Mother sleuth and the queer kid: Decoding sexual identities in Maria Gronau's detective novels

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Abstract:

Why should we study lesbian detective novels? Their storylines are, in many respects, much like those of other detective narratives: set in motion by a serious crime, often involving a corpse, the plots follow the investigation of the crime and conclude with the identification and capture of the criminal. However, lesbian detective fiction differs from its more conventional counterparts in several significant ways. Queer women, doubly marginalized by their gender and their sexuality in a genre traditionally dominated by heterosexual males, have typically embodied criminal characters rather than heroic ones in canonical literary production. Narratives focusing on gay female gumshoes raise new questions about the representation of investigators and their work, create new perspectives on the processes of identification and interpretation, and formulate new answers about what is at stake in the ever-popular genre of detective fiction and its conventions. Moreover, detective fiction that thematizes gender and sexuality also emphasizes the detection of identities on multiple levels, and thus highlights the similarities and tensions between the parallel tasks of investigating crime and decoding sexualities.

Keywords: lesbian detective novels | queer identities | German detective fiction | gaydar

Article:

Why should we study lesbian detective novels? Their storylines are, in many respects, much like those of other detective narratives: set in motion by a serious crime, often involving a corpse, the plots follow the investigation of the crime and conclude with the identification and capture of the criminal. However, lesbian detective fiction differs from its more conventional counterparts in several significant ways. Queer women, doubly marginalized by their gender and their sexuality in a genre traditionally dominated by heterosexual males, have typically embodied criminal characters rather than heroic ones in canonical literary production. Narratives focusing on gay female gumshoes raise new questions about the representation of investigators and their work, create new perspectives on the processes of identification and interpretation, and formulate new answers about what is at stake in the ever-popular genre of detective fiction and its conventions. Moreover, detective fiction that thematizes gender and sexuality also emphasizes the detection of

identities on multiple levels, and thus highlights the similarities and tensions between the parallel tasks of investigating crime and decoding sexualities.

My research begins with the following question: to what extent is queer detective fiction shaped and complicated by the structural similarity between detecting crime and decoding sexuality? Both processes involve gathering and interpreting information in order to arrive at a coherent solution, and both of these tasks focus on identity, albeit in different ways. On the one hand, professional and private investigators must work to gather and analyze evidence relating to a crime in order to reconstruct the story of the crime and identify the criminals and their motives. On the other hand, the tool colloquially referred to as *gaydar* entails the work of reading visual and behavioral codes to ascertain the sexual identities of individuals whose desires and practices are not clearly or explicitly articulated. Similarly, the clues, statements, and facts used as evidence in crime cases require interpretive work in order to become meaningful. Thus sleuthing for traces of criminals and their crimes and using gaydar to find out if individuals are gay, straight, or in between both require the identification and interpretation of clues in situations where meanings are multivalent and contingent upon a wide range of factors, such as who does the interpreting and in what temporal, spatial, and cultural context these activities take place. Crime and sexuality both exhibit varying degrees of coherence and incoherence and are both encoded as potentially solvable riddles. The lesbian investigator takes on the tasks of decoding both: her personal and professional survival depends on the gathering, deciphering, and communication of codes that reference, on the one hand, the identities of criminals, and on the other, the sexual desires, practices, and identities of the people she encounters. It is important to study lesbian detective stories because of what they can tell us about how identities are culturally constructed and because of what they can show us about how literary conventions are negotiated.

I shall begin this analysis by describing in greater detail the tool I refer to above as gaydar and the reading of sexual identity as a process similar to detective work. I then briefly discuss German lesbian detective literature and the ways in which investigating crime and decoding sexuality typically come together. Finally, I undertake a close reading of the intersections between these elements in two recent novels by German author Maria Gronau.[1]

Gaydar: Reading Sexual Identities

Neither in a heteronormative society nor in a lesbian-coded narrative is sexual identity a given; reading sexuality is therefore not a straightforward task. It can, in fact, become a challenging undertaking in situations where an individual's appearance and behavior cannot be easily or exclusively assigned to one category of sexual identity. As Donald F. Reuter puts it in *Gaydar: The Ultimate Insider Guide to the Gay Sixth Sense*, a parodic manual on how to cultivate and use gaydar to identify homosexuals, it would be inaccurate to claim that "anyone['s] actions, behavior, or experiences can be unequivocally construed as being 'gay' or 'straight.'"[2] Reuter further explains, "Meanings for 'straight,' 'gay,' 'masculine,' and 'feminine' are changing, merging, even disappearing."[3] The codes for sexuality are inherently ambiguous because they are not only shifting but also culturally contingent: what may be interpreted as a clear sign of

[1] Maria Gronau is a pseudonym.
[2] Donald F. Reuter, *Gaydar: The Ultimate Insider Guide to the Gay Sixth Sense* (New York: Crown, 2002) 10.
[3] Reuter, 11.

homosexuality in one context might not be perceived as such in another. This is evidenced by online guessing games where viewers, presented with a series of photos, must answer the questions, "Lesbian or German Lady?"[4] and "Gay or Eurotrash?"[5] Because the correct answers are "based on distinct clues in attire, and body language," finding a label for ambiguously sexualized individuals requires interpretive work much like the task of detecting.[6]

Although Reuter evokes gaydar as a sixth sense in the subtitle to his book, he clarifies in the text that he does not conceive of gaydar as inborn or infallible. Rather, he concedes that it is a learned hermeneutical labor that necessitates the deciphering of signs and signals with multiple meanings. In his discussion of reading codes for queer desires, Reuter explicitly evokes detective fiction and compares gaydar with forensic science:

> Whoa, Sherlock! . . . [S]leuthing about for gay men using *gaydar* may not be as easy as dusting for fingerprints on a bottle of lubricant.[7]

If Reuter is correct in claiming, even in this very different context, that detective work is more straightforward than decoding sexuality, it follows that lesbian detective literature may privilege the closure of crime narratives over the success of gaydar and the clear articulation of sexual identities. Although, as I explain in the following section, this is not the case in many lesbian detective stories, there is a small number of texts in which the reading of sexual identities presents a greater challenge to the lesbian detective than the cracking of complicated crime cases and the identification of the criminals. And, as I shall further demonstrate in my analysis of two recent works by Maria Gronau, the tension between closure of the crime investigation and the failure of gaydar is one of the ways in which lesbian detective narratives lay bare what is at stake in their constructions of sexual identity.

Lesbian Detective Fiction: Reading the Genre

While German lesbian detective literature is a wide field, two major traits seem to be shared across the genre. First, the narratives encourage an identificatory reader position, in part through the multiple allusions to linguistic, geographical, and cultural references likely to resonate with the experiences of lesbian readers.[8] For instance, they mention terms commonly used in gay

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[4] "lesbian or german lady?" blair magazine #4, 2007, 2 February 2007, <http://www.blairmag.com/blair4/dyke/>.
[5] "Gay or Eurotrash? the ultimate gaydar game!" blair magazine #3, 2006, 2 February 2007, <http://www.blairmag.com/blair3/gaydar/euro.html>.
[6] "Gay or Eurotrash? the ultimate gaydar game!"
[7] Reuter, 18.
[8] I should clarify that lesbian detective literature is not unique in setting a narrative stage that encourages an identificatory reader position; this is, in fact, an oft-cited characteristic of all detective fiction. Numerous critics have noted that detective stories encourage reader identification with the investigator figure because the audience also becomes engaged in unraveling the mystery of the crime; thus, reader and detective undergo parallel mental processes in attempting to unravel the hermeneutical riddles that the investigation presents. However, I claim that the lesbian subgenre brings new dimensions to this convention in thematizing desires, relationships, and communities that tend to be either marginalized or absent in mainstream cultural texts. As Phyllis M. Betz notes in the first extensive survey of Anglo-American lesbian detective novels, such texts supplement existing detective traditions with a sexually-inflected narrative that resonates with the experiences of a lesbian audience: "Besides fulfilling the genre's requirements, lesbian mysteries also present another story, one that, because the situations and characters have been specifically recast as lesbian and lesbian centered, may have a greater impact for its particular

subcultures of a certain time and place, such as the "LKS," a short haircut popular with German lesbians of the late 1980s and early 90s.[9] Or, to give another example, lesbian detective plots unfold in queer spaces that include vacation destinations and events popular with lesbians such as the Greek Isle of Lesbos or the Sydney Gay Games and metropolitan settings such as the historically gay neighborhoods of Berlin and Cologne, where the fictional characters fall in love in real women-only cafes or well-known gay-friendly locales.[10] Second, and this follows from the first point about the identificatory quality of this literature, lesbian detective narratives almost without exception incorporate a romantic or erotic subplot. Indicative of this trend is the growing number of such novels that are explicitly labeled as hybrid genres, from "criminal love story" to "erotic crime novel."[11]

Typically, the hybridity between the crime and romance genres plays out in the lesbian detective story through the structural parallel between the two types of detecting that I mention above. The lesbian investigator uses her superior skills of deduction at once to solve a crime and to determine whether another character in the novel is also homosexual. The character in question is usually a woman, and the detective's gaydar serves to assess her potential as a lover. Often, her gaydar reading correctly identifies the mysterious other woman as lesbian, or at the very least bisexual, and this decoding of her sexuality is confirmed when the two women become involved in an affair whose outcome is inevitably intertwined with the resolution of the crime plot. Sexuality and crime, both riddles to be solved by the queer gumshoe, are neatly resolved in a dramatic finale that affirms the investigator's effectiveness at deciphering codes, detecting identities, and deducing hidden truths. Thus the issue of properly decoding sexual identity is

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readers." In *Lesbian Detective Fiction: Woman as Author, Subject, and Reader* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2006) 18. This occurs, for instance, in the mention of cultural references, geographical locations, and linguistic practices coded as lesbian, gay, or queer, and therefore likely to strike a chord in readers conversant with queer subcultures. My gratitude goes to Lisa Kuppler for a helpful discussion of this aspect of the genre.

[9] The "LKS," and acronym for *Lesbenkurzschnitt* ("lesbian short [hair] cut"), is mentioned multiple times in Gabriele Gelien's *Eine Lesbe macht noch keinen Sommer* (One Lesbian Does Not Make a Summer; Hamburg: Argument, 1993). The acronym, which is often evoked as a measure of the extent to which various characters can be described as lesbian, is never explained in the text, and only readers who are already conversant with the term and its abbreviation will comprehend its role in Gelien's parodic take on lesbian subcultures. I would like to thank Claudia Breger for explaining this previously unfamiliar reference to me.

[10] Several examples of such locales that appear in German texts are situated in former West Berlin's Schöneberg district, the city's historical gay cultural center, still noteworthy today for its queer-friendly street festivals and nightlife. Schöneberg bars that appear in queer crime literature include the Pour Elle, a women-only pick-up spot that sets the stage for a lesbian romance in Hedi Hummel's *Pluto über Berlin* (Pluto over Berlin; Weissach im Tal: Alkyon, 2004); this bar with a two-word French name appears to be intentionally evoked by the fictional women-only club called La Belle in Martina-Marie Liertz's *Die Geheimnisse der Frauen* (The Secrets of Women; München: Goldmann, 1999). Tom's Bar, a staple of the Schöneberg gay scene, is a men-only cruising bar and darkroom featured in the finale of Thea Dorn's *Berliner Aufklärung* (Berlin Enlightenment; Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1994). Another scene in Dorn's novel unfolds at a gay and lesbian dance party in the Moskau, an "ehemalige[ ] Stasi-Luxus-Schenke" ("former luxury taproom for the East German secret service"; 118), which is undoubtedly a reference to the real-life Café Moskau, a gay-friendly East Berlin bar and dance club renowned for its extravagant theme parties and communist architecture.

[11] Two recent examples are a novel by Nanni Wachs titled *Tanz der Leidenschaften*, which carries the subtitle *Ein erotischer Kriminalroman* (The Dance of Passions: An Erotic Crime Novel; Pfalzfeld: Kontrast, 2002), and Hedi Hummel's aforementioned *Pluto über Berlin*, described as on its cover as *Eine kriminelle Liebesgeschichte* (A Criminal Love Story). Both narratives foreground a web of romantic and sexual intrigues to such an extent that the crime investigation tends to recede into the background, playing more of a structural role than a thematic one.

crucial to the narrative intrigue and its closure for the lesbian detective, whose success depends as much on bedding the gay girl as it does on catching the bad guy.

However, these are precisely the types of narratives that I will not discuss here. Rather, my work focuses on lesbian detective stories that narrate failed attempts to read sexual identity and in which the investigator's gaydar is directed primarily at characters who are not potential love interests. Above all, I am interested in how the reading or misreading of a character's sexuality complicates the crime investigation or challenges the lesbian heroine's perception of her own identity. In the following pages, I examine two popular works that portray one lesbian investigator's attempts to decode sexual identity first as a failure, and later as a success, both of which are portrayed in ambivalent ways. I shall discuss *Weibersommer* (Women's Summer, 1998) and *Weiberschläue* (Women's Shrewdness, 2003), the last two in a series of four novels by Maria Gronau.[12]

Like Mother, Like Son? The Case of the Queer Kid

Weibersommer is Gronau's third detective story featuring lesbian police commissioner Lena Wertebach, head of the homicide division in a Berlin police department. The narrative setting in *Weibersommer*, as in the other novels in Gronau's series, alternates between public and private spaces in which Lena emphasizes, in the former, the performance of her professional identity as a police officer, and in the latter, her gendered and sexual identities as a mother and a lesbian. On the job, the commissioner is tough, demanding, and uncompromising; however, at home, she tender, vulnerable, and fallible, especially when it comes to her precocious teenage son, Jim. The characterization of Lena as a doting mother raised eyebrows in the German lesbian scene of the mid-1990s with the conclusion of the first novel in which she appears, *Weiberwirtschaft*

[12] All translations from Maria Gronau's texts, including their titles, are my own. To date, none of the four existing novels in her series has been translated into English. Each of the titles is a word compound beginning with *Weiber*, the plural form of *Weib*, an antiquated term literally meaning *wife* but that has commonly been used to refer more generally to any member of the female sex. In contemporary usage, however, *Weiber* typically has connotations that range from dismissive and pejorative to sexually-inflected and misogynist. For this reason, although I have chosen here to translate the term as *women*, I believe that its full range of meaning might be more accurately conveyed by the English *broads*. It should be noted that none of Gronau's compound word titles translates neatly into English, as each one is a playful composition with multiple sarcastic associations. Gronau's series begins in 1995 with the publication of *Weiberwirtschaft*, a title that translates loosely as *Henhouse* and is often used, like the related term *Frauenwirtschaft*, to denote a household composed exclusively of women; however, with the replacement of *Frauen* with *Weiber*, it becomes a derogatory way of referencing a sloppy household whose shortcomings are attributed to the absence of male authority figures (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1995). Since the late twentieth century, the term has been reappropriated by feminists; one example is the women's residential and commercial collective in Berlin by the same name, which is translated on its English webpage as *women's business* ("Weiberwirtschaft: 'Women's Business' in the heart of unified Berlin," 2007, 24 May 2007, <http://www.weiberwirtschaft.de/pdf-files/summary.pdf>). Gronau's first novel was followed in the same year by *Weiberlust*, a term translatable as either *Women's Desire* or as *Women's Pleasure* (also Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1995). The third in the series, *Weibersommer*, or *Women's Summer*, is the only of Gronau's titles that translates easily (originally Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 1998). The series currently concludes with *Weiberschläue*, which can be conveyed as *Women's Shrewdness* or, with more pejorative connotations, as *Women's Slyness*, and which, in alluding to the expression *Bauernschläue*, or *farmers' shrewdness*, mockingly suggests that, in the same way that farmers are sometimes considered extremely knowledgeable about their profession but lacking in outright intelligence, women are more prone to demonstrate *cleverness*, *cunning* or *slyness* than intellectual brainpower (Leipzig: Militzke, 2003). This fourth text ends in such a manner that it leaves open the possibility of a sequel, although none has been announced to date.

(Henhouse, 1995), which was thought to privilege her gendered role as an affectionate mother over her sexual identity as a lesbian.[13] Lena's relationship to her son receives heavy focus throughout the series and is of special interest in the context of my study because Gronau's texts cultivate an ongoing intrigue through Lena's attempts to decode Jim's ambiguous sexual identity.

Weibersommer is set largely in Paris, the summer vacation destination for Lena and her alternative family, composed of her Norwegian lover Margrete, her thirteen-year-old son Jim, and his best friend Rudi. Margrete, Lena's multilingual graduate student girlfriend, is a marginalized figure and appears primarily in scenes in which Lena requires an interpreter in order to communicate with French-speaking interlocutors. By contrast, the narrative structurally and thematically highlights Jim and Rudi's relationship to one another and to Lena, emphasizing Lena's role as mother to the one and surrogate parent to the other. In fact, the crime plot begins when Lena fails to keep a close watch on the teenagers; as a consequence, Rudi is kidnapped by Corsican nationalist terrorists who believe him to be a witness to another crime. Thus Lena must compensate for her shortcoming as a parent by relying on her detective skills in order to rescue her young charge. The rest of the novel focuses on the search for Rudi and his captors, which takes the Wertebach family from their Paris vacation spot to a high-speed pursuit in Corsica.

The motherly detective figure of Lena Wertebach resonates with the trope of the female investigator who relies upon her traditionally feminine and maternal characteristics to solve a crime. Classic examples of this figure include E.T.A. Hoffmann's maternal Mademoiselle de Scudery[14] and Agatha Christie's elderly Miss Marple.[15] Yet while Wertebach's figure is evocative of this trend, she also diverges from it insofar as she usually experiences these public and private personas as separate from one another, and her maternal instincts do not usually play a significant role in her successes and failures as a police commissioner and crime investigator. In this respect, however, *Weibersommer* differs from the other novels in Gronau's *Weiber*- series in that Lena's professional duties take over aspects of her private identity when she must locate her kidnapped surrogate son while on a family vacation. Lena's private and professional identities are additionally aligned because Jim and Rudi appear to have an especially intimate

[13] Although *Weiberwirtschaft* ends with the tragic death of Lena's lover, Susanna, the narrative's concluding passage makes reference to Lena's affection for her twelve-year-old son, Jim. This finale has been interpreted by some as a validation of Lena's relationship to her son over both her sexual identity as a lesbian and her love for her deceased female partner. I would like to thank Katrin Sieg for a helpful discussion of the reception of the novel.

[14] Long before Edgar Alan Poe's creation of detective Auguste Dupin in 1841 (when he first appeared in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*), E.T.A. Hoffmann invented this motherly investigative mediator, although the title character in his 1819 novella *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* (Mademoiselle De Scudery) is not a detective by profession. Serving as a mediator between legal institutions on the one hand and witnesses, victims, and perpetrator of the crimes on the other hand, she solves the riddle behind a mysterious series of murders in Paris. Scudery does so by relying on her compassionate motherly nature and ability to communicate sensitively, which appeal to a distressed young motherless woman and her lover, that latter of whom eventually confesses to Scudery that he knows the murderer.

[15] Jane Marple, usually referred to as Miss Marple, is the elderly woman featured in twelve novels by Agatha Christie published between 1930 and 1976. The first of these was *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Like Mademoiselle de Scudery, Miss Marple is not a professional detective, although she is able to solve multiple mysteries that the authorities are unable to close thanks to her curiosity, shrewdness, and unfailing memory. She is often portrayed engaging in traditionally feminine activities such as knitting and gossiping with the townspeople.

relationship, and her attempts to decode sexual identity are directed at the same objects as are her motherly affections and her detective work.

When Rudi is kidnapped on the first day of the Wertebachs' stay in Paris, the French police investigating the case immediately point a finger at Corsican nationalists who planted a car bomb in front of the Palace of Versailles. Frustrated with the slow pace at which the local gendarmes are working to solve the kidnapping and terrorism case, Lena takes matters into her own hands and travels to Corsica in search of Rudi. The German police commissioner is entirely out of her element–not only does she have no jurisdiction outside of her own country, but she hardly speaks French, much less the Corsican language, and she knows nothing about Corsican politics–but she nonetheless quickly sees through a series of intentionally placed red herrings and deduces that Rudi's kidnapping is a ploy to distract attention from the real nationalist terrorists, one of whom is the commissioner heading the investigation. However, while the heroine successfully identifies the Corsican terrorists and saves Rudi by locating the kidnappers, she ostensibly fails at reading the other code she attempts to break in this novel: that of her own son's sexuality.

The intrigue regarding Jim and Rudi's potential queerness functions as a frame for the crime story. The question of their sexuality is raised early in the narrative, before the crime plot begins to unfold, on the Wertebachs' first night in Paris. Lena is unable to sleep soundly and gets up several times in the early morning hours to go the restroom. On one of these trips, as she passes the door to the room shared by Jim and Rudi, Lena overhears sounds whose connotation she reads as unmistakably sexual. Although she does not deliberately eavesdrop, Lena pauses when she makes out whispers and sighs against the background of a creaking bed. These are followed by moans in her son's voice that escalate into what sounds like an orgasm:

> *Bitte*, hatte mein Sohn immer wieder gesagt, *bitte, bitte, bitte*. Er hatte seinen Orgasmus regelrecht herbeigebetet. . . . (30)[16]
>
> *Please*, my son had said over and over, *please, please, please*. He had literally prayed his orgasm into being. . . .

While Lena is embarrassed by her sense that she has intruded, albeit unintentionally, into her son's private life, she is far from surprised by what she has heard. She admits, "Ich hatte es immer geahnt" ("I had always suspected it," 31). After all, Jim has never expressed an interest in the fairer sex, and Lena has believed for quite some time that there is a queer quality to the intensity of his attachment to Rudi. Although she imagined that the teenage boys harbored deep feelings for one another, never before has she suspected that they might engage in sexual activities with one another. In the aftermath of this first night in Paris, the mother reads all indications of Jim's distress over his kidnapped friend within the context of a presumed romantic and sexual relationship.

Lena's concern for the missing Rudi and her grieving son is accompanied by a growing obsession with their sexual identity, and her thoughts on this subject are often accompanied by confusion and emotional turmoil. The combination of emotions evoked by her initial reaction–

[16] All quotes from *Weibersommer* are taken not from the original edition mentioned above, but rather from the 2001 Fischer edition (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2001).

her face is a bright red and she feels "[v]erwirrt und stolz und verängstigt" ("[c]onfused and proud and scared"; 31)–suggests that Lena immediately associates her son's supposed homosexuality with her own experiences as a lesbian.[17] Thus, while Lena's assumption that Jim is gay is based on a logical interpretation of multiple codes for homosexuality, it is also constructed as the fulfillment of an identificatory fantasy projected from mother to son. Although Lena's initial response is imbued with pride, an affirmative stance, and confusion and fear, which are more distancing and skeptical, her subsequent ruminations on the subject reveal that confusion and fear play more powerful roles in dictating her reactions:

> Ich hatte mir gesagt, dass ich nichts dagegen haben durfte. Dass gerade eine lesbische Mutter Verständnis für das Schwulsein ihres Sprösslings haben müsse, hatte ich mir eingeredet. Aber jetzt, da ich sicher war, wusste ich nicht mehr, wie ich mich verhalten sollte. Vielleicht war ich deshalb so streng. (31)
>
> I had told myself that I was not allowed to have anything against it. I had persuaded myself that especially a lesbian mother should have some understanding for the homosexuality of her offspring. But now that I was sure, I no longer knew how I should act. Perhaps this is why I was so strict.

Even as Lena asserts that being a gay parent should entail a sympathetic outlook on the queerness of one's own child, her use of a subjunctive verb form indicates that she does not, in fact, understand it, nor is she inclined to tolerate it. Lena's uncertainty about how to act, coupled with the increasing strictness that accompanies her growing certainty about Jim's homosexuality, hints at the possibility that her feelings are marked by an internalized homophobia. And, perhaps even more importantly in the context of my project, Lena's confusion and compensatory gestures point to the destabilizing effect that the hermeneutical work of interpreting sexual identity can have on the very person who is doing the interpreting. While Lena may claim that she is now certain that her son is gay, the meanings of signs denoting sexuality can be assigned in multiple ways, and Lena's insecurity betrays a subconscious acknowledgement that she cannot be entirely sure that her reading is the one and only correct interpretation. The text therefore affirms that the reading of sexual identities, which themselves can shift in time and space, is based on the interpretation of codes that are ambiguous, unstable and contingent.

It is not until after the mystery of Rudi's kidnapping receives complete closure that Lena obtains an answer to her questions about the boys and their night-time activities. After the successful conclusion of the crime investigation, the final two chapters of the novel highlight the reading of Jim's sexuality. The chain of events culminating in an awkward discussion between mother and son is set off when, upon Rudi's safe return to the family, Jim is pressured by another boy to reveal that he has gotten a tattoo of Rudi's name on his shoulder. Rudi is impressed and moved: he responds approvingly, "Geil" ("Cool," 247), and pulls his friend closer so that he can lay his head on the tattoo. Jim, fearing that his best friend might have been lost forever, has literally written his affection for Rudi into his flesh. He stutters, "Jetzt … bist du … immer … bei mir"

[17] In mentioning both *pride* and *fear*, this passage evokes two activist movements associated with queer identity politics, *Gay Pride* and *Gay Shame*. The first is a celebration that seeks to increase the visibility of homosexuality and promote equal rights, while the second is a countermovement that interrogates desires for gay assimilation and equality, foregrounding the connections between power and various identity categories.

("Now … you are … always … with me," 247). Jim's embarrassment in this moment of exposure appears to indicate an emotional excess, which Lena reads as a confirmation of her conviction that the teenagers are lovers. Watching Rudi as his face comes into physical contact with Jim's corporeal text, the boys' mothers are unsure how to interpret or react to these events. Lena comments:

> Um diesem Rührstück ein Ende zu setzen, hätte ich die Automatik gebraucht. Ein paar Schüsse in die Decke, und alle wären in Deckung gegangen. (247)
>
> In order to bring this moving drama to an end, I would have needed the automatic [pistol]. A couple of shots into the ceiling and everyone would have taken cover.

Her reaction juxtaposes a fantasized act entailing the threat of violence—the shooting of a gun—with the mention of two types of cover—*Decke* (meaning both *ceiling* and *blanket*) and *Deckung* (meaning *cover* or *coverage*). This combination evokes multiple literal and figurative associations with notions of danger, fear, concealing, and safety, all of which resonate with the tropes of the metaphorical closet, a euphemism for homosexuals who do not want their sexual identities to be known. The fact that, for Lena, these associations come up here, at a moment when Jim and Rudi are putting their affections on display rather than concealing them, suggests that she is unsettled by their queer spectacle and would be more comfortable if the boys were to keep their feelings out of the public eye. In addition, her desire to end this spectacle with an act that implies violence once again raises the spectres of gay shame and homophobia.

On the plane back to Berlin, Lena ponders the two questions that remain open after the closing of Rudi's kidnapping case. One of these questions pertains to the crime–it regards the identity of a woman who assisted the kidnappers–and the other is more personal. While Lena acknowledges that, despite her desire to understand all of the details of the case, she does not need to know the answer to the first question, she feels compelled to answer the second question:

> Es genügte eigentlich, wenn es ihm [Gabriel Guéro, dem französischen Kommissar] bekannt war, nur mein bürokratischer Komplettierungswahn verlangte nach einer Antwort. Die zweite Frage betraf Jim und Rudi. Die Antwort ging nur mich und meinen Sohn etwas an. (254)
>
> It actually sufficed if [Gabriel Guéro, the French commissar] knew, it was just that my bureaucratic obsession with closure demanded an answer. The second question pertained to Jim and Rudi. The answer concerned only my son and me.

In pairing these unresolved mysteries with one another, the text constructs a parallel between the identification of criminals and the decoding of sexuality. However, the decoding of sexuality appears to be privileged by the very fact that Lena tolerates a lack of closure with respect to the criminal but not with respect to the question of sexual identity.

And so Lena pulls Jim aside for a mother-son talk. As the detective tells her son that she admires the depth of his feelings for his best friend, her embarrassment and profuse perspiration betray the lack of confidence and certainty of an otherwise secure figure. The destabilization of Lena's

usual poise at the very moment at which she attempts to communicate about and unequivocally ascertain sexuality points once again to the emotional effect that decoding and articulating sexuality can have on interpreters who are always potentially fallible because they read multivalent codes that are vulnerable to misinterpretation. Lena has trouble finding the right words to address the issue with Jim, and attempts to reformulate and complete her opening sentence several times. Yet Jim interrupts his mother to explain that, knowing that she was outside their bedroom door on that first night in Paris, the boys had intentionally misled her:

> Wir haben nur so getan. . . . Bisschen rumgestöhnt und so. Damit du dir 'nen Kopp machst. [*sic*] (255)
>
> We just pretended. . . . Moaned a little and all. To make you worry.

Lena's follow-up inquiry, "Ihr habt nicht … miteinander …?" ("You didn't … with each other …?") is cut off by Jim's curt "Nö" ("Nope," 255), an abrupt response that raises a new question: what exactly is Jim denying? Lena's query remains incompletely articulated because she has trouble choosing her words and Jim replies before she can finish her sentence. Perhaps due to her embarrassment at being caught eavesdropping and at misreading the boys' red herring, Lena fails to perceive the indeterminacy of this exchange: the act referenced by Jim's denial is unclear, and although Jim appears to deny having slept with Rudi on that particular night, he does not claim that it has never happened. While Jim ostensibly answers his mother's question, both the question and the answer call for interpretation on behalf of both parties–and on behalf of the reader as well–and thus remain shrouded in ambiguity.

In this passage, a mother is faced with the choice between two narratives about her son's sexual identity, each telling a different story. Is Jim's night-time moaning the red herring, or is the red herring rather his casual dismissal of his mother's concerns? We should also note that, even if Jim's statement here is read as a reliable representation of his intentions and actions on the night in question, it still leaves open the possibility that he and Rudi have been sexually intimate at other times in the past. Lena, however, does not appear to notice this ambiguity. Within the boundaries of this text, Lena concludes that her gaydar has failed her and that she has misread her own son's sexual identity. This misreading is juxtaposed with the commissioner's honed detective instincts, which have enabled her to catch the criminals and liberate Rudi from captivity, solving a mystery that the local and national authorities were unable to unravel. On the surface, then, as a tool for detecting, gaydar collapses into an unfulfilled fantasy of identificatory code-reading, while the professional work of interpreting clues and cracking the crime case is privileged.

Although the *Weibersommer* narrative ends there, thus answering the question of Jim's sexuality in a manner that leaves room for negotiation and ambiguity, the next novel in the Lena Wertebach series revisits this issue. Despite Jim's seemingly unequivocal denial of an intimate relationship with Rudi at the conclusion of *Weibersommer*, its sequel, *Weiberschläue*, picks up at a point three years later when Lena harbors misgivings about her son's sincerity. Even at the age of sixteen, Jim shows no interest in girls, and this lack of heterosexual signifiers is the main reason for his mother's suspicion. In addition, Jim still manifests a highly emotional and codependent attachment to Rudi, with whom he spends endless hours behind closed doors in his

bedroom. Once again, Lena's perception of their potential homosexuality begins as a suspicion but progressively develops into a firm belief. This sexual fantasy projection from mother to son–a homophilia of sorts–is the ultimate streamlining of Lena's gendered identity as an intuitive mother with her sexual identity as a lesbian.

Lena's identificatory fantasies also affect, in a minor scene in the novel, her professional interaction with a female colleague. Making a phone call to another department in the police precinct to inquire about a possible lead in a murder investigation, Lena finds herself speaking with Frau Bethke, who follows up the business-related part of their call with a commentary on sexism in police departments, current events, and international police culture. The combination of Frau Bethke's professional agency with her cultural literacy and ideological approach to gender inequality piques Lena's curiosity:

> Im Rauschgiftreferat gab es eine Frau, die nicht nur wie ich auch ein paar Männer kommandieren durfte, sondern die in der Lage war, *The Times* zu lesen. . . . Ich musste diese Frau unbedingt kennen lernen. (100-1)
>
> In the controlled substances department there was a woman who was not only, like me, in command of a couple of men, but who was also capable of reading *The Times*. . . . I absolutely had to meet this woman.

Lena's sudden desire to meet her colleague suggests that Frau Bethke has set off her gaydar and that Lena is responding with interest. However, it remains unclear whether this interest is sexual in nature or whether it is merely a desire to make the acquaintance of a potential professional ally or friend. Lena's inquiry about the possibility of meeting in person–"mit einer Stimme, die nach Süßholz duftete" ("in a voice that smelled of sweet talk"; 101)–reads as an attempt at seduction. Frau Bethke declines in a demonstration of professionalism that evokes multiple gender stereotypes and references markers of heterosexuality, not the least of which is that she is married to a man. Disappointed, Lena gives up:

> So war das also. Ich gestattete mir, das Gespräch zu beenden, denn plötzlich fühlte ich mich an der falschen Adresse. Natürlich war ich freundlich, aber as Bedürfnis, die Bethke zu treffen, hatte mich verlassen. (101)
>
> So that's how it was. I allowed myself to end the conversation because I suddenly felt that I was knocking on the wrong door. Of course I was friendly, but the need to meet Bethke had left me.

She ends the conversation in a "friendly" manner, but it appears that she would have preferred another type of ending altogether, one that would open up other possibilities. Although this scene is a minor one and neither the character of Frau Bethke nor her phone conversation with Lena is referenced again in the novel, it is significant to my analysis because it portrays a situation in which Lena attempts to use her gaydar in a professional context, and thus conflates the work of a police detective with the reading of sexual identity. However, Lena's gaydar malfunctions here, and her concession that she has misread her colleague's signals emphasizes her potential fallibility as an investigator.

On the other hand, *Weiberschläue* confirms Lena's gaydar reading of her son's queer sexuality. Two thirds of the way through the novel, Jim comes out to his mother, a development that suggests that Lena's gaydar might not be in need of a tune-up after all. On a drug-induced high, Jim confesses that he has been sexually involved with another boy named Marcin, but Lena, comprehending that what is really at stake is Jim's love for his best friend, guides the conversation to the topic of Rudi. Lena makes the most of this moment, using it to give Jim compassionate motherly advice on how to communicate with Rudi about their differences of opinion regarding their evolving relationship. At the same time, she relies on her skills as a professional interrogator, evidenced elsewhere in the crime investigation, to find out more about Jim and Rudi's sexual past. She discovers that the two have been sleeping together since the age of twelve, a disclosure that reveals that Jim's denial in *Weibersommer*–he was thirteen at the time–was indeed a red herring, or at best, an incomplete truth. The narrative thus asserts that Lena's suspicions were correct all along. Moreover, Lena demonstrates her ability to read other codes that Jim creates in his attempts to deceive her in her capacity as a detective: when Jim goes missing at school and the police force is called in, Lena is the only officer capable of correctly interpreting the clues that he intentionally leaves behind, and she immediately locates his hiding place. Thus, in opposition to the way in which *Weibersommer* ends, *Weiberschläue* concludes with an alignment of the policewoman's detective skills with her gaydar and with her parental sensitivities.

Conclusion: What's at Stake?

In the vast majority of lesbian detective novels, gaydar functions perfectly, and so there are no surprises in the detection of queer identities. Although sexuality might initially be articulated as a riddle, codes for queer desires and practices match up seamlessly with homosexual identities, and sexuality is ultimately constructed as having stable and predictable contours. In such narratives, the flawless function of gaydar is usually streamlined with successfully executed detective work.

However, in the texts I discuss here, the playful approach to a detective's use of gaydar and the emphasis on its readings and misreadings push the very construction of sexuality and its codes to the fore. What Maria Gronau's *Weibersommer* and *Weiberschläue* have in common with a small number of other German lesbian crime stories of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is that they demonstrate the failure of a queer mediator's gaydar to function within the context of a crime narrative because she takes the information she receives regarding sexuality at face value. Lena wishfully believes in her son's and her colleague's homosexuality for lack of evidence to the contrary. The detective is misled by signs of homosexuality that she does not see as codes, and therefore does not attempt to deconstruct. While the ending of *Weiberschläue*, with its revelation of Jim and Rudi's long-standing intimacy, would appear to confirm the accuracy of Lena's gaydar, thereby constructing a direct relationship between codes for homosexuality and queer identities, other aspects of this text and its prequel do not permit such a seamless reading of this hermeneutical relationship. Even if Lena's gaydar is well-tuned when it comes to her son Jim, it is still off the mark when directed at her colleague, Frau Bethke. We must therefore concede that, while the crime mysteries are solved, codes for queer sexual identity are at least partially destabilized and exposed as inherently ambiguous.

Reuter's joking remark that it may be easier to find traces of a criminal than to use gaydar to identify homosexuals aptly describes what can happen in lesbian detective stories. In *Weibersommer*, the crime narrative finds closure while the question of sexuality remains equivocal. Similarly, in *Weiberschläue*, accurate readings of sexual identity are juxtaposed with unsuccessful ones, while questions raised in the crime investigation are neatly tied up and answered in the end. Unlike criminality, which is anchored in an act, sexuality is incoherent, changeable, and not fixed in action alone. Moreover, codes referencing sexual identities are themselves unstable, unreliable, and multivalent. The failures of gaydar in Gronau's novels highlight the incoherences between signifiers of homosexuality and queer desires, practices and identities. In negotiating these ambiguities, lesbian detective fiction engages, and at the same time critically investigates, desires for identification.