

Dialogues with Tradition: Feminist-Queer Encounters in German Crime Stories at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

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Keywords: Pieke Biermann | feminism | *Mit Zorn, Charme, und Methode* | Lisa Kuppler | gay | lesbian | marginalized identities | gendered conventions | crime novel | gender | queer | queer crime | crime narratives | 21st century | twenty-first century | Edith Kneifl | Birgit Rabisch | Barbara Neuhaus | male-dominated | Thea Dorn | Ursula Steck | Susanne Billig | misreadings | unsolved mysteries | German crime stories

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Abstract

Pieke Biermann's feminist crime collection *Mit Zorn, Charme, und Methode* (1992) and Lisa Kuppler's gay and lesbian anthology *Queer Crime* (2002) engage in a common project, the rewriting of a popular genre to give voice to previously marginalized identities and perspectives. This article investigates the ways in which each volume negotiates the gendered conventions of crime fiction and its subcategories, feminist and queer crime. A comparative analysis of three mysteries from each collection demonstrates the converging and diverging tendencies of feminist and queer representation in turn-of-the-twenty-first century crime narratives. Feminist mysteries by Edith Kneifl, Birgit Rabisch, and Barbara Neuhaus shift generic conventions by aligning narrative perspectives with a feminist world view that destabilizes male-dominated structures through the intervention of a strong female figure who successfully closes the case. By contrast, queer mysteries by Thea Dorn, Ursula Steck, and Susanne Billig destabilize generic conventions and structures of identity altogether, highlighting misreadings and unsolved mysteries through parody, double entendre, and open endings.

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The 1990s witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of fictional female policewomen, detectives, and investigators who took on roles inhabited, until the 1970s and 1980s, almost exclusively by men. The twentieth century was not the first to see female investigators in German-language crime literature: with the invention of Fräulein von Scuderi in 1819, E.T.A. Hoffmann was decades ahead of Edgar Allan Poe's first male detective.¹ Scuderi, however, differs in significant ways from the detectives who walk in her footsteps almost two centuries later. The creation of a male author, Scuderi solves crimes with recourse to character traits ascribed specifically to her gender.² By contrast, female investigators of the 1980s onward, many of whom are created by women, refuse to take gender difference as a given, but rather question and challenge gender categories, empower themselves in the face of patriarchal structures, and push feminist and queer agendas.

At the millenium, the poetics and politics of crime stories continue to evolve such that readers witness considerable variations between mysteries of the 1990s and the early 2000s. How much difference can a decade make? This essay identifies key shifts in feminist and queer crime narratives through an analysis of two anthologies, Pieke Biermann's *Mit Zorn, Charme, und Methode oder: Die Aufklärung ist weiblich!* 'With Wrath, Charm, and Method or: Enlightenment is Feminine!' (1992) and Lisa Kuppler's *Queer Crime: Lesbisch-schwule Krimigeschichten* 'Queer Crime: Lesbian-Gay Crime Stories' (2002), which open up crime fiction to previ-

ously marginalized perspectives. In her afterword, Biermann asks whether women authors “enter into dialogue with the traditions of the genre and/or of their gender” (179).³ Beyond formulating a positive answer to Biermann’s question, my analysis connects this generic dialogue with feminist and queer politics. A comparative examination of short stories with common themes, structures, and narrative perspectives demonstrates the converging and diverging stakes of feminist and queer representation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Historical Contexts and Generic Categories

Feminist crime literature has a relatively short history: it begins with English-language detective fiction by women in the 1970s and 1980s. At a time when many German readers were still consuming Anglo-American novels rather than homegrown crime fiction, German-language feminist crime stories appeared in the mid-1980s and the trend gained momentum in the 1990s. First-wave German and Austrian feminist writers such as Biermann, Sabine Deitmer, and Edith Kneifl, who began to publish between 1987 and 1991, are featured in *Mit Zorn, Charme, und Methode*.⁴ As Martin Grundmann suggests in “The Departure of the Male Hero,” the era saw numerous female characters take on active roles typically occupied by men. The genre “had suddenly become feminine,” notes author and critic Thea Dorn (*Neue F-Klasse* 19).

Some stories highlight not only female and feminist figures but also lesbian and queer identities. Gender and sexual diversity is visible even in the work of authors usually associated with feminist crime rather than with the labels queer or lesbian, such as Biermann, Kneifl, Uta-Maria Heim, or Ingrid Noll.⁵ Writers like Dorn and Susanne Billig publish both feminist and queer texts and enjoy crossover success with straight and gay audiences.⁶ Both Dorn and Billig appear in *Queer Crime*, which also includes writers recognized primarily for their lesbian and queer mysteries, such as Katrin Kremmler and Ursula Steck.⁷

Mit Zorn and *Queer Crime* engage in a common project, critically intervening into the heterosexual male-dominated conventions of mystery writing in which the narrative, plot and resolution are mapped out along gendered lines. In the classic mystery, the investigation and solution are associated with a reasoning male

subject, while the riddle or the object of knowledge is feminized, a scenario which leads Dorn to describe crime as “the most macho of all literary genres” (*Neue F-Klasse* 19).⁸ Investigators are male, and women are cast either as femmes fatales whose sexuality—a red herring—threatens the investigation, or as feminized victims—damsels in distress—who must be saved or redeemed by the male investigators.

By contrast, in Biermann’s and Kuppler’s anthologies, women can be reduced neither to the threat of their sexuality nor to mere victimhood. No longer just distractions or casualties, women are leading characters—investigators as well as criminals—in narratives that spotlight not only gender and sexuality but also the violence that can arise in the policing of these categories. Female narrative perspectives highlight the tangible successes and failures of the women’s and gay rights movements as they manifest in women’s professional and personal lives. Romance, desire, and sexuality are also emphasized in mysteries from both collections in which female subjects take control of their own pleasure.

However, while the two collections do, to paraphrase Biermann, engage crime fiction’s gendered traditions in a shared dialogue, closer analysis reveals that they belong to different subgenres: *Mit Zorn* is feminist crime fiction, while I argue that *Queer Crime* should be understood not only as gay and lesbian crime fiction, but more precisely in terms of a new genre that it helped to create, queer crime. While it can certainly be argued that these narratives are all *Frauenkrimis* ‘women’s crime stories,’ such broad categorization focuses primarily on the gender of their authors, audiences, and characters, and elides critical distinctions among them.⁹ As an overarching label, the *Frauenkrimi* overlaps with subcategories ranging from mainstream to feminist women’s crime fiction, and from *Lesbenkrimis* ‘lesbian crime’ to queer crime. This essay argues that a more precise classification can help to chart not only the changing characteristics of women’s genre fiction, but also the shifting conceptions of gender and sexuality within feminist and queer cultures at the millenium.

Alone the task of defining the *Frauenkrimi* presents a challenge; competing definitions exist alongside the assertion that there is no unified definition. Marianne Vogel suggests that the label functions

as a catch-all for crime stories by female authors rather than as a critical category (50-51).¹⁰ Other critics, such as Anja Kemmerzell and Kirsimarja Tielinen, indicate that the very category of *Frauenkrimi* is problematic.¹¹ Kemmerzell distinguishes between mainstream and feminist *Frauenkrimis*, contending that the latter merits classification as a new genre. In the mainstream *Frauenkrimi*, the traditional male investigator is simply rewritten as a female character and other generic conventions are left untouched, but in its feminist variant, gender and politics are accentuated in a *Weltanschauung* ‘world-view’ that underlines “the social, legal, and psychological limitations that affect women within a patriarchal society” (6). Tielinen similarly describes the feminist *Frauenkrimi* as “closely tied to feminist thought and its political task of exposing and displacing the patriarchal social system” (42). In line with these definitions, I stress that the stories in *Mit Zorn* must be considered feminist *Frauenkrimis* because they assign key roles to women who question and shift the dynamics of male-dominated structures and narratives by uncovering and struggling against sexism and homophobia.

The *Lesbenkrimi* might be understood as a subgenre of the *Frauenkrimi*. Sabine Wilke’s definition of the *Frauenkrimi* implicitly acknowledges such classification when she lists same-sex relationships and sexual diversity among the genre’s themes (256). But even if we view the *Lesbenkrimi* as a type of *Frauenkrimi*, it does not automatically follow that the lesbian variant is feminist, although a connection is frequently presumed to exist.¹² Nicola Barfoot clarifies, “While a lesbian lifestyle may be considered to constitute an implicit challenge to patriarchal norms, it does not necessarily go hand in hand with an explicit feminist analysis” (90). Odile Kennel questions the *Lesbenkrimi*’s “claim to be feminist,” determining that there is nothing inherently feminist about the subgenre (39). Some go so far as to suggest that the *Lesbenkrimi*’s use of stereotypes is anti-feminist: “Especially lesbian crime stories, with their mostly cliché-laden and kitschy love and bed scenes, call for the resistance of enlightened minds” (“Mordslust” 32). This citation evokes one dimension of the genre that, authors and critics concur, distinguishes the *Lesbenkrimi*: it emphasizes romance and eroticism. In her discussion of Anglo-American texts, Paulina Palmer affirms that a “focus on sex is, in fact, a distinctive feature of lesbian crime fic-

tion, differentiating it from lesbian fiction of a more general kind in which it occurs less frequently” (“Lesbian Feminist Thriller” 21).¹³ Indeed, sex takes center stage in four of five of the stories by German authors in *Queer Crime* with female main characters; in the fifth, sex is absent but romance is a central theme. Thus it would be fair to categorize these stories as *Lesbenkrimis*. However, I will argue that they can be better understood as part of a new subgenre, which I identify as queer crime.

Unlike the labels discussed above, queer crime cannot be described with reference to previous critical or scholarly work. To my knowledge, there exists no definition of the term, although the title of Kuppler’s collection implies such a classification, whose meaning is perhaps self-evident. Because the category is crucial to my analysis, I shall here define the genre. As a first step, I identify it as a subgenre of crime fiction related to but not subsumed under the *Frauenkrimi* or identical with *Lesbenkrimi*: though its tropes and politics intersect with those of feminist and lesbian texts, queer crime is the exclusive domain of neither women nor gay authors.¹⁴ On one hand, queer crime constructs more complex and nuanced identities than labels such as woman, lesbian, or heterosexual imply.¹⁵ It thematizes the very blurring or transgression of these categories and often refuses to answer questions of identity neatly and coherently. On the other hand, queer crime entails a poetic approach and narrative content beyond the mere inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender characters. Queer mysteries narrativize identity as messy, performative, and spinning out along multiple axes, juxtaposing these constructions with the search for identity and identification that lies at the heart of the crime genre. Queer crime highlights the work of reading—and misreading—in solving the mystery by choosing among multiple possible meanings and interpretations.¹⁶ Not just because of the title, then, the mysteries in *Queer Crime* can be assigned to this genre: altogether, they take a playful, destabilizing approach to identity, and they also highlight other dimensions of queerness in their approaches to generic conventions and narrative closure.

The following sections further develop this reading of feminist and queer crime genres through an analysis of six short stories from Biermann’s and Kuppler’s collections. The first section examines

female corpses and crime investigations in Kneifl's "Das blühende Leben" 'Flourishing Life' (1992) and Dorn's "Blowjob" (2002). The second section highlights lesbian motherhood and child custody in Birgit Rabisch's "Eier im Glas" 'Eggs in a Glass' (1992) and Steck's "Vermisst" 'Missing' (2002). A third section emphasizes illness and memory in Barbara Neuhaus's "Frantiček" (1992) and Billig's "Dora" (2002). This comparative study demonstrates the congruences and incongruences between feminist crime of the 1990s and queer crime of the early 2000s, as well as the converging and diverging stakes of the genres' narrative politics.

The Corpse Speaks: Victims' Narratives in "Das blühende Leben" and "Blowjob"

In Kneifl's "Das blühende Leben" and Dorn's "Blowjob," the female corpse literally speaks, commenting on her murder and its investigation. But the victim's account of the crime is not the only one to which the reader has access. Kneifl's tale includes two alternating narrative voices: the victim Frau Rittmeister's first-person inner monologue, accessible only to the reader, and the dialogue among her neighbors and lovers, told from an unembodied third-person perspective. This alternation creates conflicting accounts and casts Rittmeister's friends as unreliable speakers. In Dorn's text, the majority of the story is narrated in the first person by the victim Sonja, who addresses her unnamed killer in the second person. But the story ends with the medical examiner's autopsy report, a detached scientific description of the evidence and the cause of death. The radical change in voice at the end of the story genders both narratives and highlights the multiplicity of possible interpretations of the same event.

By articulating the perspectives of deceased victims who literally cannot speak for themselves, Kneifl's and Dorn's texts privilege a point of view often absent in crime literature. They give the reader access to the victim's experience while foregrounding the discrepancies between different accounts and different kinds of language about the crimes and their victims. The shifts in narrative voice demonstrate both texts' engagement in the feminist project of creating a democratic forum for multiple voices, including the disenfranchised and marginalized.

While these stories thus work toward a shared feminist goal,

their form and content also produce divergent commentaries on social and legal processes. Both texts articulate critiques through the construction of a male character who represents a patriarchal system that works to silence and eclipse female voices. In “Das blühende Leben,” this system is deconstructed as ineffectual at serving justice, and the female-centered narrative prevails. “Blowjob” privileges the male voice but also criticizes and subverts it, indirectly commenting on gendered language and the limitations of a purely scientific narrative.

In Kneiff’s text, Rittmeister’s inner monologue frames the story—she gets the first and last word—but her neighbor Frau Huber’s intervention solves the mystery of her death. The intrusive neighbor creates a people’s court in the living room of the deceased, where she discusses the case with Rittmeister’s neighbors and lovers, interrogating and accusing each of the murder. Her investigation both reinforces the female gendering of the narrative’s organization and discredits the efforts of the male figure who attempts to take charge of the inquiry. Herr Hofrat, who suggests that the best way to solve the crime is to let (male) authorities handle it, stands in for a patriarchal system that endeavors to control and silence unruly women. However, his inability to manage the dissemination of information implies that an official intervention might be as ineffective as his capacity to maintain an erection as Rittmeister’s sexual partner. Closure is only achieved through the women’s narratives and investigations: first Rittmeister’s monologue recounts her death at the hand of a postman who absconded with her money order; then Huber confirms Rittmeister’s narrative by correctly rereading the available clues and deducing the murderer’s identity. “Das blühende Leben” thus depicts the patriarchal system as unable to serve justice and places the narrative firmly in control of female characters.

While Kneiff’s text privileges Rittmeister’s position as its organizing consciousness by giving her the first and last word, in Dorn’s “Blowjob” it is the male scientist who gets the last word, declaring the mechanism of the victim’s death. Univ.-Prof. Dr. med. Heinrich Sternberg’s numerous titles superficially justify his narrative authority, but this excess of validation takes on parodic contours. Although the story ends with his report, which identifies the victim as thirty-one-year-old Sonja Wagner, Sternberg is unable to identify

the perpetrator; his narrative thus remains limited and incomplete. Like Sternberg, Sonja does not know her killer's name—she calls her “meine Fe” ‘my Fe,’ perhaps an abbreviation of the word *Fee* ‘fairy’—but she does know who the killer *is* and can account for their intimacy in ways that the doctor cannot. While Sonja's first-person narrative reads as a romantic fantasy of seduction, Dr. Sternberg's report highlights the cold, hard facts of the case. The two converge in their instrumentalization of the body: Sonja describes her body as a vessel for pleasure, while the doctor uses the corpse to determine the circumstances of death. Sternberg concludes that the evidence is insufficient to determine whether the death was intentional or accidental. Sonja, however, indicates that “Fe's” fatal actions were as purposeful as they were romantic, indicating that the encounter was intended to provide her with the greatest imaginable pleasure. The story's conclusion appears to privilege the aloof, male-dominated scientific narrative, but its open ending suggests a queer critique of the eclipsing of an intimate story with unsentimental medical language. The missing identity of the murderer, which neither narrative can provide, further queers this constellation.

A third similarity between Kneifl's and Dorn's texts is that they foreground representations of the nude body and female sexuality. Both stories are sex-positive and play with the trope of the beautiful female corpse. “Das blühende Leben” highlights competing narratives about women's sexuality while claiming an erotic subjecthood for the corpse. “Blowjob” takes this a step further, drawing queer connections between sexuality and violence.

In Kneifl's story, the representation of the victim emphasizes the hypocrisy of prudish attitudes about female nudity and promotes the feminist ideal of women's sexual freedom. The narrative opens with the comical image of a deceased naked woman unable to answer her ringing door. Rittmeister describes herself as “*zu alt, um mich halb nackt zu zeigen*” ‘too old to show myself half-naked’ (47, emphasis in the original), but this attitude seems more obligatory than sincere; in fact, she is curious to see her visitors' reactions. Huber, who finds the corpse together with her lover Josef, ostensibly covers it up “*aus Pietät*” ‘for piety's sake,’ but her real motive is probably to mitigate Josef's potential arousal by the body of his former lover (48). Huber's implied fear ascribes erotic potential to the fe-

male corpse, a trope that recalls the Romantic ideal of *schöner Tod* 'beautiful death.' Rittmeister's memories of sex and pleasure with multiple lovers attribute an erotic subjecthood to the corpse. These overt representations of desire take a sex-positive stance over more traditional values, represented by Huber's hypocritical comments about proper sexual behavior. "Das blühende Leben" thus figures as a feminist rewriting of the canonical representation of the romantic corpse, embracing the trope not only as an object position, but also as the embodiment of a female erotic subject.

Dorn's "Blowjob" also plays with the trope of the beautiful female corpse by foregrounding the nude female body, through which it articulates queer constructions of gender and sexuality. The title introduces the story as potentially pornographic in content and queers the very expression that it announces: "blow job" is slang for fellatio, which is typically performed on men, not on women. Subverting this terminology, "Blowjob" engages a queer critique of gender-based and heteronormative constructions of identity by distancing the sexual act from the gender of its participants and shifting it toward the dynamics of performance.

With its erotic content, "Blowjob" participates in a defining convention of lesbian crime writing, but also queers this constellation. Queer sex is quite literally the crime: an erotic act between two women is the cause of death. But despite the violence of the sex murder, the victim's narrative is quite sentimental. At the same time, the romance of the encounter is downplayed with animalistic depictions of "Fe" as a sexual predator and Sonja as her prey, which call to mind another boundary-crossing sexuality, sadomasochism. Like the beautiful corpse in "Das blühende Leben," this representation evokes a Romantic trope connecting love with a woman's death: "Ich habe dich geliebt, meine Fe, und jetzt liege ich auf diesem kalten Tisch und kann mich nicht mehr bewegen" 'I loved you, my Fe, and now I lie on this cold table and can no longer move' (176). But the text pushes this further, for Sonja's murder is not so much a tragic consequence of queer desire as a desired outcome, and therefore its ultimate fulfillment. It carries out and rewrites the warnings Sonja has heard—"Kind, schau, in wen du dich verliebst! Ich schaute dich an und wusste, es ist richtig, auch wenn es mein letzter Fehler ist" 'Child, be careful whom you fall in love with! I looked at you and

knew: it is right, even if it is my last mistake’—that read as a caution against homosexuality (177). The affirmation of Sonja’s death as not a last mistake but as right, a definitive expression of pleasure and love, is the ultimate validation of queer desire.

Dykes with Tykes: Lesbians and Motherhood in “Eier im Glas” and “Vermisst”

While the stories in *Queer Crime* feature gay, lesbian, or queer sexuality as a given, this is the case with only one contribution to *Mit Zorn*. The sole lesbian mystery in Kuppler’s volume, Rabisch’s “Eier im Glas,” shall be read here alongside Steck’s “Vermisst,” with which it shares a focus on sexuality, procreation, and motherhood. In “Eier im Glas,” pregnant police commissioner Inga Ruben investigates the sex murder of recently-divorced Petra Schröder-Herlau. In “Vermisst,” lesbian police officer Elsa visits a women’s retreat in Denmark after failing to solve a missing child case. The stories emphasize the connections between their main characters’ personal and professional lives: both Inga and Elsa are high-ranking officers in their late thirties who struggle with their feelings about the crimes they investigate. Inga’s experience is overtly gendered and constructs a clear moral universe, while Elsa’s reactions destabilize identity politics and moral interpretations. Although both texts foreground lesbian identity and its relationship to the crime investigation, they construct sexuality in very different ways.

Rabisch’s heterosexual Inga, who is in the last trimester of her pregnancy, responds to the criminal investigation in ways that emphasize her gender, suggesting that she possesses an innate sense of justice. When her job confronts her with an unjust or violent scenario, her visceral reaction begins with the fetus: “Auf das Bild, das sich Hauptkommissarin Ruben von der offenen Zimmertür aus bot, reagierte das Baby in ihrem Bauch mit heftigen Fußstritten” “The scene that greeted Police Commissioner Ruben through the open bedroom door brought about vigorous kicking by the baby in her belly’ (112). The causal relationship implies that Inga—as well as her unborn child—can intuit right and wrong, which is confirmed when Inga’s bad feeling about the lesbian fertility clinic director, Dr. Lisbach, leads to the crime’s solution. This black-and-white characterization of a police officer with an inherent sense of justice and a criminal who emanates wickedness constructs competing models

of gender and sexuality. On one hand, it pushes a feminist agenda that challenges patriarchal values: her sense of justice indicates that Inga is an effective police officer, contesting her coworkers' misogynistic accusations that women are too family-oriented to succeed in law enforcement. On the other hand, there is a homophobic dimension to the characterization of Dr. Lisbach as an evil lesbian perpetrator who will stop at nothing, even murder, to protect her career. Lesbianism is portrayed as inherently destructive: every gay or potentially gay female character is linked to the perpetration of a crime, be it blackmail or murder. At the same time, these crimes can be read in the story as a critique of homophobia: for instance, Dr. Lisbach's sexuality is grounds for blackmail in the conservative world of medicine. By linking lesbians to victim and perpetrator positions, the text both reiterates homophobic tropes and critiques sexual discrimination.

Similarly, while "Eier im Glas" ostensibly argues for the rights of lesbians and unmarried women to receive insemination, the juxtaposition of lesbian mothers with a pregnant heterosexual woman creates an implicit hierarchy of motherhood. If the text appears to take a critical distance from the nosy neighbor who describes a child's non-biological lesbian mother as "gar nich die richtige Mutter!" 'not at all the real mother!' (115), it also indicates that biological heterosexuality is the preferred form of motherhood. The insinuation that there is something odd or illicit about lesbian motherhood also lingers behind Inga's rumination, conveyed by the narrator, "Wie kompliziert das Kinderkriegen in der heutigen Zeit sein konnte!" 'How complicated it could be to have a child these days!' (118). However, Inga expresses her ignorance of these complications when she asks the doctor if a lesbian pregnancy might be achieved "auf natürlichem Wege" 'naturally' (121). Instead, the story suggests that lesbians who wish to become mothers must resort to dangerous or criminal activities. Dr. Lisbach describes Petra, an aspiring mother who blackmails her for egg implants, as so "neurotisch in ihrem Kinderwunsch" 'neurotic in her desire to have children' that she becomes "unberechenbar" 'unpredictable' (122). Were it not for this characterization of Petra as obsessed, potentially even psychologically ill, the story might read as an all-out indictment of German society's resistance to reproductive rights for lesbi-

ans and unmarried women. However, coupled with the description of the would-be lesbian mother as fixated and unstable, the story's feminist intentions are partially undermined by the homophobic implications of its identity constructions.

Steck's lesbian Elsa is single and childless, and she struggles to cope with an intense sense of loss after the failed search for the missing child Mandy Breuer. Her wish for "einen Ort, wo nicht hinter jedem Strauch Mandy liegen konnte" 'a place where Mandy was not potentially lying behind every bush' (71) takes her to a women's retreat on a Danish island, where she hopes to recuperate from the disappointment of the unsolved case. There she meets the lesbian couple Raggi and Margret and their daughter Linda, who bears a striking resemblance to the missing Mandy, raising Elsa's suspicions. Like Inga, Elsa has a feeling that something is not quite right about the lesbian suspects, but Elsa's suspicions are never validated. Attempting to make sense of clues that point in different directions, Elsa must carefully weigh her sympathies for both families, the Breuers and Raggi and Margret. Locating this conflict in a retreat occupied exclusively by lesbians, the text critically addresses identity politics with an emphasis on Elsa's alienation from the other guests, whose manner she perceives as "total persönlich und gleichzeitig distanziert, einer der Widersprüche der alternativen Frauenszene" 'totally personal and at the same time distanced, one of the contradictions of the alternative women's scene' (85). This playful approach to identity, which is further underlined by the guessing game the women play at the dinner table, addresses the fragmentation of feminist and lesbian politics and culture. The text deconstructs gender and sexuality as the basis for political solidarity when Elsa feels ethically obligated to leave the resort in pursuit of the two potentially criminal lesbians.

"Vermisst" constructs a range of lesbian identities that include the first-person narrator-investigator, criminal suspects, and innocent bystanders. By foregrounding multiple lesbian characters who are neither victims nor perpetrators, "Vermisst" avoids falling into the same trap as "Eier im Glas," in which homosexuality is linked to criminality. Instead, Steck's story portrays diverse queer relationships by including couples and families at various life stages. When Elsa suspects that Linda might be Mandy, a conflict arises between

different models of parenthood that echoes and revises the dynamics of Rabisch's "Eier im Glas." This constellation places biological fatherhood in competition with adoptive lesbian motherhood. On one hand, Thomas Breuer, Mandy's father, is validated as the natural and rightful parent, even in the absence of her mother, who he claims forfeited custody. On the other hand, Raggi and Margret's custody rights are questioned because neither is Linda's biological parent (Linda was birthed by Margret's ex-girlfriend). Nonetheless, in contrast to "Eier im Glas," "Vermisst" makes a direct plea for lesbian parenting rights. The text sympathetically portrays Margret and Raggi as conscientious and caring, and their relationship to Linda is marked by compassion and respect.

Another significant distinction between these two texts is their approach to narrative closure. While Rabisch's narrative ends with closure on all fronts, Steck's story forecloses this possibility. In "Eier im Glas," the investigation is wrapped up in a timely fashion; on her last day of work before maternity leave, Inga solves the crime. Concluding with the identification of the murderer as Dr. Lisbach, the story echoes an age-old imperative of crime fiction, "Cherchez la femme": where there is trouble, a woman is its cause. This is a happy ending for Inga, suggesting that her career will benefit from this successful solution, despite her male supervisor's disappointment in her decision to start a family. Thus the conclusion adheres to a traditional gendered convention of crime fiction while also voicing optimism for the feminist cause.

In "Vermisst," on the other hand, there is no such closure: three cases are left unsolved. The case of the missing Mandy is still open, as is the question of whether Mandy and Linda are the same person. Moreover, it is unknown whether Raggi and Margret are innocent or guilty of child abduction. And finally, the potential romance between Elsa and Sonja, her love interest, is left open, for the reader does not know which way Elsa is headed at the end of the story: is she after Raggi and Margret, or is she going to meet Sonja? These open questions queer the crime narrative by refusing to provide closure, destabilizing identity concepts, and rejecting easy answers. The conclusion of "Vermisst," with its ongoing pursuit of Mandy, of Raggi and Margret, and of romantic possibilities, revises the imperative driving Rabisch's story, "Cherchez la femme," shortening it

to “Cherchez,” for here there is no answer, just the search.

Memory, Malady, and Mayhem: Escaping the Past in “Frantiček” and “Dora”

Despite the overt differences between their structures and themes, Neuhaus’s “Frantiček” and Billig’s “Dora” share a preoccupation with memory, through which the central female character confronts haunting visions of a male enemy. Both stories portray illness and criminality as symptoms of an oppressive social order. “Frantiček” connects memories of the GDR and Czechoslovakia with institutionalized misogyny, suggesting that socialist society is literally and figuratively cold, especially for its female citizens. In “Dora,” an institutionalized narrator conflates memory with fantasy as she recalls her love affair with Dora, whose husband she killed.

In “Frantiček,” memory of the GDR is introduced by a present-day frame that casts German unification as a scenario of imprisonment and escape. “Frantiček” opens with narrator Karla’s promotion in the Berlin police department. After moving to a new office, she sorts through papers and stumbles across a memento from Franzensbad, a wellness spa in Czechoslovakia, which brings a flood of memories from a case she solved in 1987. Because she will later discard the souvenir, this recollection is part of a cathartic process: Karla works through her East German past so that she can look toward her professional future. The past and future are aligned with distinctly politicized experiences of gender in the workplace.

Karla’s memory of Franzensbad highlights the sense of imprisonment and lack of agency many women experienced in the GDR. It constructs a socialist order from which there is no escape, even if one leaves the country—since even this departure places the narrator in yet another socialist state. Karla is given no choice when she receives orders to undergo a *Kur* ‘treatment’ at Franzensbad, and once there, she has no control over her daily routine. To make matters worse, she almost becomes a victim of a nighttime break-in, and potentially even more violent crimes, when a man whispering the name “Frantiček” attempts to climb into her window (104). Although Karla drives away the intruder and successfully avoids victimhood, she is later pressured by a male colleague not to report the incident. Major Kniebarth dismisses Karla’s claims on the basis of her gender, suggesting that her femininity negates her credibil-

ity, which could have negative consequences for her career: “Man wird sagen, daß du, anstatt brav zu kuren, diverse Kerle angemacht hast, und einer von denen hat deine Angebote ernstgenommen. Das ganze wird natürlich nach Berlin gemeldet, und dort kriegst du den Ärger.” “They will say that, instead of obediently getting your wellness treatments, you hit on various guys, and one of them took your offer seriously. The whole thing will be reported to Berlin and you’ll pay for it there’ (104). Kniebarth’s admonition reads as a threat, indicating that credibility is predicated on gender. Coupled with the portrayal of the perpetrator, Herr Bogumil, as preying exclusively on women, this gendered constellation locates “Frantiček” among feminist crime stories seeking to reveal the misogynist workings of patriarchal values. Karla reluctantly follows Kniebarth’s advice, and soon another woman falls victim to the same crime. This second victim indicates that the well-being of other women is at stake if feminists fail to stand up and resist sexism.

The story concludes with Karla facing a new professional situation: she can choose to keep working for the state or enter the private sector, a shift that mirrors the transformation from the socialist GDR to capitalist unified Germany. As she contemplates leaving law enforcement to become a private detective, Karla sheds the baggage of the past by disposing of the Franzensbad card and decides to stay on the police force. With this upbeat conclusion, Neuhaus’s narrative acknowledges the limitations that shaped women’s lives as recently as the late 1980s and marks the progress made toward the feminist goal of gender equality in the workplace.

In “Dora,” the tension between imprisonment and freedom also plays out on multiple levels and is punctuated by friction between past and present. Although the unnamed narrator opens by declaring, “Ich werde diesen Ort mit den Füßen voran verlassen” ‘I will leave this place with my feet first,’ this is a mere fantasy of mobility, for she is locked in a cell, alone with memories and daydreams (244). On a small bed in a grey room devoid of decorations, the narrator reminisces about her first encounters with her lover Dora, whom she met at a sauna. Her nostalgic recollections of the good times spent with Dora are interrupted by two events: her recurring vision of killing Dora’s husband Henrik, and Dora’s visits to the institution, which usually end with Dora saying she must go home to

her husband.

Not only is its narrator unreliable, but Billig's story also withholds all forms of closure that one might expect from a traditional crime story. Even a classification of the text as a crime story is problematic, for it is unclear whether a crime has been perpetrated; the recurring visions of Henrik's bloody death, as well as the love affair with Dora, may simply be creations of the narrator's delusional mind, serving to distract her from the daily routine of imprisonment. By withholding closure and foregoing concrete solutions to these enigmas, the story actively queers the conventions of crime writing. Unlike "Frantiček," in which the crime, its investigation, and its solution are lucidly articulated within a clear framework, in "Dora" none of these tropes is unequivocal, and the narrative's development is so non-linear that it becomes difficult to determine what happened first, or what happened at all. There is no crime investigation; in fact, the only investigation to speak of is the reader's necessary attempt to make sense of many conflicting and unresolved elements of the narrative. Such playfulness with generic conventions aligns the text with the queer crime trend of eschewing clear answers to the riddles posed in favor of nuanced conclusions requiring the reader's hermeneutic intervention.

Neuhaus's and Billig's stories also diverge in their constructions of gender and sexuality, negotiating female desire in drastically different ways. "Frantiček" defuses the erotic potential of female sexual subjectivity when Karla overcomes her attraction to the Czech policeman Pavel Slavata. Angered by Slavata's inefficient handling of the case, Karla calms herself down by picturing him nude, and her imaginative game dismisses Slavata as a potential object of desire: "Es zeigte sich bald, er gab nicht viel her" 'It soon became clear that he did not provide much fodder' (109). This scenario both divests Karla of desirous tendencies and redirects remaining erotic potential into the solution of the crime. It is noteworthy that when she solves the mystery, Karla overcomes her desire for Slavata. Neuhaus's story therefore replicates a tradition of the conventional male-centered crime story by controlling female sexuality with the validation of reason over desire in a tidy solution to the crime. Although this crime is solved by a female and not a male investigator, the radical potential of this replacement is tempered by the dismissal of her

sexual subjectivity. The story fulfills the expectations of the genre's more conventional traditions in neutralizing female erotic desire and channeling it into the investigation.

While "Frantiček" redirects the potential of female desire, "Dora" embraces and queers it. Dora, it seems, walks the world freely precisely because she can pass as straight, living an outwardly conventional life as a housewife with two children. Her sexuality is never labeled, but she actively desires and has relationships with partners of both sexes. Although the text suggests that Dora becomes involved with the narrator not for passion but rather to escape her boredom, her sexuality nonetheless cannot be classified as straight or gay. The text thus constructs a multidimensional sexual identity that does not fit neatly into a monolithic category.

In Billig's story, erotic moments between Dora and the narrator are described in explicit and unromantic terms. Such representations situate "Dora" alongside Dorn's "Blowjob": both operate within the conventions of lesbian crime writing, in which eroticism is a defining element. "Dora" not only includes a recurring queer castration fantasy (visions of killing Henrik first with a screwdriver and later with a power drill), but also vividly portrays lesbian sexual encounters, queering their erotic impact by interspersing them with references to the unpleasant, unromantic sides of sex. These include, for instance, Dora's inappropriate pillow talk—"Sie stößt ihre Hand in mich, während ich stöhne, spricht sie von ihm" 'She thrusts her hand into me, while I moan, she talks about him' (247)—and the narrator's postcoital feeling of debasement—"Auf dem Linoleumboden nimmt sie mich, bis ich schreie, aus Lust, aus Scham, aus Demütigung" 'On the linoleum floor she takes me, until I scream for desire, for shame, for humiliation' (250). These moments are always followed by the mention of Henrik's death or a replay of his execution. Sex is depicted alongside murder and mayhem in similarly gruesome terms—according to the narrator, both have their exquisitely beautiful and excruciatingly painful sides. Billig's text thus constitutes a sobering contribution to the genre of queer crime, heralding the articulation of female desire and eroticism while at the same time refraining from romanticizing them.

Converging and Diverging Tendencies

German-language crime stories have, indeed, come a long way

in the two centuries since E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Fräulein von Scuderi* solved a murder mystery by using her femininity to extract concessions, confessions, and appeals from the suspect, the perpetrator, and even the king. Although this female figure is central to the intrigue and organizes a successful investigation, Scuderi's motherly gender and virtuous sexuality are a far cry from the range of femininities depicted in *Mit Zorn* and *Queer Crime*. In contrast with Hoffmann's early nineteenth-century novella, the mysteries in these recent volumes depict female investigators, criminals, and victims in complex and disruptive ways. These portrayals of robust female characters and crimes underline conflicting constructions of gender and sexuality and make a critical contribution to the political and cultural engagements of feminist and queer cultures.

That *Mit Zorn* and *Queer Crime* have similar goals, but different focal points—the former highlights gendered experiences, while the latter emphasizes sexuality—is just part of the story. Although the mysteries in these collections engage parallel political agendas and share numerous themes, my analysis demonstrates that fundamental distinctions exist between them, even though they were published just a decade apart. Perhaps one of the main causes of this shift is the proliferation of queer theory and politics and gay cultures at the turn of the millennium, but other possible reasons include the long-term effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the influence of postmodern crime fiction. Biermann's 1992 *Mit Zorn, Charme & Methode* foregrounds the personal and professional lives of women who assert themselves in milieus traditionally dominated by men. These narratives depict both the established boundaries of gender in a patriarchal system, and the ways in which feminist characters can push these boundaries outward and renegotiate their very constructions. Closure in the texts often validates and serves up justice to the main female characters. Kuppler's 2002 *Queer Crime* anthology, by contrast, pushes the critiques articulated in *Mit Zorn* a step further, parodying and deconstructing gender and sexuality along with notions of narrative control, cohesion, and closure. *Queer Crime*'s mysteries tend to leave the crimes, along with other questions raised by the narratives, unresolved, a queering device that often goes hand in hand with other queer aspects of these texts. If "Cherchez la femme" gets a feminist twist as the guiding imperative in *Mit Zorn*, in which

the *femme* is not only the subject of the search but also the seeker, then *Queer Crime* queers this imperative, effectively abbreviating it to “Cherchez,” an ongoing process in which there are no clear solutions, but only open endings and questions that remain.

Notes

1 Poe's Auguste Dupin first appeared in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), which is widely considered to be the first detective story in world literature

2 For a more nuanced discussion of the significance of Scuderi's gender, see McChesney.

3 All translations are my own.

4 First-wave feminist crime texts include Biermann's *Potsdamer Ableben* 'Potsdam Demise' (1987); Deitmer's *Bye-bye, Bruno* (1988) and *Auch brave Mädchen tun's* 'Good Girls Do It Too' (1990); Kneifl's *Zwischen zwei Nächten* 'Between Two Nights' (1991); Doris Gercke's *Weinschröter, du mußt hängen* 'How Many Miles to Babylon' (1988); Christine Grän's *Weißer sterben selten in Samyana* 'Whites Seldom Die in Samyana' (1986); Corinna Kawaters's *Zora Zobel findet die Leiche* 'Zora Zobel Finds the Body' (1984) and *Zora Zobel zieht um* 'Zora Zobel Moves Out' (1986); and Uta-Maria Heim's *Das Rattenprinzip* 'The Rat Principle' (1991).

5 Biermann's *Potsdamer Ableben* series, Kneifl's *Zwischen zwei Nächten*, Noll's *Die Häupter meiner Lieben* 'Head Count' (1993), and Heim's trilogy beginning with *Bullenstadt* 'Cop City' (1995) all have queer dimensions.

6 Billig's series heroine Helen Marrow is not openly gay, but her queer desires are made explicit in *Sieben Zeichen. Dein Tod* 'Seven Signs: Your Death' (1994). Winner of the prestigious Raymond Chandler Prize, Dorn's debut *Berliner Aufklärung* 'Berlin Enlightenment' (1994) features a queer investigator, although her later work emphasizes feminist rather than queer politics.

7 Kremmler's popular lesbian novels begin with *Blaubarts Handy* 'Bluebeard's Cell Phone' (2001). Steck has published lesbian crime stories in Germany and the United States.

8 See Ebert's examination of conventional gendered representations in crime novels; Dietze's characterization of hard-boiled masculinity in works by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, highly influential in German crime fiction, as “a ‘masculinist’ or ‘hypermasculine’ discourse” (9); and Varnacker's discussion of feminist crime's revisions of gender constructions. 9 Barfoot notes: “The slogan ‘von, für und mit Frauen’ [‘by, for and with women’] is frequently quoted, a definition which is simple on the surface but in fact covers a complex of ideas about the significance of authorial gender, about content, and about

audiences and intention” (75).

10 While I agree with Vogel that the *Frauenkrimi* category has little critical value, some scholars identify it as a genre with distinct characteristics, understanding it as implicitly feminist. For instance, Wilke’s definition includes authorial gender as well as women-centered thematic content (256). For a definition overtly linking the *Frauenkrimi* with feminism, see Deitmer.

11 Tielinen asserts, “The definition along with the labeling of the genre causes problems” (42); Kemmerzell critiques usage of the *Frauenkrimi* label “without a new definition of genre having been made” (5).

12 Some scholars might disagree, emphasizing instead the parallels between lesbian and feminist crime. Bosman and Bradford assert that feminist themes have “an ongoing plot presence in all lesbian mysteries to some degree” (24). Palmer describes lesbian crime as “part of the growth of feminist genre fiction in general” (“Lesbian Thriller” 87).

13 Little scholarly work exists on German lesbian crime; I therefore cite scholars of Anglo-American fiction, who widely acknowledge the ubiquity of erotic and romantic subplots. See, for instance, Betz, who claims, “The introduction of a love interest into the criminal investigation is a conventional narrative strategy” (37).

14 Definitions of genre are not exclusive; at best, they are approximate and open to interrogation, negotiation, and revision.

15 The notion of queer invoked here has two crucial dimensions: it denotes an emphasis on gender and sexuality, as well as a destabilizing approach to identity categories. This notion is inspired by Sedgwick, who evokes queerness as a constellation of possibilities, while also acknowledging that, beyond gender and sexuality, queer extends to various “*other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” (9, emphasis in the original).

16 Admittedly, this definition of queer crime is somewhat self-selective. It reflects an accumulation of novels that challenge categorization through nuanced plots that aren’t easily resolved.

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