

Of herrings red and lavender: Reading crime and identity in queer detective fiction

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Abstract:

Why study queer detective novels? This question is answered through an examination of the similarities between the tasks of solving crime and decoding sexual identity. Diverse modes of code reading employed in detective narratives are untangled, exposing their structural relationships to the investigative work of interpreting and categorizing ambiguous sexualities. The author's analysis includes Thea Dorn's *Berliner Aufklärung* (Berlin Enlightenment, 1994).

Keywords: Thea Dorn | gaydar | gender | queer detective fiction | sexuality

Article:

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

Why should we study queer detective novels? First and foremost, the queer detective genre forms a site of tension between the conventions of detective literature and the destabilizing gestures of queer poetics. Queer detective novels are, in many respects, much like all detective stories: They usually begin with the discovery of a corpse and follow the homicide investigation that seeks to identify and capture the murderer. As a genre, detective fiction demands that the question of the crime and any other questions raised in its investigation receive closure before the story ends. Queer narratives, on the other hand, tend to leave questions open, especially those relating to gender and sexuality. The tension between the resolution of the criminal's identity and the lack of resolution with respect to sexuality plays out in queer detective fiction in complex and fascinating ways, laying bare the politics and poetics of these hybrid texts.

This essay works with a strategically broad definition of the word *queer*, which, like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conception of the term, destabilizes identity categories but maintains a focus on gender and sexuality.¹ *Queer* will be used here to reference specifically nonheterosexual identifications such as homosexuality and to denote a broader range of sexual

¹ Sedgwick clarifies her usage of the term *queer* in *Tendencies*, particularly in the "Foreword: T Times" and the introductory chapter "Queer and Now."

practices that resist easy assignment to other discursive categories.² Both in this investigation and elsewhere, my research actively engages the distinctions, overlaps, and tensions between the terms *lesbian* and *queer* by focusing on texts featuring female-embodied figures that I read from a queer angle. It is precisely in this manner that this analysis approaches the case study of Anja Abakowitz and her crime investigation in *Berliner Aufklärung* (Berlin Enlightenment, 1994) by popular German author Thea Dorn. Anja is categorized as queer because she is not overtly identified in the text as lesbian, but her desires cannot be described as exclusively heterosexual either.

Theoretical and literary portrayals of conventional detective work provide clues about why it is worthwhile to study the queer detective genre. This essay begins by investigating various texts for indications of how detective stories are typically constructed, paying special attention to functions of the clue and the red herring, two generic devices that perform in potentially queer ways. The focus then narrows to queer detective novels, whose plots are complicated by the structural similarity between detective work and the decoding of sexual identities, both of which involve reading signs with multiple signifieds. The last section of the essay analyzes these elements in Dorn's *Berliner Aufklärung*, which narrates a queer investigator's efforts to decode the criminal and sexual identity of a murder suspect.

READING CRIME: RIDDLES, CLUES, AND RED HERRINGS

The work of the detective begins with a riddle. A detective story is a hermeneutical code, posing a riddle that begs for an explanation while it also hides information. As German crime scholar Richard Alewyn formulates it in his canonical description of the genre, the detective novel is structured as a series of questions and answers with the detective as the subject who asks the questions and locates the answers (58–60).³ Presented with an enigma, the investigator takes on the job of gathering evidence, the sum of which serves as a foundation for formulating hypotheses about the riddle's most likely solution or solutions.

This raises the next questions: What constitutes evidence, and how can the detective know that what she finds is indeed evidence and not meaningless data? Heta Pyrhönen writes: "Knowing that the scene of the crime is at least a partially manipulated surface, [the detectives] have to observe it closely, trying to decide what items constitute clues" (64–65). Portraying the search for clues as a challenging interpretive task, Pyrhönen's account indicates that there is no clear formula for determining what constitutes evidence except that its geographical starting point is

² Heterosexuality can also be constructed as queer. The notion of queer heterosexuality is the subject of Richard Fantina's *Straight Writ Queer*.

³ In his essay on the structure of the detective novel, Alewyn describes the genre thus: "Aus Frage und Antwort besteht die Anatomie des Detektivromans" ("The anatomy of the detective novel consists of question and answer," 58). Even when there is no direct interrogation, Alewyn asserts, the detective novel is constantly engaged in the process of asking and answering questions, often in sequential way such that each answer gives rise to new questions. In this constellation, the detective is "der Mann, der die Fragen stellt und die Antworten findet" ("the man who asks the questions and finds the answers," 60). Alewyn's use of the masculine articles is symptomatic of the time in which he wrote this text, the late 1960s, and would not have been at all unusual for a time when female detectives had not yet made a noticeable appearance. All translations from German texts are the author's own.

the scene of the crime.⁴ To ascertain what does or does not qualify as a clue, detectives must use their senses and intellects, and their conclusions about the status of clues are necessarily subjective. Peter Hühn also describes detective work as a subjective undertaking: “From the perspective of the detective, the traces left behind by the criminal serve as ‘clues,’ as potential indications of the hidden story of the crime” (242).⁵ In evoking the *perspective of the detective*, Hühn indicates that clues and the crime stories that they reconstruct are contingent on a limited point of view. Traces, evidence, and clues take countless forms with multiple meanings; thus, precisely what constitutes them and their significance is open to interpretation.

In her work on the women’s thriller, Jill Radford succinctly describes conventional detective work in this way: “[T]he detective ... follows clues and herrings and names the villain” (82). This sounds simple enough, but it begs the question: How does the detective differentiate between clues and red herrings? They are, in fact, quite similar: Both are polysemic, and the detective must, according to Radford, follow both to catch the culprit. Radford levels the clue and the herring, theorizing them as equivalent and interchangeable. To push this parallel even further, I contend that a red herring is not just similar to a clue but also that it is a type of clue; indeed, there is no essential distinction between the two devices except that which is assigned to them through the process of interpretation. The difference between the clue and the red herring comes into relief through the performative act of hermeneutical value assignment, a process that is actively engaged in detective narratives, on the one hand through the physical and intellectual intervention of the investigator, and, on the other hand, through the reader’s own attempts to solve the mystery. The success or failure of detective work sets clues apart from red herrings. In short, a clue is a red herring that has been properly interpreted as the trace of a criminal or crime. Or, to put it differently, the herring is a potential clue that is misread and therefore misleads or distracts. This performative distinction is pivotal in narratives that disturb the boundary between clues and herrings by presenting readers with scenarios in which one and the same object serves as both.

Clue is derived from the Old English *clew*, referring in the fourteenth century to “a ball of yarn or thread” (Hendrickson 155). Figuratively, a clue is an indication, referencing both an event in the past, the crime, and a desired goal in the future, the answer to the riddle of the crime. Described in this way, the clue is a particular type of *sign*: The significance that the detective assigns to his clue, like the value of the sign, has both a denotation and a connotation. Signs acquire their connotations and therefore their value only within a constellation of signification, or, as Roland Barthes puts it, connotations are determined through their placement in a textual “‘nebulae’ of signifieds” (8). Theorists of detective fiction have alluded to the connection between clues and signs in a sense that evokes Barthesian semiotics: Alewyn describes the clue as “a cryptogram” (61),⁶ while Hühn claims that, because *all phenomena* have multiple valence,

⁴ From Edgar Allan Poe’s mid-nineteenth-century stories featuring C. Auguste Dupin and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s turn-of-the-century Sherlock Holmes stories to Patricia Cornwell’s contemporary forensic crime novels starring the medical examiner Dr. Kay Scarpetta and popular American television programs such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, detective narratives have portrayed the search for clues as beginning with the minutiae of crime scenes.

⁵ “Aus der Perspektive des Detektivs dienen die vom Verbrecher hinterlassenen Spuren als ‘Clues,’ als mögliche Indikatoren der versteckten Geschichte des Verbrechens” (242).

⁶ Alewyn evokes the clue as “ein Kryptogramm” (61).

the detective is faced with the complicated task of assigning meaning when there may be no correct, clear, or singular solution.⁷

Clues do not have to be concrete traces or things; indeed, just about anything can, under the right circumstances, qualify as clue. But a clue is not just anything and everything: It is constituted by its context and becomes tangible through its simultaneous ordinariness and extraordinariness. Alewyn elaborates on this point, describing the clue as a deviation from the norm (62).⁸ The clue itself is thus a queer sort of thing because it is encompassed by the everyday but exists in excess of the ordinary and the expected, forcibly interrogating the conception of what is normal and normative.

The queerness of the clue can also be seen in its fluidity and indeterminacy, its resistance to being tied down to a certain type of thing, gesture, or notion, because it can be any of these. The clue is not a stable sign. Alewyn himself evokes a connection among the clue, the unusual, and the literally *queer* (although, to be fair to Alewyn's text, he is evoking a meaning of *queer* that does not necessarily signify sexuality): "[T]he English detective novel has a rich vocabulary for such odds and ends that are out of the ordinary: from 'odd'—'queer'—'wrong'—'strange'—'fishy'—'rummy'—'doesn't make sense,' to stronger expressions such as 'eery,' 'unreal,' 'unbelievable,' ... [and the categorically] 'impossible'" (62).⁹ While he clearly indicates that a, if not *the*, defining characteristic of the clue is that it be odd and therefore suspicious, what Alewyn does not specify is that clues are sometimes *not* conspicuous in their unusualness. For instance, in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," the sought-after intimate letter is displayed in plain sight and thereby "invisible." Such a narrative posits the gestures of looking at and overlooking as necessary to the work of detecting. That is, clues are often very ordinary things placed in slightly different contexts, frequently only becoming perceptible to those who are trained and scanning for them.

If clues are somewhat queer, then the herring is even queerer. It is both a clue and not a clue. The perplexing, multivalent herring has made a career of performing as a clue, for it looks like one but seems to point in other directions. Like its namesake, the proverbial smoked fish that is dragged across a trail to confuse scent hounds, the literary red herring either diverts attention

⁷ Hühn elaborates on this point: "Die Annahme—und die Suche nach—einer verborgenen Geschichte, die der Alltagsrealität eingeschrieben ist, bewirkt, daß sich die Romanwelt in ein Konglomerat aus möglichen Zeichen verwandelt. Alle Phänomene können ihre üblichen, automatisch zugeschriebenen Bedeutungen verlieren und etwas anderes bezeichnen... . Indem die Signifikation entautomatisiert wird und Dinge 'verfremdet' werden, verleiht das Rätsel um den Mord der Alltagswelt ein reiches Potential ungeahnter Bedeutungen" ("The presumption of—and the search for—a hidden story that is written into everyday reality brings about the novel's universe as a conglomeration of potential signs. All phenomena can lose their usual, automatically assigned meanings and denote something else... . Insofar as signification is deautomated and objects become 'alienated,' the puzzle about the murder bestows upon the everyday world a rich potential of unanticipated meanings," 242).

⁸ Alewyn explains: "Ein Clue wird sich immer als eine kleine Abweichung bemerkbar machen, eine Abweichung von der Norm, vom alltäglichen Rahmen, von der alltäglichen Routine, von dem bisher Bekannten" ("A clue will always make itself noticeable as a small aberration, an aberration from the norm, from the everyday routine, from that which has been known until now," 62).

⁹ "Für solche Kleinigkeiten, die aus dem Rahmen fallen, steht dem englischen Detektivroman ein reiches Vokabular zur Verfügung: 'odd'—'queer'—'wrong'—'strange'—'fishy'—'rummy'—'doesn't make sense,' von den kräftigeren Ausdrücken wie 'eery,' 'unreal,' 'unbelievable,' bis zum kategorischen 'impossible' noch zu schweigen" (62).

from the real clues or, like a hidden trap door, appears to point in no direction at all. If the herring has all of these characteristics, then how can we formulate its relationship to the clue?

This is precisely why I contend that the red herring is a queer device. In dovetailing with the clue, it affirms its contingency, pushing the boundaries of what and in which context something can qualify as a clue. In destabilizing the category of the clue, the red herring raises questions about the terms and limitations of signification, identification, and communication. Like the concept of *queer*, the red herring has no fixed orientation or referent, but rather references a wide range of subjects and practices. It challenges the notion that there is one right answer to every question or one correct way to arrive at an answer. Its effect is to place the detective, and ultimately also the reader, in a situation in which he or she questions his or her assumptions.

Now consider a red herring whose referent is a gendered or sexualized practice, desire, or identity: This could be the queerest herring of them all. I reference Judith Butler's notion of queer as both expansive and contingent in that it "opens up new possibilities" of signification at the same time that it resists "fully describ[ing] those it purports to represent" (229–30). Although *queer* has been defined by various scholars in different ways, I use the term to refer to gestures that contest heteronormative and binary categories of gender and sexuality. In line with this definition, then, a red herring that creates a deceptive narrative about sexual practices or identities questions the very condition of possibility for the signification of sexualities and is thus quite queer indeed. I envision this queer herring not as reddish in color like its namesake, but rather as lavender-hued, insofar as that particular shade of violet has been read and celebrated since the late-nineteenth century as a marker for decadence, desire, and queer practices.

The effect of the lavender herring—that is, the misreading of sexuality, whether intentionally induced or merely coincidental—reveals what is at stake in the workings of identity categories in a narrative.¹⁰ In some queer detective novels, the gender and sexuality of a character is not easily decoded and becomes another riddle in addition to that of the crime. This strand of the narrative is a vital part of the mystery that the detective seeks to resolve. In fact, these two riddles are interconnected and inseparable: The pursuit of the criminal entails an attempt to decode gender and sexuality. In the queer crime novel analyzed in the last part of this essay, the lavender herring is crucial to the revision of generic detective conventions and identity politics, a critique that is most palpable when the criminal is identified and captured but sexuality is not unequivocally determined.

READING IDENTITY: GAYDAR AND DETECTIVE WORK

As a genre, detective fiction thematizes the very conception of identity, particularly that of the criminal. The lesbian and queer variants of the genre are no different in this respect, although they tend to explicitly thematize gender and sexuality. The central axes of queer texts may be

¹⁰ One example from a queer German detective story is in Michael Roes's whodunit *Der Coup der Berdache* (The Coup of the Berdache, 1999), in which the herring questions the parameters for detecting in destabilizing those seemingly logical assumptions that we make in reading our world and its human inhabitants. In this novel, solving the crime entails discovering whether the murderer in a transvestite nightclub is a man or a woman. However, the assumption that the murderer must belong to either one or the other gender proves to be the biggest fallacy of the investigation.

dictated or dominated by constructions and negotiations of gender and sexuality and the consequences of such constructions at the psychological, social, and political levels. While these elements may play a thematic rather than a structural role, they can leave their mark on those other generic constituents of crime fiction: the contours of the crime itself, its investigators and investigation, and the psychological and political profiles of the characters involved in all aspects thereof. These characters, from victims and witnesses to perpetrators and investigators, in addition to others linked to the crime through legal or social connections, are not necessarily queer or lesbian, and in fact, it is sometimes the case that one or more characters are ambiguously sexualized.

In some queer narratives, sexuality is, just as in real social interactions, not explicitly articulated, but rather communicated through subtle codes. Reading sexuality depends on the correct decoding of physical and behavioral signs that may have multiple potential meanings. It can thus be quite challenging to read the sexuality of individuals whose appearance and behavior do not align neatly with one identity category. This is precisely the kind of work referenced by the vernacular term *gaydar*, an amalgamation of the words *gay* and *radar*, referring to “that totally unscientific sixth sense that many people rely on to tell if [someone] is gay or straight” (Colman). However unscientific it may be, *gaydar* is neither inborn nor completely dependable. It is a socially acquired hermeneutical task based on a set of visual and behavioral codes that constitute a form of communication used to telegraph sexual orientation and to form communities based on similar desires.

Gaydar can be acquired through learning and honed through practice, as Donald F. Reuter contends. Reuter explains in no uncertain terms that he cannot and will not assert that “anyone[’s] actions, behavior, or experiences can be unequivocally construed as being ‘gay’ or ‘straight’” (10). He goes on to say that “[m]eanings for ‘straight,’ ‘gay,’ ‘masculine,’ and ‘feminine’ are changing, merging, even disappearing” (11). Codes for sexuality are not straightforward; their ambiguity rests in part in their historical and cultural contingency. This contingency gives rise to online guessing games where players, upon viewing a collection of photographs, are asked to assign sexual and cultural identities such as “Gay or Eurotrash?” and “Lesbian or German Lady?”¹¹ Instructing viewers to decode visual clues to determine the correct answers, these games construct the task of labeling sexual identity, especially in ambiguous cases, as similar to the investigative work undertaken by detectives to solve crimes and name criminals.

Reuter also compares the interpretive work of reading sexuality with detecting: “Whoa, Sherlock!” he exclaims, “sleuthing about for gay men using *gaydar* may not be as easy as dusting for fingerprints on a bottle of lubricant” (18). Reuter jokingly suggests that forensic science is founded on clearer and more reliable formulas than *gaydar* is. However, in evoking lubricant as a sign of male homosexuality, Reuter parodies the very notion that any object could function as a stable and unequivocal code for queer identity. Even for a detective as shrewd and educated as Sherlock Holmes, there may sometimes be no clear answer to the riddle of sexuality.

To return to the question of why queer detective novels are worthy of closer investigation, there is, or at least ought to be, something special about this subgenre because of the structural

¹¹ Even in these *gaydar* games, some of the solutions are unclear.

similarities between crime and sexuality: Both appear as riddles that require interpretive work to become meaningful, and both may be solvable through a complex process of decoding. The literary queer detective attempts to bring coherence to both of these puzzles as she collects, deciphers, and articulates the sexual and criminal identities of people connected to the crimes she investigates. In neither case are these codes stable, and therein lies the challenge.

THE CASE OF THE LAVENDER HERRING: DORN'S *BERLINER AUFKLÄRUNG*

To demonstrate how these theoretical issues might translate into literary language, the following analysis of a contemporary German detective novel focuses on its representations of sexual identity and the failure of gaydar, placing special emphasis on the functions of clues and red herrings in these constellations. It should be noted that, in many lesbian crime novels, gaydar functions perfectly and thus unproblematically dovetails with successful detective work.¹² However, in the text analyzed here, the failure of gaydar and the multiple misreadings it brings about highlight the very construction of sexuality and queer codes. In addition to its cynical take on the conventions of the detective genre and its parodical send-up of the philosophical canon, the narrative actively queers any and all constructions of gender or sexuality.

¹² Many queer crime novels contain a plot or subplot in which a queer main character, usually a detective figure, becomes interested in another character of the same sex; this romantic interest relies on the understanding, sometimes explicit and at other times merely inferred, that the object of desire is also queer and therefore a potential partner. Because the typical lesbian crime novel does not tend to overtly thematize gaydar, the object of desire is already understood as a potential partner: She is known or assumed to be queer. Her queerness is subsequently confirmed when she becomes romantically or sexually involved with the main character, a development that frequently precedes or accompanies the successful closure of the crime investigation. With some variations, many novels follow a plot structure along these lines: Girl meets girl, girl beds girl, and girl solves mystery (or, alternately, girl solves mystery, then girl beds girl). Examples of this structure abound, such as in the English-language novels by Katherine V. Forrest, *The Beverly Malibu* (1989), and, by Mabel Maney, the satirical *The Case of the Not-So-Nice Nurse* (1993). German-language texts featuring similar plot developments include Gabriele Gelien's *Eine Lesbe macht noch keinen Sommer* (One Lesbian Does Not Make a Summer, 1993), MAF Räderscheidt and Stephan Everling's *Mitternachtsmosaik* (Midnight Mosaic, 2000), and Katrin Kremmler's *Blaubarts Handy* (Bluebeard's Cell Phone, 2001). There also exist numerous stories in which the development of queer romances between characters central to the crime story parallels the process of detecting crime and criminals, and both problems are solved at the end of the narrative, although not necessarily with the structure outlined above. For instance, in Claudia Wessel's *Es wird Zeit* (It's about Time, 1984), a male perpetrator's fiancée falls in love with a lesbian and teams up with her new girlfriend's feminist entourage to exact revenge on her murderous boyfriend. Or, in Barbara Kirchner's *Die verbesserte Frau* (The Improved Woman, 2001), the main character falls for two women: One becomes a murder victim, which sets off the investigation, while her increasingly intense romance with the other, a perpetrator, converges with the crime plot.

In *Berliner Aufklärung*, Dorn's prize-winning debut novel,¹³ protagonist Anja Abakowitz¹⁴ is an amateur detective whose professional training in hermeneutics includes her truncated doctoral studies in philosophy and her self-employment as a therapist in what she calls a *Philosophical Practice for Life Questions*. Although the text never labels Anja's sexuality, she is implied as queer in multiple ways. The text simultaneously positions her as a woman while it also emphasizes her masculinity. Because of her deep voice, broad shoulders, and lack of feminine curves, Anja is often mistaken for a man, even when she is not dressed in male drag.¹⁵ Although the text portrays her flirting with and engaging in sexual activities with people of both genders, Anja prefers the sexual company of women to that of men: She has an on-again, off-again romance with a singer named Susanne, and she also appears to have a strong attraction to her good friend, Professor Rebecca Lux. Anja's sexual desires are further queered through her apparent penchants for necrophilia and sadomasochism.

Berliner Aufklärung's crime plot features two constellations of characters. The first is composed of members of the university's philosophy department; the narrative begins with Anja's discovery of the fragmented corpse of one professor, whose body parts have been distributed among the mailboxes of his 54 colleagues, all of whom have sexual skeletons in their closets. The other social pole of the narrative consists of the colorful individuals who populate Berlin's queer subcultures. These two communities, the academic and the queer, are linked not only through Anja but also through the murder victim, Professor Rudolf Schreiner. Anja learns from her gay roommate, Ulf, that Rudolf's homosexuality was an open secret in the Berlin gay scene. After Rebecca is murdered, Anja begins to search for clues within the philosophy department.

¹³ Thea Dorn, whose pseudonym honors Frankfurt School critic Theodor Adorno, won the Raymond Chandler Prize for *Berliner Aufklärung*. In public life, the author exclusively uses her alias and rejects her birth name, Christiane Scherer: "Da denke ich immer sofort Finanzamt oder Krankenkasse. Das ist ein Name auf den ich gar nicht gut zu sprechen bin" ("It immediately makes me think of internal revenue or health insurance. That is a name by which I am not to be addressed" [qtd. in Bremer]). Like her pseudonym's namesake, Dorn developed an early passion for music and pursued the study of music at the university (Adorno was a pianist and composer, Dorn a singer), but switched gears in her early twenties to study philosophy. Both Dorn and Adorno studied and worked in Frankfurt and Vienna; both also spent several years in academia as teachers and researchers. Now a freelance writer, Dorn has published novels, essay collections, journalistic writings, and dramatic works. She also writes radio plays and television screenplays and appears on television as the moderator of literary talk shows.

¹⁴ The name *Abakowitz* evokes associations with the abacus, a manual tool for making mathematical calculations. *Abakowitz* also glosses into Bavarian dialect as "aber kein Witz" ("not a joke"). However, the author's parodic use of other proper names underlines the very notion that they are, indeed, meant to be understood as a joke, the butt of which is the conventions and methods of philosophical inquiry.

¹⁵ Anja's masculine physique—"sie [war] mit ihrer Frauenüberlänge und den breiten Schultern ohnehin eher maskulin gebaut" ("with her excessive height for a woman and her broad shoulders, she [was] built rather masculine anyway," 45)—causes gender confusion on several occasions in the novel. Anja actively plays with her gender by manipulating her clothing and appearance for various public contexts. Frequent references to stereotypical masculinities, particularly those of the American West, begin the first time we see Anja, who, on her way to work, realizes that she is inappropriately dressed "noch im Privatoutfit, bestehend aus Lederjacke, Jeans, und Cowboystiefeln" ("still in a private outfit consisting of leather jacket, jeans, and cowboy boots," 20–21). As she replaces this ensemble with a more recognizably feminine one—a silk suit completed by "Bluse, Blazer und High Heels" ("blouse, blazer, and high heels," 21)—she listens to the popular 1980s Tina Turner song "Typical Male," whose lyrics reference feminine sexuality: "All I want is a little reaction, just enough to tip the scales, I'm just using my female attraction on a typical male." Other scenes, too numerous to mention here, emphasize connections among Anja's appearance, makeup, clothing, and perceived gender. Taken together, these multiple instances have the effect of constructing Anja's gender as constantly in flux and as always the effect of a performance.

Masquerading as a journalist researching an article about politically involved professors, she interviews one of her suspects, Professor Willi Maier-Abendroth, who has reason to dislike both Rudolf and Rebecca. Known for his virulently homophobic and misogynistic treatises, Willi espouses a Christian philosophy that views all homosexuals as aberrations of nature and all women who do not marry and produce offspring, such as his colleague Rebecca, as biologically and emotionally unfulfilled. However, Anja senses that the moral life championed by Willi is not in line with his own practices, which is confirmed when the lascivious professor invites Anja to do a follow-up interview at his weekend getaway, a secluded log cabin in the former East German countryside. Aware that Willi is attempting to seduce her but eager to solve the crime, Anja accepts the invitation.

In the next scene, Anja moves out of the professor's space and into an ostensibly safer space, the Moskau, a queer-friendly Berlin café and dance club.¹⁶ Here, she discusses the case with Ulf and his new boyfriend, a well-built young man named Peer. When Anja muses aloud whether the homophobic Willi was aware of his murdered colleague's homosexuality, Peer responds that Willi is not only himself a closet homosexual but also was Rudolf's most recent lover. Anja laughs at this allegation, not suspecting that Peer is simply throwing her a gay red herring, as he is the very murderer she seeks to identify.

Once Peer has planted the suggestion, Anja must choose between two competing narratives about Willi's sexuality: Is he a misogynist and a homophobe as well as a compulsive womanizer, or a closeted homosexual living out in his private life fantasies that conflict with his professional philosophies? It is telling with respect to Anja's own sexual politics that she does not consider the possibility of both narratives coexisting: In her mind, the professor is either straight or gay. Peer's allegation thus sets up a new context for the interpretation of any clues that Anja has encountered. Perhaps Anja's decision to take Peer's contention in earnest is encouraged by the queer space in which he makes it, which lends credibility to this homosexual-identified male and his lavender herring. Upon reflection, Anja acknowledges that she has been seduced by the idea of gay love gone sour as the motive for the murders. In her attempts both to fulfill this fantasy and to solve the crimes, Anja reads signs of Willi's heterosexual practices against the grain as connotations of his queerness.

Berliner Aufklärung demonstrates the failure of the gaydar of a queer mediator who is misled by signs of homosexuality that she does not see as covert codes and therefore does not attempt to decipher. The resolution of the issue of sexual identity is vital to the solving of the crime riddle. Anja's persistence in reading the professor as both gay and guilty of the murders causes her to risk her own life twice and to overlook the murderer's motives, manipulations, and proximity. However, although the reader knows more than Anja about Willi's sexuality, it is left unresolved when Anja realizes that he cannot be the murderer.

In suggesting that the murderer is gay and that his motive is linked to his sexuality, Peer's lavender herring contains an ironic self-referential gesture. The quest for a queer motive and homosexual suspect is aligned with the search to identify the murderer, and both questions are

¹⁶ The Moskau, described as an "ehemalige[] Stasi-Luxus-Schenke" ("former luxury bar for the Stasi [the East German secret police]," 118), is likely 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.

answered when Anja forces Peer's confession, during which Peer, who is already identified as a homosexual, comes to embody the criminal as well. Moreover, Peer's motive is tied to his sexuality: He kills to avenge the suicide of his former lover. In juxtaposing the criminal with the homosexual, the narrative evokes a literary and scientific trope over a century old.¹⁷

The text destabilizes the relationship between the clue and identity by thematizing disjunctures between traces and their meanings. An example from the text illustrates that there is no epistemological distinction between the clue and the red herring: The appearance of one object in particular, a lipstick-stained wineglass, three times in three separate spaces and scenes, highlights the multiple hermeneutical gestures that bring about the relation between codes and sexualities. In two passages in which Anja enters the homes of male members of the philosophy department (one belongs to a graduate student named Hugo Lévi-Brune; the other is Willi's), Anja sees lipstick-stained wineglasses that are evidence of the same woman's presence, a lecturer named Petra Uhse who is having affairs with both men. In the first scene in Hugo's apartment, Anja correctly interprets the lipstick-marked wineglass as an unequivocal trace of Petra and female heterosexuality, while in the later scene in Willi's cabin, she reads another similarly marked glass as an possible signifier of female heterosexuality, but then decides that it is more likely to be an indicator of male homosexual or male-embodied transvestite identity, specifically of either Willi's transvestism or his preference for male-to-female transsexuals. The juxtaposition of these two identical traces reduces the difference between the clue and the herring to a mere hermeneutical value.

The multiple readings of the wineglass's sexualized significance are further complicated by the way in which Anja herself uses the same object to signify her own non-normative female gender. The sequence of Petra's two lipstick traces in the two men's homes is interrupted by an intervening scene in which it is Anja's own wineglass that is portrayed as a signifier of gender identity. The setting is a posh restaurant, where Anja is dining with her attorney, and the wineglass is playfully evoked as a kind of evidence—but one that has nothing to do with the crime investigation. Rather, it is connected to Anja's sophistication—or lack thereof—as demonstrated by her good taste in wine and her rejection of gender-specific social practices.¹⁸ The excessive lipstick traces that mark Anja's glass are part of her performance of a resistance to what she perceives as a repressive ideal of femininity. Like the smears on the wineglasses left behind by Petra as vestiges of her sexual presence, Anja's prints are a direct signifier of her non-

¹⁷ Not only has the connection between homosexuality and crime been forged through the classification of homosexuality as a criminal offense in many cultures around the world but also Western literature and intellectual thought have constructed lasting links between these two concepts. In the emerging field of sexology at the turn of the twentieth century, it was a common move to associate homosexual practices and sexual perversions with other criminal acts. In *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), a groundbreaking study of sexual offenders and asylum residents, psychologist Leopold von Krafft-Ebing attempted to humanize homosexuals and advocate compassion for their condition, while also linking homosexuality with criminality through his choice of case studies. Early-twentieth-century German literature shows evidence of this association in dramas such as Franz Wedekind's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (Pandora's Box, 1904) and in stories allegedly based on real events, such as Alfred Döblin's *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (The Two Girlfriends and Their Poison Murder, 1924).

¹⁸ "Zum Beweis ihrer guten Wahl nahm Anja einen kräftigen Schluck aus dem inzwischen rundum mit Lippenstift verschmierten Weinglas. Die Tussi-Allüre, mit spitzem Mund immer nur an derselben Stelle des Glases zu nippen, konnte und wollte sie sich nicht angewöhnen" ("To prove her good choice, Anja took a large gulp from the wineglass, which had in the meantime become smeared all around with lipstick. She could not and would not adopt the bimbo practice of sipping with pointy lips at the same side of the glass," 138).

normative gender: Although she may occasionally wear deep red lipstick and feminine clothing, she eschews clichés of femininity. Here wearing lipstick, there a silk suit, and elsewhere a leather jacket and cowboy boots, Anja alternately passes as a woman, a man, and an individual of indeterminate and shifting gender. Anja's gender, like the unruly lipstick smears on her glass, is disruptive and excessive.

Although the novel does break down the relationship between some codes of gender and sexuality and the subjects and identities that they reference, it does not completely deconstruct the signifying relation between the lipstick-stained wineglass and femininity. However, by juxtaposing three different significations and readings of wineglasses, the novel places processes of reading and interpreting under the microscope. The misinterpreted glass highlights the playful and parodic constructions and deconstructions of gender and sexuality in this text. At the same time, it foregrounds the valence of the clue, which, when properly interpreted, may lead the investigator to the criminal, but cannot and will not function as an unequivocal trace of identity. For, in this novel, identity is itself an effect of interpretation and of narrative.

The novel's story of identity extends to the multiple narratives about Anja's own identity, which emphasize the epistemological incoherence of gender and sexuality. When, at the narrative's climax, Anja punishes Peer for his transgressions by performing a gender that he misreads, she retaliates against his lavender herring by presenting him with one of her own. Anja uses her gender-indeterminate physique to her advantage as a means to regain control of the narrative and find closure. She does this by performing male drag, which allows her to enter Tom's Bar, a men-only cruising locale with darkrooms.¹⁹ Dressed head to toe in leather fetish attire, she passes the bouncer's inspection and enters the gender-exclusive space. The male gender of this "leather man"—as the text calls her—is made possible by the costume, but it is also a result of the policing that takes place at its threshold.²⁰ Anja's performance of gay masculinity culminates in a sexualized torture of Peer that brings him to orgasm in the women's restroom, which had "probably never seen a woman before" (189).²¹ In portraying Anja's penetration into this

¹⁹ Tom's Bar is the name of a real Berlin gay locale in the historically queer Schöneberg district. Like the bar Dorn portrays in *Berliner Aufklärung*, the real Tom's Bar is for men only and has darkrooms in the back.

²⁰ The text describes a "Ledermann mit Glatze und hellem Schnäuzer" ("leather man with bald head and light mustache," 187) who enters the bar, but it is not clear until several pages after his appearance that this man is Anja. Anja's drag is made complete by accessories that she refuses to remove: "Trotz der schwülen Wärme in der langen, schlauchartigen Raumflucht hatte der Ledermann weder seine Handschuhe noch die Lederkappe mit der breiten Goldkette auf dem Schirm abgelegt" ("Despite the humid warmth in the long, tubular alignment of rooms, the leather man had removed neither his gloves nor the leather cap with the wide gold chain on its bill," 187). Although two other women are denied entrance into the bar, Anja receives the bouncer's approval and penetrates the male-only space. In juxtaposing the rejection of the other two women with Anja's entrance in male fetish attire, the narrative calls attention to the instability the categories of gender and sexuality. Anja's performance of masculinity goes beyond drag; she passes for a man and thus embodies female masculinity.

²¹ The "Damenklo, das vermutlich noch nie eine Dame gesehen hatte" (189) is personified as a subject who has *supposedly* never seen woman, but it does not explicitly follow from this statement that no woman has ever entered it. This space is aligned with male homosexual acts: While it has been marked by urine, it has not been used primarily for the purpose of urinating as such, but rather for the staging of sexual acts such as "Wasserspiele" ("waterworks," 189). Not only is the space of the restroom in gay and lesbian bars often regarded as an erotic zone but here the space is demarcated as one in which fetishistic activities take place. However, sexual acts usually take place in men's restrooms, and thus Anja's actions in the women's restroom can be read as a subversion of the usual usage of nominally gendered restrooms in men's cruising bars, where the women's restroom is customarily reserved

gendered space and her transgressive sexual act with Peer, the narrative calls attention to the constructedness, fragmentation, and instability of categories of gender and sexuality. Indeed, Anja's constant refashioning of her gender and sexuality in passing alternately as a woman and a man and engaging in sexual acts in and with bodies of both genders constructs the categories of gender and sexuality as temporally and spatially conditioned and bound.

Anja's performance further demonstrates the way in which queerness can serve as a means of gaining power and authority. If the destabilization of identity, its liquidation into performativity, results in confusion, disorientation, and even a risk of the loss of life for some, then it also has the potential to empower others. For Anja, the performance of drag becomes a vehicle for capturing and torturing the murderer. The text constructs all codes of identity as potential red herrings, and it is by appropriating the contingent relationship among signs, practices, and identities that the protagonist succeeds in reestablishing order. Although this novel thematizes mistaken identity, it is not just about reading and misreading gender and sexuality but also about the multiple connections among narrative, power, and violence.

In *Berliner Aufklärung*, the failure of gaydar and the emphasis on the misreading of sexuality highlight the construction of sexuality and its codes. The novel straddles a precarious boundary between genre and politics in identifying the murderer as a gay male, while at the same time leaving the question of Anja's gaydar and Willi's sexuality unresolved. The lavender herring breaks down the relationship between the gay signifier and gay identity, by, on the one hand, providing the reader but not the detective with indications that Willi is heterosexual, while, on the other hand, refusing to provide permanent closure on this issue. Queer detective fiction portrays desires to identify and label sexuality while it also destabilizes and deconstructs the very processes and categories for such identification. The lavender herring thus lays bare the stakes of queer detective fiction—and for this reason it does more cultural work than just a smelly, oddly colored fish.

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as a safe space in which men do not engage in sexual acts. Thus, Anja reinscribes the women's restroom with a new function: No longer the conventional safe space, it now becomes a stage for a violent, vengeful, and erotic exchange.

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