has character; if one has character, one has fate. One's chance encounters at certain moments in one's life, in the formation of 'primal acquaintances', establish hidden laws that mark out certain passages, or paths of experience. The diagram, then, like the palm, is a mapping of those paths, those laws that direct and define the course of one's life.

Through a process of determination and overdetermination, I will build a number of instances of reduction in relation to lines *via* Wolff's *Studies in Hand-reading* (1936) and *The Human Hand* (1942).

The first mode of reduction can be called *internal reduction*, in which the constitution of the body or the psyche is visible and/or interpretable on the hand. Cheiro's *Palmistry for All*, a classic instruction manual from 1916, claims that the hand, through nerves, is in direct contact with the brain.⁴⁰ The publisher's preface to *The Human Hand* quotes Wolff on a similar point: "The hand is a visible part of the brain."⁴¹ This leads to the second form of reduction, a *diagnostic reduction*. In *Studies in Hand-reading*, Wolff traces particular lines on the hand to diagnose various conditions, constitutions, and dispositions of the body and psyche. For example, the director of a large fashion house has a number of 'lines of influence' springing from the Heart Line to indicate 'a passionate nature.'⁴² This method of *diagnostic reduction* of the entire body (or person) congeals into a judgement or

38 Ibid.

39 Walter Benjamin, 'Fate and Character' [1919/1921], trans. by Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael Jennings and others, 1 (2004), pp. 201–06 (p. 202).

40 Cheiro, *Palmistry for All* [1916] (London: Corgi Book, 1975), p. 15.

41 Wolff, *The Human Hand*, p. xii.

42 Examples could be more numerous throughout *Studies in Hand-reading*, but this case is listed on pp. 21–22.

name or label. For example, some of the cases in Wolff's book are listed not by profession, initials, or personal name, but via a physiological characteristic: one case she names simply as 'Lack of Head Line'.⁴³

In later work, particularly her book *A Psychology of Gesture* (1945), some of Wolff's techniques enter a more acute setting: psychiatric hospitals on the outskirts of London, which she visited for a number of years, observing patients as they ate and interacted with each other. She reduces a whole set of behaviours to a term. For example, she identifies two hysterics and two people with 'persecution mania' (another term for acute paranoia) just from observing their gestures whilst they eat.⁴⁴ For Wolff this is another case of *internal reduction*, given that it is an example of the visible condition of an interior state, as if there was an internal state untouched by the outside, untouched by history. Benjamin outlines these dialectical movements in 'Fate and Character' where 'the external world [...] can also in principle be reduced [zurückgeführt], to any desired degree, to his inner world, and his inner world similarly to his outer world'.⁴⁵

Opposed to this revelation of interior moments is an *external reduction*, the third mode, whereby the hand can be read as a displaced or transposed map of something outside: a longer totality, whether it be the world and/or the cosmos. On the hand of the fashion journalist Helen Grund, for example, Wolff identifies a prominent Ring of Saturn, a line that loops below the middle finger, which indicates a tendency to depression.⁴⁶ In this judgement a whole history collapses: the history of Saturn within a history of those born under its influence, tied to it a whole temperament and disposition.⁴⁷ Other such examples appear throughout Wolff's *Studies*.

43 Ibid., p. 145.

44 Charlotte Wolff, *A Psychology of Gesture* (London: Methuen, 1945), pp. 162–63. This method also culminates in Wolff's book, *The Hand in Psychological Diagnosis*.

45 Benjamin, 'Fate and Character', p. 202. Note that Benjamin is referring at this point in the essay to the 'active man', which has been translated from both 'handelnde Mensch' and 'wirkenden Menschen'. See Walter Benjamin, 'Schicksal und Charakter', in Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II (1977), pp. 171–79 (p. 173).

46 Wolff, *Studies in Hand-reading*, p. 68.

47 See Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

A temporal reduction follows from here, the fourth instance: *the reduction of the future in the form of lines of fate or destiny*. If you are the poet Paul Éluard, according to Wolff, your Line of Fate is cut by four clear Lines of Influence at very specific ages: fifteen, twenty-four, twenty-eight, and thirty-four, which indicate significant shifts in character and circumstance in those years.⁴⁸ Those shifts transform your future, your destiny. Other people, according to Wolff and the manuals of hand reading, don't have much fate, and so they are less subject to its governance or power. This is something Benjamin addresses in 'Fate and Character' in proximity to the Nietzsche quotation also found in 'Berlin Chronicle': 'If a man has character, his fate is essentially constant. Admittedly, it also means: he has no fate — a conclusion drawn by the Stoics.'⁴⁹

Another form of temporal reduction, the fifth, is past oriented: where past movement or a past event congeals as something legible on the body or hand. In *The Human Hand* (1942), Wolff claims that during the First World War, doctors developed a technique to date war trauma from the position and placement of certain marks on nails. Named after the French physician Joseph Honoré Simon Beau (1806–65), these marks, named 'beau lines', are said to appear at the root of the nail at the moment of trauma and, given the nail takes a specific amount of time to grow out (one hundred and sixty days), a physician could date, or measure the time of a trauma, by the position of the line on the nail.⁵⁰

Graphology — the study of handwriting, a concurrent fascination of the period (about which Benjamin also wrote) — is a significant parallel here, in that it saw past movement crystallized on the page in the form of lines. As such, to read handwriting is to read gestures frozen or transformed on the page.⁵¹ The same could be said of the 'wrinkle' on the body, a particular form of the line that has its own interpretive history.⁵²

48 Wolff, *Studies in Hand-reading*, p. 71. Fate, it should be said, is here not taken in the Benjaminian sense that relates more guilt, debt, and law.

49 Benjamin, 'Fate and Character', p. 202.

50 Wolff, *The Human Hand*, p. 82.

51 See Wolff, *A Psychology of Gesture*, p. 5. See also Eric Downing, 'Divining Benjamin: Reading Fate, Graphology, Gambling', *MLN*, 126.3 (2011), pp. 561–80.

52 See Sam Dolbear, 'Reading Wrinkles', 19 May 2021 <<https://raeblodmas.substack.com/p/reading-wrinkles>> [accessed 1 March 2022].

One might add a *hereditary reduction*, as a kind of temporal reduction, which holds that certain lines on the hand are inherited or even fixed at birth. Julius Spier, whom Wolff studied with in Berlin prior to developing her own hand-reading methodology,⁵³ held that the right hand is the ancestral hand, inherited and fixed on the hand of the child, whereas the left hand is transformed and marked over time.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Wolff says that the left hand resembles the hand of the mother, the right corresponds to the hand of the father.⁵⁵

Wolff carries over some notions of heredity into *Studies* when she discusses the hand of the composer Armande de Polignac:

Her tendency to suffer from nervous disorders is the natural accompaniment of the astonishing intensity of her emotions and the extent of her intellectual range. It is probable that heredity plays some part in this last named characteristic, for on her mother's side Armande de Polignac is descended from the Goethe family. Her talents as a philosopher and a musician are bound up with a deep feeling of unrest and of dissatisfaction with reality, which inspires her efforts to create another and symbolic world.⁵⁶

This nervous disposition is evidenced through the way in which the heart line comes to an end between the fingers of Jupiter and Saturn.

The final reduction might be called an *identitarian reduction*, whereby the so-called 'complexity' and uniqueness of the hand and its print is used as a signature *of* the body or the person. For instance, one might think of the example of the fashion director and designer Madeleine Vionnet, who stamped her garments with a print of her finger to stop the counterfeiting of her wares.⁵⁷ Only her fingerprint

53 Wolff writes: 'I was inspired to continue my studies in hand-reading not only by the discoveries which had been made in the field of graphology, but also by the psycho-analytical works of Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung. I tried to apply to hand reading the newly found knowledge of the unconscious with the light it threw on dreams, imagination and art. I found an excellent teacher in Julius Spier, and later on, when I began to study the French literature on the subject, I discovered that M. Mangin-Balchazar had made several important attempts to apply modern knowledge of psychology to chiromancy' (*Studies in Hand-reading*, p. 6).

54 See Wolff, *The Human Hand*, p. 24. Also Julius Spier, *The Hands Of Children: An Introduction to Psycho-Chiromancy* [1955] (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 48.

55 See Wolff, *The Human Hand*, p. 24.

56 Wolff, *Studies in Hand-reading*, pp. 105-06.

57 See Dolbear, 'Reading Wrinkles.'

was her fingerprint. The palm reader also engages with this notion of identitarian reduction: as they read the lines, they read them on the basis that they are singular to the person sitting. They define that person's life, that person's fate. And the final instance of this identitarian reduction is by the state, which also collects hand prints and stores them in its archives.⁵⁸ The question here is how the state comes to recognize or not recognize those who fall within its fold.

PART TWO: LINES AS BORDER AS REDUCTION

Or, reduction as collapse,
transgression, demand⁵⁹

Charlotte Wolff was arrested (or almost arrested) in 1933 on the platform of Hasenheide U-Bahn (now Südsterne), suspected as a spy for dressing androgynously. The day after, she renewed her passport and left for Paris on the train, to escape a regime newly hostile to her, for her gender-identity, her sexuality, her politics, her religion.⁶⁰ Many of the others on the diagram also escaped on train lines out, along lines of friendship and infrastructure, disseminating from their names — and, as they travelled, they would pass over other lines of property, of states (themselves shifting), to places potentially of greater if not total safety. Another 'transposition' of the diagram comes into view at this point as a series of train-tracks, the names perhaps stations along lines of movement, lines of escape.

When Avery Gordon ran a workshop at the ICI Berlin in November 2021, she spoke briefly of the artist Bouchra Khalili's *Mapping Journey Project*, produced between 2008 and 2011. For the work, Khalili

58 For this history see Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, 39 (1986), pp. 3–64.

59 Again, this interlude is quoted from a shared document assembled in June 2020 by fellows and members of staff around the motif of 'reduction as X'.

60 See Wolff, *Hindsight: An Autobiography*, pp. 108–10. This account varies slightly in Wolff's 'Lebenslauf' held in her legal papers prepared for compensation against the German state: Entschädigungsamt Berlin: 341.655.

recorded oral testimonies of the journeys of eight people who had been forced to make 'illegal' journeys of escape or migration. As the audio is playing, videos show the speaker's hand as they mark out the route in permanent marker on a map. The permanence of the marker is intentional, to cut through existing state boundaries and leave a permanent record. These videos were then all placed in the same space together. As hands mark, a voice can be heard:

When I arrived in Skopje [North Macedonia]
 They told me that my papers looked a little fake
 They told me 'You cannot enter the country.'
 And they called the police
 And I was jailed for 8 months and 20 days, something like that
 Afterwards they sent me to Bangladesh ... The man I paid to go to Italy
 said 'Wait a few months, we'll find another road.'⁶¹

Echoing Robert Glück's intention to contain the story in a few words, Tobi Haslett has written, in relation to Khalili's work, that 'An appalling five-year gauntlet collapses into eleven minutes.'⁶² Time that was once stretched out, experienced within something close to real time, is condensed into memory and testament, through the voice and hand.

In 2011, at the end of the project, Khalili converted the tracings into a series of screen printed constellations, each point a city, or a place of punctuation, whether a pause, derailment, diversion, departure, imprisonment, release. In these maps, the world is abstracted out of its striations: the lines that mark the world (as state boundaries) become background. The sky is profaned, constellated again.

The border, as a line, demarcates: it places you on either side of something, even if it is itself displaced, into ports and airports but also into classrooms or employment or housing law. If and when you are on it (the physical border), you wait to pass (to a different regime of law and enforcement), and this is one of the moments of precarity, when someone else decides your fate according to a mixture of law and discretion. The border agent, in this sense, is like a governmental palm reader: they read or

61 Quoted in Tobi Haslett, 'A Philosophy of the Cauterized Wound: Tobi Haslett on the Art of Bouchra Khalili', *Art Forum*, March 2019 <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201903/tobi-haslett-on-the-art-of-bouchra-khalili-78669>> [accessed 1 March 2022].

62 Ibid.

they let a machine read your destiny, they read or they let a machine read your fingerprints to see if you may pass.

One way I have come to understand reduction over the last year or so is through the *coarsening* of political demands. As Manuele Gagnolati put it: ‘reduction as concentration, condensation, synthesis (getting to the essence and to what is at stake).’⁶³ What could be necessary for this gesture if not a coarsening of demands as a call for abolitions of various kinds: of borders, of fear, of suffering.⁶⁴ The essence of the matter is perhaps: who cares what the lines on the hand mean in relation to the cosmos if this world renders those meanings superfluous anyway, when the most active palm reader remains the guard at the border, when fate does not function even to prescribe banal paths, but commands, through contingencies of nature and law, violence for those it so unevenly targets.⁶⁵ As György Lukács wrote at the start of *Theory of the Novel* (1914–15): ‘Blessed are those times when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths — ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars.’⁶⁶ To re-constellate the sky would be to reconstitute the lines not only between but upon ourselves.

63 This is a quotation from the shared document ‘reduction as X’ assembled in June 2021.

64 Examples of this movement accumulated in my head over the years. In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor W. Adorno writes ‘There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand, that no-one shall go hungry any more’ (*Zart wäre einzig das Größte: daß keiner mehr hungern soll*). See Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by Edmund F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 156, and Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* [1951] (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 206. Other examples could be added.

65 M. Ty explores this question in the essay ‘Benjamin on the Border’, *Critical Times*, 2.2 (2019), pp. 306–19 (p. 315): ‘Through a strike of fate, a contingent movement becomes a decisive misstep; and the border produces this misfortune.’ Their paper ‘To Break with Fate’ at the conference *Walter Benjamins ‘Zur Kritik der Gewalt’* of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin on 12 February 2021 expands on these questions. See the online video recording on <<https://symposiumtheoriederpolitik.wordpress.com/programm/>> [accessed 26 June 2022].

66 György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* [1914–15], trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 29. Translation slightly altered.

Sam Dolbear, 'Lines that Reduce: Biography, Palms, Borders', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger, *Cultural Inquiry*, 25 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 117–33 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-25_06>

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