

## Museum, furniture, men

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## Museum, Furniture, Men:

### The Queer Ecology of *I Am My Own Wife*<sup>1</sup>

#### Queer Histories and Loved Objects

*I Am My Own Wife* by Doug Wright stages the remarkable life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (born Lothar Berfelde in Berlin, 1928), a transvestite woman who lived through Nazi and Communist regimes, singlehandedly created a museum to house her collection of artefacts, and provided a safe haven within it for the lesbian and gay community of East Berlin. At the opening of the play we see Charlotte appear in a plain black dress through doors at the rear of the set; she pauses for a moment and then exits again. When she returns she is cradling a huge antique Edison phonograph and gives her audience a short lecture on its invention (Wright, *Wife* 9-11). For this, and all the other objects in her collection from the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century (“Grunderzeit” era), we learn are her passion. The play stages Charlotte guiding visitors around her museum, introducing the collection: “*Charlotte pulls a small, lovingly carved, elegantly furnished doll dresser from the box. She holds it sweetly in her palm and approaches the audience, holding it out for inspection.*” (Wright, *Wife* 15) She has an old sideboard, a bust of Wilhelm II, a pendulum clock, an old gramophone, a cherry-pitter – all in miniature. The set is a “*simple square room, [...] a rear wall, covered in delicate blue-grey lace*” (Wright, *Wife* 5). In the original 2003 New York production, designer Derek McLane gave a sense both of the density of von Mahlsdorf’s collection, and of its significance for history:

Looming behind Charlotte’s modest quarters was a huge wall of shelving, overstuffed with antiquities: gilded mirrors, upturned chairs, ornate German cabinetry, porcelain dogs, sideboards, tea tables, music machines of all makes and varieties, old crystal

chandeliers, bureaus, bric-a-brac, and bronze busts—marvelous debris culled from the nineteenth century and hoarded with a kind of obsessive grandeur. [...] The wall gave the play an epic scope; Charlotte's repeated descriptions of furniture became—through visual enhancement—a record of lives lived through the objects that were left behind. (Wright, *Wife* 6)

The implication of Charlotte's love for her objects is the central concern of this article.

Wright's play is not a straightforward chronicle of von Mahlsdorf's life, but is rather the documentation of his attempt to write such a play, containing both verbatim elements, such as recordings of Wright's interviews with von Mahlsdorf, and imagined scenarios. Wright appears as a character in his own play (known by his first name, Doug) – along with thirty-four other characters, all played by a single actor.<sup>2</sup> Wright started the project with the desire to bring a queer historical icon to the New York stage but, while he was meeting with and writing about von Mahlsdorf, information came to light that complicated the project. This was to do with her supposed cooperation with East German authorities. On the face of it, it may seem that von Mahlsdorf's transvestism, homosexuality and resistance to normative regimes of power are more than enough, in spite of her somewhat muddied past, to make her an important figure in a recovered homosexual history. However, as this article will explore, Wright found that his desire for von Mahlsdorf to be such a figure was ultimately unfulfillable.

Before continuing, it may be worth noting that this article draws on two texts dealing with von Mahlsdorf's life: Wright's play, first performed off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons, before transferring to the Broadway Lyceum theatre in 2003 and published in 2004, and von Mahlsdorf's autobiography, published in 1992.<sup>3</sup> Many of the stories which von Mahlsdorf tells in her autobiography appear in similar detail in the interviews Wright uses in

his play, a fact which caused him some concern, especially when her Stasi file was unearthed. Doubts over the veracity of some of von Mahlsdorf's stories were fortified by this almost verbatim telling and retelling of her life anecdotes. That said however, there are some remarkable moments of destabilizing queerness apparent within each text and the life to which they refer. These moments emerge most pointedly in revelations of von Mahlsdorf's relationship with her collected objects. I approach each text therefore as a record or reference point for specific performances: one is Wright's staging of Charlotte, and the other, von Mahlsdorf's performance as museum curator and self-proclaimed bourgeois hausfrau.

The story of von Mahlsdorf's realization of her transvestite identity is told both in her autobiography and in Wright's play. She tells of her discovery of a copy of Magnus Hirschfeld's book *Die Transvestiten* in her aunt's house – an aunt who not only condones her behavior, but shares in the impulse. Her aunt catches her dressing in women's clothing and says only (Charlotte translates into English): 'Did you know that nature has dared to play a joke on us? You should've been born a girl and I should've been born a man!' (Wright, *Wife* 23). In terms of gendered identity then, von Mahlsdorf is keen to point out, and does so several times in her autobiography, that she feels in her soul as though she is a woman. She is not however, as she puts it, self-conscious of her biologically male body, adding that she is not a transsexual (von Mahlsdorf 43). Although she could never bear to grow a beard, the von Mahlsdorf that Wright meets in the 1990s does not attempt to hide the signs of her masculinity with cosmetics, nor has she ever given any thought to surgery. She writes of the great debt she owed to Magnus Hirschfeld whose books reassured her that she was not alone in the world and not to be condemned or imprisoned for being perverse or unnatural (133). Hirschfeld's theory of sexual "intermediaries" suggests a vastly complex gender spectrum, with many and varied combinations in between the male-female polarity (Hirschfeld loc. 3418 of 6275). Hirschfeld takes a far more tolerant and indeed progressive approach to

gender non-conformism, even making a case for the social and legal recognition of a person as their opposite gender as quite often ‘a question of existence’ (2296). Von Mahlsdorf’s transvestism needs to be set within the context of Hirschfeld’s language and understanding and set apart to a degree from fetishism (in the way that Hirschfeld defines this, drawing on Krafft-Ebing, 2345). What is most striking about von Mahlsdorf’s approach to her gender is the absence of internal conflict she displays when it comes to the disparity between her male physical body and her female ‘soul’, to use her own word; it is, to a contemporary eye, strikingly queer.

While von Mahlsdorf’s transvestitism may be therefore a clear starting point for an investigation which underscores her queerness and examines the fact that her living as a woman is inextricably linked to her resistance to regimes of power, I suggest that von Mahlsdorf’s relationship to objects, in combination with her non-normative approach to gender and sexuality, might provide a much more radical vision of her life, where the agency of matter, the forces it exerts over the human, becomes visible in and through her performance. Von Mahlsdorf may have failed to hold onto the social status she achieved before her Stasi file was released, but to dismiss her life’s work because of this would be a shame, as Wright well knew, and would mean failing to look deeper into the queer potentialities that she offers. In the following, I explore the extent to which von Mahlsdorf’s identities may be as fluid and unfixed as the anecdotes and narratives she creates for us. While recognizing that her actions may have been motivated by survival alone, this article attempts to explore what von Mahlsdorf’s performance may offer us, what critique of the structures of power, capital and normative relationality she allows us to imagine. The primary focus of the article is on what is at the center of von Mahlsdorf’s life and her desires: the objects of her collection, the things that were her life’s passion. Similarly to Wright, I take the approach that von Mahlsdorf’s life-narrative may not bring us to some ultimate truth

about her character, or her past actions. However, in her life and the version of it staged by Wright there are performative moments which may allow us to imagine queer alternatives to our current reality. In this article, I link queer understandings of gender and desire to emerging, radical interrogations of humanity's place in the world, thus thinking of *I Am My Own Wife* (henceforth referred to as *Wife*) and the life of its protagonist through object-oriented ontology and queer ecology.

### **Charlotte's Props?**

Theatre is an art form uniquely predisposed to revealing tensions and incoherencies in identity and is in the eyes of many inherently queer.<sup>4</sup> Theatre tends also to be structured on the fault line between materiality and immateriality, demanding, as Bert States would have it, that we see it in all its concrete and phenomenological manifestations, as well as tune to its polysemic resonances (21). The prop in theatre is both a concrete object – matter in its own right – at the same time as it is meaningful within specific dramaturgies and narratives. As such, theatrical performance can reveal human-object relationality, contained in the relationship between the body and the prop on stage, and the prop and the meaningful real-world objects for which it supposedly stands. While Andrew Sofer writes of the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance (2), he maintains that a prop's meaning is tied to an actor's visible manipulation (24) and is therefore contingent on the human element. He writes that,

like the play that contains it, then, the prop does not offer itself up to our gaze 'all at once' as a digestible sign. The prop must mean in the moment, and that meaning is inextricably tied to such contingent circumstances as the physical dimensions of the

performance space, the skill level of the individual actors, director, and designers, and the mood and makeup of the audience on a given night. (16)

Sofer makes the case that the meaningfulness of the prop is given through its relationship with the other elements of theatre, including especially the human elements. The prop in itself, alone, is not enough to convey meaning. The prop is mute matter, awaiting activation. Props need human actors in order to speak, and audiences and actors need them to resonate with the narratives being presented. Not actors in themselves, props are owned by the actors (historically speaking, this was where the word theatrical “property” emerged from). In the following I consider Charlotte’s objects as props, yet I query ultimately if viewing her objects in this way may limit their vibrancy and agency.

Charlotte’s miniaturized on-stage furniture pieces stand in naturalistically for the actual collection of objects in her museum, but gesture also to the theatricality inherent in von Mahlsdorf’s life: she is not only a museum guide, but an embodied re-enactment of the *Grunderzeit* era. Whether on stage or in her museum, these objects draw attention to the ways in which elements of the material world may stand in for something which is lost, be that something a time gone by or the material reality for which the stage itself stands. Charlotte’s objects are all clunky mechanical examples of a time of craftsmanship that predates the more streamlined and mass produced design practices of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. These material objects give the past a shape, a form, and a weight. They confer a degree of haptic certitude on the immaterial narratives of the past, just as they might be seen to anchor the queerly chimeric presence which moves among them, caring for them. Charlotte’s objects might therefore be usefully described as props, objects which allow her to realize her world and tell her story.

For example, when Charlotte talks of the Mulack-Ritze, the gay and lesbian bar that she “rescued” in 1963 from destruction by the communist government and housed, lovingly, in her basement, she speaks of the wood of the tables as “remembering” those who sat around them. She takes Doug on a tour and his response is one of wonderment:

Holy shit. It’s huge. Old-fashioned, rough-hewn tables on wrought-iron stands. Cane-back chairs. There is an enormous bar, made of oak, stocked high with glasses, liquorice, and—it’s porcelain, I can’t quite tell, but it might be an ancient beer pump.  
(Wright, *Wife* 37)

Following this, the play re-enacts or re-imagines the ceremony in which she was awarded a Medal of Honor for her efforts of conservation. Charlotte talks of the famous figures that once frequented the bar – Bertolt Brecht, Marlene Dietrich, Magnus Hirschfeld, the actress Henny Porten. For Charlotte, it is as if the traces of these people remain embedded in the surface of the material: “This table, he is over one hundred years old. If I could, I would take an old gramophone needle and run it along the surface of the wood. To hear the music of the voices. All that was said.” (Wright, *Wife* 38) The voices of the past are etched into the anthropomorphized wood of the table, to be awakened in Charlotte’s fantasy through material contact – needle and surface. She perceives the objects she describes to be imbued with presence, a plenitude of history etched therein: the world of matter (rough wood, porcelain, glass) becomes a repository for a record of human lives in a way which seems to confirm a certain hierarchy of inert matter and vibrant human subjectivity. And indeed it might be argued that Charlotte’s identity is somehow constructed out of the material objects with which she surrounds herself, that her objects and the clothes she wears are part of the construction of her classed, feminine identity; they are props for her performance. Wright’s



play illuminates the theatrical potential of Charlotte's museum: she has constructed a set for her life. In concrete matter – wood, metal, simple fabric – she realises herself (and since her death in 2002, it might be added, leaves behind a museum, a material legacy).

It might be said in that case that just as they “record” history, Charlotte's objects form an important substrate for her chimeric identity – they are props (in the way that Sofer defines the term) for her complex traversal of gender, class, time and space continually enriched by material objects, just as the antique record sings when it is touched by the needle. It is a fascinating fact of this play that Jefferson Mays's development of his performance as Charlotte involved drawing and cutting out miniatures of furniture and objects from her museum catalogue until he had a tiny paper “salon” in a shoebox, and then, during the workshop, gave a tour, as Charlotte, of the museum in miniature. This eventually became part of the show (Mays).

Yet, even as Charlotte's subjective identity spills over into the world, when needle touches wax and two surfaces are in friction, there is a vibrancy which may, in performance, surpass this limiting notion of identity, where the world is made into a theatre for the human performance of selfhood. These props may have a lively reality of their own also, even a certain agency. For instance, early in the play, Charlotte describes how she came to possess many of the items in her collection. She talks of how, under Hitler's rule, she saved many records by Jewish composers from destruction and of how furniture came her way:

When families died, I became the furniture. When the Jews were deported in the Second World War, I became it. When citizens were burned out of their homes by the Communists, I became it. After the coming of the wall, when the old mansion houses were destroyed to create the people's architecture, I became it. (18)

While this might make von Mahlsdorf's collecting activities seem quite mercenary and opportunist (and indeed Wright stages this critique among the barrage of questions thrown at Charlotte by journalists, (*Wife* 73)), it remains an act of cultural preservation, however ethically complicated, and one for which she was eventually honoured by the State. The choice of words is interesting here, however. In what is a beautiful illustration of the accidents of translation, she uses the word "become" to describe her relation to the objects, which is probably quite simply a direct translation of the German term *bekommen*, which means "to get". Yet this simple error of speech, which employs a false cognate between English and German, renders her relationship with her objects as being far more intimate than perhaps she intended – it describes Charlotte's intimate ethics of curation most fittingly, and renders visible the vibrancy of the objects themselves.

Although Douglas Mao is cautious about making sweeping claims for historical narratives, he suggests that one of the significant epistemic ruptures of our time "is to be found in a new return to objects, now held to illuminate not only the order of the cosmos or distant antiquity but also the immediate human past (and even, in flashes, the dark chasms of the near human future)" (6). While the newness of the "turn" to objects may be debatable, this rupture is lived out in recent philosophical shifts towards a radical re-thinking of being – a re-thinking which attempts to push philosophical enquiry beyond the limits of human epistemological structures and toward the world *in-itself*. Among the vanguard of this branch of philosophical enquiry, which has become known as speculative realism, is the writing of Quentin Meillassoux. Meillassoux claims that the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant is that of correlation, in other words the idea that there is always correlation between thinking and being, and that the two can never be considered apart; the idea that the world discloses itself "through me" has come to dominate Western thought (5-6). Correlationism insists on the one hand on a connection to radical exteriority – being toward the world (as in

the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre) while on the other hand insisting on a sense of perceptual (and therefore mental) imprisonment: exteriority is consequently only a correlate of our own existence (7). For Meillassoux,

contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or no; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere (7).

Other thinkers such as Graham Harman and Jane Bennett have taken these ideas in a direction which is even more radically attuned to the world *in-itself*, specifically the world of objects. Harman writes that “Contrary to the dominant assumption of philosophy since Kant, the true chasm in ontology lies not between humans and the world, but between *objects and relations*” (2). He draws on Heidegger whom he argues accidentally incites a new age of metaphysics, providing a position for an object oriented ontology to “oppose the dictatorship of human beings in philosophy”:

What emerges in its place is a ghostly cosmos in which humans, dogs, oak trees, and tobacco are on precisely the same footing as glass bottles, pitchforks, windmills, ice cubes, magnets, and atoms. Instead of exiling objects to the natural sciences (with the usual mixed emotions of condescension and fear), philosophy must reawaken its lost talent for unleashing the enfolded forces trapped in the things themselves. (2)

Jane Bennett similarly highlights what is typically cast in the shadow: the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things (Loc. 36 of 2417). She aims to paint a positive ontology of vibrant matter, which stretches received notions of agency and freedom, dissipating the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic and sketching a style of political analysis that can better account for the contributions of nonhuman actants (48). The “vital materialism” that Bennett proposes shares with these other writers an attempt at a radical displacement of the human subject (558).

While on-stage props may function literally as props for character and narrative, there is something in Charlotte’s approach to objects which demand that we think of them beyond the human significances ascribed to them; the hint at this radical understanding of selfhood, *vis-à-vis* objects, is fascinating. As well as this embodied connection to her objects, her anti-instrumentalist care for them means that she loves things that are obsolete and redundant. Of the era of design which she is most fond of, she says:

And the trim? People would tear it off; they would burn it. They did not like the scalloped wood, the tiny turrets, the ornamental molding. ‘Too old-fashioned! Too difficult to dust!’ But me . . . I had a feeling for such things. And so I saved it (Wright, *Wife* 16).

This is reflected in in her autobiography. She recounts how when five or six years old she preferred to play with old junk rather than real toys. Sometimes she would play with doll furniture given to her by her mother or a train set given to her by her great-uncle; however her true interests however lay in cleaning and admiring her great-uncle’s old clocks, kerosene lamps, paintings, and candlesticks and with collecting a “useless hodge-podge” as her uncle called it (von Mahlsdorf 17-18). She also presents herself and is presented by Wright as a

deeply humble figure who has no desire to make money, but merely survives, frugally, on a small pension and whatever donations the visitors to the museum choose to give (von Mahlsdorf 183). What is worth noting are the sacrifices that Charlotte has made for her objects, the ways in which she took care of them, the hours of labor she poured into cleaning and preservation and the place they hold in the self-defined hierarchy of her life: “Museum. Furniture. Men.” (Wright, *Wife* 67), as she put it herself.

Reading Charlotte’s object oriented existence in this way has implications for how we understand the hetero-patriarchal and capitalist systems which places the consuming human at the top of the hierarchal pyramid and mute matter at the bottom. Von Mahlsdorf’s form of what might be termed queer ecology hints at a disruption of this hierarchy. She generates a vision of a “flat ontology” which, in Levi Bryant’s characterization, suggests that humans may not be at the center of being, but are among beings. As Bryant puts it, “Humans, far from constituting a category called ‘subject’ that is opposed to ‘object’, are themselves one type of object among many,” (249). In the work of Jane Bennett, “flat ontology” indicates the elevation of all things to a non-hierarchical mode of existence.

When Doug says to his friend John: “Don’t you see? She doesn’t run a museum, she is one! The rarest artifact she has isn’t a grandfather clock or Biedermeier tallboy. It’s her” (Wright, *Wife* 36), he intends to convey the extent to which Charlotte embodies a queer history he never knew existed. Yet, in light of the ways in which Charlotte relates to her objects, “becoming” them, as she puts it, albeit unintentionally placing her alongside her collection in a way which, on the one hand may objectify her into becoming a totem of recovered history and, on the other, provide a glimpse into a more radical and queer human-object relationship, in line with the philosophical approach of object-oriented ontology. When it comes to von Mahlsdorf’s past, her cooperation with the Stasi and the colorful tales she wove, such a position is not unproblematic however.

### **Ethics in an Object-Oriented World**

Von Mahlsdorf's object orientation presents an ethical problem. For if Wright found it difficult to generate a queer icon given Charlotte's past, then uncovering a queer human-object relationality with a whiff of the utopic about it should be no easier. The question of whether or not the play (and indeed von Mahlsdorf's presentation of herself) points to how a love of object is paralleled with or connected to a lack of concern for fellow humans – an ethical failing in other words – needs to be addressed in full before any conclusions can be drawn about what von Mahlsdorf's object-oriented performance might represent. While mostly positive, many critical responses to the play during its US premiere and later UK tour voiced suspicions that Wright left too much of his subject uninterred. London reviewers in particular critiqued the show for not going far enough below the surface that von Mahlsdorf presented to the world. For example, *Guardian* newspaper critic Michael Billington accused Wright of buying into Charlotte's carefully constructed surface identity. If Charlotte is a living museum, Billington longs to know how she appears “after closing time”. His comments, that a regime collaborator cannot be said to have truly “survived” (at least not innocently) are perhaps overly harsh given what is evident about the complexity of life in Communist East Germany and Billington admits as much, but the questions that he asks (which Wright's play does not) are appropriately searching:

Wright not only seems in thrall to his subject, he also never investigates the reality of her life. How difficult was it to live as a transvestite in a rigidly puritanical East Berlin? How did she finance her museum? And, although Charlotte turned her carefully preserved bar into a sexual meeting-house, was she herself devoid of emotional entanglements? By accepting Charlotte's version of herself, Wright turns

her into a gay icon: what he fails to do is penetrate behind the mask. (Billington 2005: 42)<sup>5</sup>

To be fair, some of these questions, such as the lengths that she goes to save and occupy the old mansion that now houses her museum, are addressed (even if doubts remain) in Charlotte's autobiography. And, while I address below the state of her emotional entanglements, it is important to note that that we cannot be fully sure that her collaboration was the ethical failing Billington suspects. In a right-of-reply piece published by the *Guardian* newspaper, Wright counters Billington's analysis by suggesting that the critic has missed the central point. The play is not a character study, but uses von Mahlsdorf's life story to explore thematic questions about the nature of history, such as what persons merit inclusion in the historical record? And: when is history marred by self-invention and mythology? He argues that:

The accusation that I treat Charlotte's connections with the Stasi lightly is salacious. My reaction to her involvement mirrored that of the German people: initial outrage, which abated when the extent of the phenomenon became clear. That is, one in three Germans were working for the Stasi. The play doesn't accept Charlotte's own mythology as truth but challenges the veracity of the facts. To leave her mystery intact is not a liability of the piece, but its greatest asset. Audiences can reach their own judgments. ("Right of reply")

As for being "in thrall" to von Mahlsdorf, it was Wright himself who was able to facilitate her access to her Stasi file and this ultimately became an important part of the play. As a foreign researcher he could expedite the process of negotiating an overloaded bureaucracy

and did so with the proviso that he would be allowed to read it too. In an interview he describes the moment Charlotte read the file:

She was surprisingly cavalier about its disclosures; she had either an amusing anecdote or staunch defense for each of its allegations. She was titillated when she read it, and even giggled on occasion. Apparently, she gave a few of those Stasi officers a real run for their money. (Stanescu 102)

Before the discovery of the file, Jens Giersdorf points out that she was an exotic and authentic queer icon fit for presentation on the North American stage (185). This is expressed early on in Wright's play: after the initial set of interviews, Doug writes to Charlotte, sending her two antique cylinders, saying that he is listening to the interview tapes at every chance he gets and expresses his fascination with her life story. He tells her "You are teaching me a history I never knew I had. Thank you." (Wright 28) Michael R. Schiavi points out that this is understandable: "In an era marked by violence and absence, queer descendants seek the few vocal ancestors who can provide a community history that Wright, a gay native of the Texas Bible belt coveted upon meeting Charlotte." (201) Wright even pokes fun at his own enthusiasm for the project. In his request for permission to write a play about Charlotte's life, Doug reveals her cultural value: "As far as grant applications go—forgive me—but from where I sit, you're a slam dunk." (19) Wright admits to wanting von Mahlsdorf to function as an icon of queer survival and history, but this aim is acknowledged as ultimately very problematic.

Act I of the play ends with the revelations of the Stasi file, and in Act II we are introduced to Alfred Kirschner, whom Charlotte is accused of informing upon to save herself and her collection. Their relationship began and was rooted in their mutual love of beautiful



objects. Charlotte recounts how one rainy day in Berlin she ducked into an antique shop and met Alfred for the first time. They both realized that they shared a passion for collecting, and Alfred invited Charlotte to his apartment to see his record collection – of which he claimed to have about 15,000. In the play, Charlotte lists his expansive collection not only of records, but also of pianolas, clocks, and even a mediaeval breastplate (von Mahldorf 51-52). In Charlotte's version of events, Alfred persuaded her to renounce him when the Stasi investigated their underground business. The Stasi impounded all of Alfred's collection and, so broken was he by this that he ceased collecting after his release from prison. When he died, Charlotte found that he had left everything to her. The stage directions invoke a linkage between corporeal body and material object:

*(She picks ALFRED's glasses up off the sideboard and contemplates them a final time.)*

Alfred was more intelligent than I.

*(She slides open a drawer and—delicately—places the glasses inside, shutting it gently. A burial.)*

Still, that's all he had left – scraps of paper, yes? (61)

When Doug confronts her with his doubts, her only response she has is to show him the sweater which she knitted for Alfred while he was in prison. Frequently, the play documents how, when experiencing pain or regret and the pressure of negative opinion or critique, Charlotte turns to her objects, instead of providing explanations. In this case the turn to the object is not necessarily innocent, but tied here to her potential deception, a deception of herself also perhaps. The next three scenes (“The Cross”, “The Three M's”, “Celebrity”) address the publicity over Charlotte's Stasi file. Charlotte's only reply to her detractors is to give the order in which she lived her life: “Museum. Furniture. Men.” (Wright, *Wife* 67). In her autobiography, she tells also an anecdote in which she chooses to keep an appointment

with a clockmaker over the temptation of sex (Wright, *Wife* 67), serving to reinforce the priority that Charlotte gives to the objects in her life. If she makes any concession to the truth it is expressed in the following passage in the play, after Doug questions her about the file:

*(Another pause. Charlotte turns cagey)*

Meine Tante Luise always said, ‘Be as smart as the snakes; it’s in the Bible.’ She said, ‘Never forget that you are living in the lion’s den. Sometimes you must howl with the wolves.’ (Wright, *Wife* 44)

During the course of the play, Doug expresses his frustration with the attempt to write a play about von Mahlsdorf, a process made even more difficult by her Stasi record. He acknowledges that he needs to believe in those stories as much as von Mahlsdorf does, yet the play images Charlotte taking refuge in her queer status against an onslaught of international journalists who have dug deeply into her past. Her only reply to them is to recount the story of her mother asking, evasively, “‘Lottchen, it’s all very well to play dress-up. But now you’ve grown into a man. When will you marry?’” To which she replies: “‘Never, my dear Mutti. *Ich bin meine eigene Frau*. I am my own wife.’” (Wright, *Wife* 75) Wright’s solution to the problem – the desire for a queer icon, and evidence of queer history meeting certain historical realities – is to present Charlotte as she presents the objects in her museum:

DOUG: Charlotte, what do you do when a piece loses its luster? Are you ever attempted to strip the wood or replace the veneer?

CHARLOTTE: I did not refinish the pieces. No. *Diese alte Anrichte?* The polish is as old as the object itself. It is antique, too.

[ . . . ]

A missing balustrade, a broken spindle. These things, they are proof of its history.

And so you must leave it. (77-8)

She points out that she would never throw anything away even if old and damaged: “It is a record, yes? Of living. Of lives.” (78) It is worth noting that while von Mahlsdorf may not provide the material necessary for recovered, ennobled queer history, the work that she did in maintaining a safe social space for lesbian, gay and trans people during years before the fall of the Iron Curtain cannot be underestimated and only adds to the complexity of her story.

Furthermore, Wright, leaving conclusions about von Mahlsdorf deliberately undrawn, is aware of the kind of narrative that would be needed to make von Mahlsdorf into a queer historical icon – such an approach would have to be deeply selective about her life and, as Judith Halberstam puts it, find it necessary to engage in the disciplinary process of memorialization, where a ‘continuous narrative replaces one full of ruptures and contradictions’ (Loc. 245 of 2706). Better perhaps, as Halberstam would have it, to fail and leave open those ruptures and contradictions.

In Germany, the discovery of the file meant von Mahlsdorf was exposed to a great deal of public criticism. Giersdorf writes that, with the suggestion that she had operated as an informer, von Mahlsdorf lost a great deal of respect, even though it may have been her collaboration, willing or otherwise, that enabled her survival and that of her museum. The Stasi question is of course a deeply complex one and, as Wright pointed out in his reply to Billington, a significant number of the East German populace “cooperated”, whether willingly or not. While Giersdorf’s piece on the play usefully sets von Mahlsdorf within the context of lesbian and gay history in East Germany (something which Wright recognizes as beyond his capability to display in all its complexity), Giersdorf also draws a very helpful

distinction between Wright's and von Mahlsdorf's 'inventions'. While neither Wright, Rosa von Praunheim (who made a documentary about von Mahlsdorf<sup>6</sup>), nor von Mahlsdorf herself, can stake a firm claim on truth, they invent for very different reasons. Von Praunheim "emphasized the gap between all the layers of her existence" in 'a political celebration of von Mahlsdorf as a powerful alternative to mainstream standards of sexuality and gender (Giersdorf 187). Furthermore, Giersdorf also suggests that Wright eliminates Charlotte's sexuality in the play, when in fact she led a very active sex life, even if she rather coquettishly recounts choosing furniture over men. Wright does this by both exoticizing her and by removing her sexuality from the public theatrical display (187). Wright's intention was to "present a theatrical event about a compelling character":

[T]hey were inventions for very different reasons. Wright aimed toward the theatrical representation; von Mahlsdorf had to survive. Thus Wright had to take liberties and simplify where von Mahlsdorf had to avoid generalizations. The real-life von Mahlsdorf performed ambivalence and contradiction. (Giersdorf 189)

In his analysis, Giersdorf presents the ambivalence and contradiction which von Mahlsdorf embodies as a survival strategy. Her survival includes also the survival of her objects, her museum.

It is necessary therefore to consider the ethics of von Mahlsdorf's love of objects: does it come at the cost of the lives and sufferings of others? Firstly, it's not entirely clear how von Mahlsdorf's past is to be characterized: as the ethically ambiguous actions of a self-interested survivalist or the actions of someone who, as a member of a homosexual minority, has always risked persecution on the margins of society? Even as she hovers, chimerically, out of the range of truth and authentication, I find it difficult to read von Mahlsdorf as a self-

interested survivalist alone. She does not represent a full rejection of humanity (as I explore further below) and, if her priorities are focused on her objects, it has to be remembered that it was among and with objects that she found friendship and happiness, within, let us not forget, a society that for the most part rejected her. Von Mahlsdorf's life, emerging in her autobiography and in Wright's play, may indeed reveal the muddied and complex compromises that the most marginal in society must make in order to survive.

Yet the suggestion that she has a greater loyalty to inanimate objects than to her fellow humans is significant when it comes to the complex ethics of a queer ecology; the place of the human within such an object-oriented world is worth considering. By taking account of von Mahlsdorf's relationship with objects along with the queer potentialities of her gender dysphoria, an image is laid bare of the queerness of that relationality. Von Mahlsdorf does not provide a model for a utopian homosexual community; her past, like the antique pieces she protects, is missing too much of its veneer. Her curatorial practice might be better viewed as ecological rather than humanitarian. And her museum, I suggest, models a kind of queer ecology which points more toward the unfathomable intimacies between manifestations of matter than those between human and human. To imagine these is, as Timothy Morton points out, "to imagine pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts" (280), and perhaps not ethical, at least from a humanist perspective, and certainly not innocent.

A human lack of concern for the impact of the matter it produces, consumes and throws away, from plastics to carbon, will most likely determine the course of humanity within the next fifty to one hundred years. Yet matter, from carbon and plastics to bacteria, viruses and so forth, will not mourn our passing nor share in our suffering. The material world does not share in a humanist system of ethics, utilitarian, deontological or otherwise, but is its indifference to human suffering the same indifference that von Mahlsdorf showed?

Does she align herself with the mute, indifferent world of objects to such a degree that her actions represent a failure of interpersonal ethics, covered over by her carefully woven narratives? And, furthermore, is it highly problematic that I should name this action as ‘queer’, thus perhaps aligning von Mahlsdorf with the anti-humanist queer sentiments of Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani? Furthermore, it is perhaps a mistake to call such a life queer when it might in fact be characterized by nothing more than self-interest. My final commentary will be concerned therefore with whether or not the displacement of the human in *Wife* is also a rejection of the human and will address the extent to which we can move beyond pathologizing von Mahlsdorf’s actions toward thinking through the implications, ethical and otherwise, of her answer to the call of objects.

### **Beyond the Human**

With the embodied connection with objects in *Wife* comes a simultaneous, though not necessarily innocent, displacement of the human, realized through the ways that Charlotte (in Wright’s dramatization) directs her audience’s attention. She draws attention first and foremost to the object itself, secondarily to its affective qualities, and only lastly to the human histories it embodies. As previously noted, the play begins with Charlotte introducing the phonograph. She describes the workings of the object in detail, turning the handle and readying it for play as she does so, before remarking on how the needle with its little sapphire “sounds so nice” when it grazes the record. We hear the sounds of an old German waltz, described by Wright in the directions as “scratchy and exquisite” (Wright, *Wife* 11); as the record plays, Charlotte reminisces on how she played British and American records while allied aeroplanes flew over Mahlsdorf, thinking that if they can hear her playing Edison records they will know she is a friend. In these brief opening moments of the play, we are given an insight into Charlotte’s world of objects. Even though the object is linked to two

historical moments (the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was created and the Second World War), and ultimately conceived as a bearer of history, there is still a moment when the object exists on stage briefly before being required to bear the weight of history. This privileging of the object, beyond its historical meanings, may gesture toward the object as thing, or, in Bryant's terms a 'subjectless object', an object *in-itself* (19). If the meaning of the object is always fundamentally linked to the determination of the subject, things, in Bennett's words are those "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics" (235). It may be that Charlotte's performances offer us a glimpse into the world of matter, with matter even shown to exert agency, degrees of force over the human subject.

Bennett proposes that we think of the agency of things, a sort of thing-power, where supposedly inanimate matter exerts force over humans, compelling action. Regarding the practice of hoarding, she suggests that if we bypass for a moment the impulse to pathologize the hoarder (and exoticize and exploit also, as is the case with so many television shows on the subject), the hoarder might present as having great sensitivity to matter's vibrancy and reveal, as she puts it, the "strange attraction", even power, that objects exert over humans. Hoarding, Bennett suggests, is one end of a spectrum, with the collector (of Walter Benjamin's commentary) at the other (Bennett, 2010). Von Mahlsdorf might well be placed somewhere on this spectrum; her collecting is obsessive, but her "hoard" is deeply ordered; she approaches her collection in a non-instrumentalist manner, and takes great pleasure in their form (scratches and all) – unlike, it might be added, the more extreme hoarder, where pleasure taken in individual objects becomes limited, as they are swallowed by vast amounts of hoarded matter. On the whole however, von Mahlsdorf seems to answer the call of the object more fully than that of the human.

In this privileging of objects, Charlotte may point toward a radical thinking beyond the human, a post-or non-anthropocentric vision of the world. The re-routing of desire, not only away from normative reproductive (heterosexual) relationality, but also from human to human relationality is what makes Charlotte's case both radical and unique. That is not to say, however, that human love and sex is excluded. In her autobiography von Mahlsdorf is candid and unembarrassed about her desire for men. Indeed, one of the criticisms levelled at Wright's rendering of Charlotte has to do with the play's downplaying of von Mahlsdorf's quite active sex life. Giersdorf suggests that Wright eliminates her sexuality in the play by both exoticizing her and by removing her sexuality from public theatrical display into the private realm of the audience's imagination (187). It might be noted also that von Praunheim's documentary deals much more openly with von Mahlsdorf's sexuality, including her interest in sadomasochism. Certainly von Mahlsdorf does not herself shy away from or disavow her own desires, nor does she condemn the desires of others. This is lived out in the anecdotes she tells in her autobiography of sexual encounters and longer romances, as well as the fact that when she preserved the Mulack-Ritze bar she not only gave members of the lesbian, gay and transgender community a safe social space, but also provided private space for people to have sex: "It was a museum for all people, but I thought, Why not for homosexuals?" (Wright 38) Yet, at the same time, she clearly loves to tell of how her desires are somewhat torn, between beautiful men and beautiful objects. The objects tend to win the battle with great frequency: "If I were to get a new Vertikow cabinet today, ten willing man could do cartwheels on my steps and I would send them home" (von Mahlsdorf 179). She demonstrates love and care for the material objects she preserves and this is expressed in the very loving, tactile relationship between the staged body in *Wife* and the objects that she holds.



She recounts also how the formation of important human to human relationships was facilitated by her love of objects. Just emerging into teenage-hood, she found acceptance and tolerance in the second-hand shop run by Max Bier, a place where she could be herself; the Biers called her by the feminine name Lottchen (von Mahlsdorf 28). Similarly, she presents her relationship with Kirschner as, while not sexual (although Kirschner was gay), both deeply accepting of von Mahlsdorf's nature and connected to their mutual love of antiques. So, while von Mahlsdorf does not appear to have had difficulty forming relationships or finding acceptance, it might be suggested that those relationships were related to, even rooted in, material culture and a shared love of objects.

It must be emphasized then that in spite of the complexity of von Mahlsdorf's relationships with her fellow humans, she does not reject humanity, but rather opens a space to see relationality differently. Although selective about the sorts of objects she collects, von Mahlsdorf may image something of the true materialism of which Morton writes, a queer ecology which shows how beings exist "precisely because they are nothing but relationality, deep down—for the love of matter" (277). Charlotte's performances, by which I mean her daily performance as museum curator and its embodiment in the play, hint at the beyond of the correlation between self and world and enact a post-anthropocentric vision of the world in which bodies and objects share both space and materiality, in a sort of "flat ontology" in which there is no hierarchy of being and the human is an object among objects (22). In her love of objects, and her sensitive curatorial relationality with them, Charlotte is not only transgender, but also traverses the boundary between human and object. If there is a link between the destabilization of gender in the performances of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf and the destabilization of the pre-eminence of the human in the world, it is here in the gesture through which she places herself within the realm of objects. It might be argued of course that the museum is an extension of von Mahlsdorf's subjectivity, providing a *mise en scène*

for her sense of identity and that when she “became” the object she merely extended and articulated herself. It might be argued also, as discussed above, that the museum and its objects signal von Mahlsdorf’s failure to live up to the ideals which Wright (and indeed post-Communist German society) set for her, as well as a way of covering over that failure. Yet the ways in which, in her stories, she makes herself diminutive, humble before her objects, indicates a way of thinking beyond selfhood, at least in the ways that we currently imagine selfhood. In her embrace of the vibrancy of objects and her sensitivity to their affective qualities (the sapphire needle on the antique cylinder) she models a different kind of ecology. She even gives us a moment, in the midst of all her flaws (perhaps because of them), to imagine what a queer ecology, in which the anthropocentric hierarchy of human, animal, object is disrupted, might look like. Even as she fails as the queer icon that Wright longed for, her performance demands that we think about the complex ways in which human existence is implicated in the material world. Living her life in the order of museum, furniture men, she reminds us that we cannot consider humanity in full without thinking also of how human life is interwoven and ethically implicated in the vibrant lives of our inhuman others.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Dirk Schubotz of Queen’s University Belfast for his advice and insight on an early draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> She was played by Jefferson Mays in the New York premiere production in 2003 (dir. Moisés Kaufman) and by John Cronin in a more recent production in Belfast, Northern Ireland (Prime Cut Theatre Company, directed by Emma Jordan, September 2012), a performance which this writer attended.

<sup>3</sup> Note that I use “Charlotte” to indicate the character in Wright’s play and “von Mahlsdorf” when discussing von Mahlsdorf in the context of her autobiographical material.

<sup>4</sup> As Jill Dolan puts it, “With its liminal status as both real and not, as ephemeral and transformational, theatre has long been a site where misfits and the marginalized have congregated. Sexual minorities have found among theatre people a generous acceptance sometimes not available dominant culture’s work constrained, conforming ways of life” (3).

<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Nicholas De Jongh, for example, writes that ‘Disappointingly, Wright avoids psychological probing and relentlessly skims the flamboyant surface of a life’ and Benedict Nightingale writing in *The Times* asks if Wright could not have explored Charlotte in greater depth. This is not limited to UK critics alone although critics in the US tended to be somewhat more sympathetic to the difficulties of presenting a subject like Charlotte. See for example Murray (2003) and Weber (2004).

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<sup>6</sup> The documentary, made in 1992, is entitled *I Am My Own Woman*.

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