

‘EINE BEFREIUNG AUS EINER EINENGUNG’: HELGA
KÖNIGSDORF’S QUEER PROTAGONISTS, SELF-CENSORSHIP AND
SHAME IN *UNGELEGENER BEFUND* AND *GLEICH NEBEN AFRIKA*

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates self-censorship in two works by Helga Königsdorf written either side of German reunification: *Ungelegener Befund* (1990) and *Gleich neben Afrika* (1992). The form of Königsdorf’s texts engages with self-censorship in and after the GDR, and the queer identities of her protagonists serve to emphasise this narrative project. Self-censorship represents the transmission of the prohibitions and machinations of power involved in literary production into a writer’s work and even identity. I argue that Königsdorf demonstrates writers’ internalisation of GDR institutions through analogy to the queer subject who has internalised society’s repression in the form of shame. The manifestations of self-censorship in Königsdorf’s texts on the level of narrative form have much in common with the features of a shame experience, appearing for example as silences and evasions in the text, most clearly in *Ungelegener Befund*. The protagonists’ same-sex desire is directly related to the process of writing, furthermore, so that the narrative of *Gleich neben Afrika* can itself be considered queer. Königsdorf’s characters never fully overcome their self-censors, but these two narratives suggest an open-ended process of self-reassessment which GDR writers were engaged in during and after reunification.

Im vorliegenden Beitrag wird die Selbstzensur in zwei Erzählungen von Helga Königsdorf untersucht, die vor und nach der Wende geschrieben wurden: *Ungelegener Befund* (1990) und *Gleich neben Afrika* (1992). Die Form der beiden Texte greift die Selbstzensur in und nach der DDR als erzählerisches Thema auf, was durch Königsdorfs Entscheidung für queere Protagonisten unterstrichen wird. Durch Selbstzensur wird das Werk und sogar die schriftstellerische Identität von den Verboten und Machtspielen der literarischen Produktion geprägt. Königsdorf stellt diese schriftstellerische Verinnerlichung der staatlichen Institutionen anhand eines Vergleichs von selbstzensurierenden Schriftstellern und dem queeren Subjekt dar, das gesellschaftliche Unterdrückung in Form von Scham verinnerlicht hat. Die formalen und psychischen Eigenschaften der Selbstzensur weisen zahlreiche narrative Gemeinsamkeiten mit denjenigen einer Schamerfahrung auf, wie etwa die Leerstellen und Ausweichungen, die insbesondere den Text von *Ungelegener Befund* prägen. Königsdorf bringt das gleichgeschlechtliche Begehren ihrer Protagonisten mit dem Schreibprozess in unmittelbare Beziehung; selbst die Erzählweise von *Gleich neben Afrika* kann als queer betrachtet werden. Königsdorfs Figuren gelingt es nicht, ihren Selbstzensor vollständig zu überwältigen, aber die beiden Texte dokumentieren in narrativer Form einen offenen Prozess der Selbsteinschätzung, den Schriftsteller während und nach der Wiedervereinigung zu durchlaufen hatten.

Helga Königsdorf turned to writing as a 'Befreiung aus einer Einengung' in the 1970s, out of frustration as a professor of mathematics and physics with the restrictions of scientific discourse,¹ but writing's 'liberating' potential had even greater relevance for Königsdorf around German reunification. Two works written either side of this personal and political 'Wende', *Ungelegener Befund* (1990) and *Gleich neben Afrika* (1992), highlight in their formal differences a 'Befreiung' from the restrictive and censored literary environment of the GDR.² *Ungelegener Befund* is an enigmatic text, its epistolary form hiding more than it reveals while grappling with taboos, the not-so-antifascist heritage of the GDR and the protagonist's same-sex desire, which demanded 'verdecktes Schreiben'³ to pass the censor. *Gleich neben Afrika*, by contrast, is a confident semi-autobiographical narrative, which confronts the narrator's involvement with the GDR and depicts a lesbian relationship. Despite radically different styles, both texts present a queer protagonist delving into the past in order to understand their identity in the present. Königsdorf's narratives never categorise characters' sexual identities, but for analytical purposes 'queer' offers a relatively inclusive category without the negative or diagnostic connotations of 'homosexual', which I use only where more historically appropriate for reference to discussions within the GDR.

Critics have often passed over the significance of Königsdorf's queer protagonists, but Elizabeth Mittman and Cheryl Dueck have briefly drawn connections between characters' same-sex desire and their investigation of identity.⁴ The nature of this link warrants further exploration as it sheds new light on the two texts: the key is Königsdorf's treatment of self-censorship. The internalisation of censorship mechanisms and wider social and political prohibitions dominates the two texts, affecting characters' writerly and sexual identities equally. Thus the struggle Königsdorf presents, with protagonists forced to confront their past and their identity as writers, exposes parallels to the queer subject, whose 'primal encounter with shame' reflects internalised societal prejudices which 'affect[] one's biographical identity'.⁵ This article argues that, far from constituting a

¹ Helga Königsdorf, 'In diesem vereinigten Land mit aller Kritik nun angekommen', in *Zur Person: Jurek Becker, Daniela Dahn, Walter Jens, Hermann Kant, Helga Königsdorf, Christa Wolf*, ed. Günter Gaus, Berlin 1998, pp. 66–85 (p. 84).

² Helga Königsdorf, *Ungelegener Befund*, Berlin and Weimar 1990; *Gleich neben Afrika: Erzählung*, Berlin 1992.

³ Katharina Grätz, 'Rückblicke auf Strategien des verdeckten Schreibens in Romanen von Katja Lange-Müller und Monika Maron', *Seminar*, 43 (2007), 194–205.

⁴ Elizabeth Mittman, 'On the Road to Nowhere: Utopian Geography in Post-Unification Literature', *Seminar*, 37 (2001), 336–54; Cheryl Dueck, *Rifts in Time and in the Self: The Female Subject in Two Generations of East German Women Writers* (= *Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur*, 154 (2004)), 132–6.

⁵ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Cambridge, MA 1999, pp. 8, 28.

coincidental link between protagonists' explorations of their past and their queer identities, Königsdorf's use of queer protagonists foregrounds issues of self-censorship underlying *Ungelegener Befund* and *Gleich neben Afrika*.

Few writers explicitly discussed self-censorship within the GDR, but Christa Wolf's essays and speeches occasionally broach the issue and reveal its complexity. A much quoted interview describes an 'unfruchtbares und aussichtsloses Gerangel' with often contradictory inner taboos,⁶ but Wolf's attitude to self-censorship was yet more ambivalent. Elsewhere she explains how this 'Hochspannung macht den Reiz des Schreibens aus',⁷ gesturing to productive and even compulsive effects. Wolf's inner conflict has been discussed by Holger Brohm, who draws 'eine deutliche Parallele zum Prozeß der Verdrängung', but the parallel to the affect shame in his formulation 'Selbstzensur aus Gründen der Scham', which he does not elaborate further, could be more fruitful.⁸ For example, Didier Eribon's book on insult and queer subjectivity describes shame as an 'inscription of the social order into the subjectivity of "pariahs" and as a factor in one's subsequent recomposition of oneself'.⁹ Eribon's description of queer self formation echoes the formation of writerly identities under censorship, where anticipation of the censor shapes texts' very composition and texts inscribed with prohibitions in turn constitute writers' identities. Moreover, self-censored texts share certain formal features with shame,¹⁰ particularly difficulties in communication, reflected in a text's silences, and an 'instabiles Ich'¹¹ with an estranged relationship to itself. Königsdorf uses such features to great effect, and the focus on self-censorship with its parallel to shame offers important insights into the relationship between writer and state under and after censorship, as well as into the therapeutic and performative role of writing during reunification as a period of personal transition.

⁶ Christa Wolf, 'Subjektive Authentizität: Gespräch mit Hans Kaufmann', in *Die Dimension des Autors: Essays und Aufsätze, Reden und Gespräche 1959–1985*, 2 vols, Berlin and Weimar 1986, II, pp. 317–49 (p. 334).

⁷ Christa Wolf, 'Über Sinn und Unsinn von Naivität', in *Eröffnungen: Schriftsteller über ihr Erstlingswerk*, ed. Gerhard Schneider, Berlin and Weimar 1974, pp. 164–74 (p. 171).

⁸ Holger Brohm, 'Der andere Text: Zum Status von Zensur und Selbstzensur in Franz Fühmanns Traktat-Essay *Vor Feuerschlünden*', in *Zensur im modernen deutschen Kulturraum*, ed. Beate Müller, Tübingen 2003, pp. 181–93 (pp. 182, 189).

⁹ Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, tr. Michael Lucey, Durham, NC and London 2004, p. xviii.

¹⁰ See Stephen Pattison's 'ecology of shame': *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 69–92.

¹¹ Brohm, 'Der andere Text', p. 191.

Ungelegener Befund was written in 1988,¹² and deals with two taboos which its protagonist, the genetics lecturer Dieter Jhanz, has internalised.¹³ The first relates to continuity between Nazi Germany and the GDR, embodied by Dieter's father, Christian Jhanz, whose post-war work with a 'Kinderheim' is undermined by a bundle of letters suggesting his involvement in the Nazi programme of 'Rassenhygiene' (p. 51). The second taboo is that on homosexuality. Although decriminalised in 1968, homosexuality remained a taboo subject in the GDR. It was cautiously discussed from the late 1980s,¹⁴ but the taboo continued to affect publishing, as shown by the four-year delay in the publication of Jürgen Lemke's interviews with gay men, *Ganz normal anders*.¹⁵ Although *Ungelegener Befund* was not published until March 1990, when censorship mechanisms were redundant, it exhibits and plays with formal techniques to evade the censor.

The novel presents a number of Dieter's letters and a further set of letters found by Dieter's colleague, Helmuth Paul, supposedly written to and by Dieter's father before 1945. Dieter's letters are primarily to academic colleagues or to his student, Felix, and many addressed to Felix are marked 'nicht zum Absenden'. The letters are uncommented and without any preface, with Königsdorf demanding that '[m]an muß an einigen Stellen zwischen den Zeilen lesen' (p. 8). The nature of Dieter's relationship with Felix is never clear. Dieter says in an early unsent letter that he 'schon weiß, daß Du nicht "er" bist, sondern meine Erfindung' (p. 13). Königsdorf thus allows that an intimate relationship between Dieter and Felix could be a figure of Dieter's imagination. Similarly, the period when the man who is 'vermutlich' Dieter's father (p. 53) may have worked on racial experiments is not described directly: the letters fall silent between October 1942 and October 1945. These formal devices demonstrate the 'Tarnstrategien' which Katharina Grätz describes in texts conceived 'mit Blick auf die Zensur':¹⁶ they transfer internalised taboos to the fragmentary text but could also enable publication of texts dealing cautiously with taboo

¹² Christine Cosentino, "Heute freilich möchte man fragen...": Zum Thema von Schuld und Verantwortung in Christa Wolfs *Was bleibt*, Helga Königsdorfs *Ungelegener Befund* und Helga Schuberts *Judasfrauen*', *Neophilologus*, 76 (1992), 108–20 (108).

¹³ A third, greater taboo is the suggestion that the father of Dieter's colleague Helmuth Paul was a victim of Stalinism.

¹⁴ E.g. Ulrich Berkes, *Eine schlimme Liebe: Tagebuch*, Berlin and Weimar 1987. See Denis M. Sweet, 'Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism: The German Democratic Republic Devises a Gay (Male) Body', in *Gender and Germanness: Cultural Productions of Nation*, ed. Patricia Herminghouse and Magda Mueller, Providence, RI and Oxford 1997, pp. 248–62.

¹⁵ Jürgen Lemke, *Ganz normal anders: Auskünfte schwuler Männer*, Berlin and Weimar 1989; Hans Joachim Schröder, *Interviewliteratur zum Leben in der DDR: Zur literarischen, biographischen und sozialgeschichtlichen Bedeutung einer dokumentarischen Gattung*, Tübingen 2001, pp. 309–10.

¹⁶ Grätz, 'Rückblicke', 194, 202.

subjects. In *Ungelegener Befund*, however, these formal 'Tarnstrategien' also form part of Königsdorf's thematic treatment of self-censorship.

Unlike Dieter's father's involvement in Nazism, homosexuality is discussed much less openly. The dust jacket of the East German Aufbau-Verlag edition explicitly describes 'der Vater, Soldat und Rassenbiologe im III. Reich', but conceals Dieter's same-sex desire: 'In dieser ganz gegenwärtigen Erzählung geht es um Schuld, Trauer und Vergebung, um Zukunftsverantwortung, *aber auch um Liebe* und Bedingungen für Kreativität' (dust jacket; my italics). This is in stark contrast to the post-reunification Luchterhand edition where reference to Dieter's 'Verschweigen seiner Homosexualität' is followed by an almost apologetic note from Königsdorf:

Von der Anlage der Gestalten war es für mich zwingend, daß es Männer sein mußten. Und da ich auch eine Liebesgeschichte schreiben wollte, um Wärme und menschliche Nähe hineinzubringen, ergab es sich, daß es eben eine Liebesgeschichte zwischen Männern wurde.¹⁷

The irony of Königsdorf's reasoning based on 'Wärme und menschliche Nähe' is that the epistolary form immediately removes any interpersonal contact beyond letter writing, and letters sent between Dieter and Felix are rarely 'warm'. Homosexuality is never named in the novel, but is present as an unspoken desire throughout, as when Felix is denied a research place due to 'Beziehungen zu jungen Leuten dort, die *aus nicht näher genanntem Grund* mißliebig sind' (p. 111; my italics). Dieter's letters to colleagues about Felix show that he has internalised the unspeakable nature of his desire: they are impersonal and bureaucratic, using the passive voice: 'Es ist bedauerlich, daß dem Antrag auf ein Sonderstipendium für den Studenten Felix K. nicht stattgegeben wurde' (p. 15). Such abuses of power are frequent, but like Dieter's desire, power issues in his relationship with Felix go unmentioned. The clearest indications of intimacy are two instances of 'Ich freue mich auf Dich' (pp. 96, 98), and Dieter's letter to Helmuth after he caught Dieter and Felix together at Dieter's apartment: 'Felix und ich, wir könnten eine verdammt gute Zeit miteinander haben. Meistens geht es jedoch bei uns weniger gemütlich zu' (p. 105). Dieter's shamed silence with respect to his same-sex desire demonstrates the effect of internalised taboos on his writing.

The evasion and concealment triggered by shame extends to the destabilising of fixed identities in the text. The unstable relationship to oneself is important for Königsdorf's novel, which excludes any fixed narrator or author figure through its epistolary form. The only intervention of an unidentified editor is a footnote: 'In den Briefen, die Dieter Jhanz von seinem Freund Helmuth Paul zugestellt bekam, waren die Namen

¹⁷ Helga Königsdorf, *Ungelegener Befund: Erzählung*, Frankfurt a. M. 1991, p. 2.

von unbekannter Hand sorgfältig gelöscht' (p. 54). The effacing of names and signatures which might identify the authors or recipients reflects the shameful content of the letters, and leaves the reader guessing as to who censored the names. Königsdorf further problematises the implication that a letter's named addressee and signatory denote a clear, fixed origin and destination,¹⁸ with Dieter's separation of the addressee 'Felix' into a Du-Felix and an Er-Felix in the unsent letters and addressing comments about the Er-Felix to the imaginary Du-Felix: 'Er ist großenwahnsinnig und arrogant' (p. 23). Königsdorf thus highlights Dieter's unstable relationship to his own identity through her play with the epistolary form.

Even Dieter is largely censored from the communication suggested by the text's use of letters. In the second and third of the novel's four sections, he does not send a single letter. In all, he writes forty, of which almost half bear the note '*nicht zum Absenden*', itself an act of self-censorship. These unsent letters use dreams to depict Dieter's troubled unconscious and voice his same-sex desire, which is never explicitly referred to elsewhere, as Dieter 'versuch[t] vergeblich, Herr [s]einer Leidenschaft zu werden' (p. 13). Dieter repeatedly describes the men sleeping together, at least in his imagination: 'Du schläfst noch, und nichts soll Dich stören' (p. 29). In his sleep, however, dreams confront him with manifestations of his shame, particularly speechlessness and paralysis: 'Ich war ganz starr vor Schreck und brachte keinen Laut heraus' (p. 33). This speechlessness attaches to both his past, as in this case, and to his sexuality (p. 109). Overall, the unsent letters present Dieter's ambivalent relationship to his desire: 'Ich rüste zur Flucht und bin doch gefangen' (p. 14). This desire to '*hide, disappear or flee*' is an important feature of the shame experience,¹⁹ but Dieter's inability to escape intimate aspects of his self results in letters oscillating between exposure and speechlessness.

The compulsion to narrate resulting from this dialectic suggests the therapeutic function of writing for reconciling shameful aspects of one's past or identity. This is an important theme for Königsdorf, which critics have usefully highlighted in describing the diaristic nature of unsent letters.²⁰ However, whereas a diary is intended only indirectly for transmission, an unsent letter is fundamentally an abortive or failed act of communication. Despite their undoubtedly therapeutic function, the unsent letters represent above all what Dieter cannot say, his censorship of his self which drives him to silence. Nevertheless, the epistolary form demonstrates the importance of writing and reading, as all characters implicitly perform both roles as writers or recipients of letters.²¹ Reading

¹⁸ Linda Kauffman has described undermining such assumptions as a key feature of modernist epistolary writing: *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*, Chicago and London 1992, p. xx.

¹⁹ Pattison, *Shame*, p. 75.

²⁰ E.g. Cosentino, "'Heute'", 110.

²¹ Kauffman, *Special Delivery*, p. xix.

and writing uncover the text's 'ungelegener Befund', referring both to the presumed role of Dieter's father in Nazi Germany and to the 'diagnosis' of the self-censorship that was endemic in the GDR, but also enable recognition and confrontation of shame. Dieter realises that his conformity has been a 'Tarnstrategie' for his queer identity: 'Ich lernte, mich zu verhalten. Auch mein Anderssein warf seinen Schatten. Ich war nicht wirklich zugehörig, ich mußte mich tarnen' (p. 103).²² The past tense here suggests that a re-evaluation of Dieter's relationship to his queer identity has occurred. This reassessment is clear from the disappearance of the Du-Felix from his side in an earlier letter: 'Als ich erwachte, war der Platz neben mir leer. Ich wußte, Du warst gegangen. Endgültig' (p. 92). Subsequent unsent letters are still addressed to 'Felix' but discuss him with greater detachment, in the third person. By banishing from his bed the illusory Du-Felix, Dieter accepts his same-sex desire in a more critical and self-conscious fashion. The Du-Felix reappears once in the final letter, after the departure of the Er-Felix, when the tension between the two is resolved and 'Felix' recedes into memory: 'Sein Name wird schon zur Formel' (p. 118).

The unsent letters provide a narrative vehicle for Dieter to reassess his identity, and the book's last sentence appears hopeful:

Und ich glaube, es ist meine Pflicht, Zeugnis abzulegen, weil alles, was uns geschieht, so unmerklich vor sich geht, daß wir den Eindruck haben könnten, es geschehe nichts, wie wir gern unsere Zeit für klein halten möchten, die in Wirklichkeit in einer Weise groß ist wie keine Zeit zuvor. (p. 118)

Only through writing can Königsdorf's characters attempt to overcome their self-censors. In *Ungelegener Befund*, written under censorship, this process is necessarily incomplete, just as Königsdorf's self-censor seems to have been at work in such an enigmatic text. A letter from April 1989 suggests she was undergoing a similar process through her writing. She quotes the last sentence of *Ungelegener Befund* and the 'Pflicht, Zeugnis abzulegen', before apologising: 'Verzeih mir, daß ich soviel über mich schreibe.'²³ This writerly self-exploration is reflected in her prolific journalistic contributions during reunification, exploiting the new situation where '[z]um ersten Mal konnten Meinungen im Klartext kundgetan werden'.²⁴ Grätz describes, however, how the lifting of the censor after the 'Wende' was experienced 'nicht nur als Befreiung, sondern vielfach auch

²² Dueck, *Riffs*, 136.

²³ Helga Königsdorf, *1989 oder Ein Moment Schönheit: Eine Collage aus Briefen, Gedichten, Texten*, Berlin and Weimar 1990, p. 35.

²⁴ Eva Kaufmann, 'Adieu Cassandra? Schriftstellerinnen aus der DDR vor, in und nach der Wende: Brigitte Burmeister, Helga Königsdorf, Helga Schütz, Brigitte Strzyk, Rosemarie Zeplin', in *Women and the Wende: Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, ed. Elizabeth Boa and Janet Wharton (= *German Monitor*, 31 (1994)), 216–25 (221).

als Verlust einer wichtigen Richtmarke des schriftstellerischen Schaffens'.²⁵ These difficulties in adapting to a new literary environment are the central theme of *Gleich neben Afrika*.

The narrator, a writer with many biographical parallels to Königsdorf, is forced by the collapse of the GDR to realise that her inner censor persists as the real 'Einengung', and that power structures affected not just her texts but her identity: 'Mein ganzes Lebenskonzept war zusammengebrochen' (p. 99). Silvan Tomkins has described the shame experience that affects people forced to confront social taboos in a phrase which has startling relevance for the narrator in *Gleich neben Afrika*: 'One can not [*sic*] realize the extent of censorship until one tries to suspend it.'²⁶ This shameful realisation results in 'Angst' and 'Wut', as well as silence and writer's block as the narrator tries to suspend her inner censor, with 'zwanzig Romananfänge in meiner Schublade' (pp. 14, 13, 18). Königsdorf's working title, *Auf der Suche nach dem eigenen Schatten*,²⁷ indicates the novel's function as an engagement with the narrator's self and identity, referencing Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, an intertext as important for its position in the queer canon as for its exploration of first-person subjectivity. The narrator of *Gleich neben Afrika* addresses her shame in a remarkably confident way. That the narrative will be shameless and parodic is signalled in the epigraph:

Hier wurde
Wieder schamlos
Abgeschrieben (p. 7)

The potential productivity of queer efforts to confront shame through parody, irony and performativity has been discussed by many theorists, and Eribon has even described the drive to overcome shame as integral to queer subjectivity.²⁸ This is clear in *Gleich neben Afrika*: the narrator's same-sex relationship is one of the most confident aspects of the text, and the narrative parodies a number of genres in a way that could also be described as 'queer'.

Königsdorf presents the narrator's relationship with Maria unproblematically, almost without mention, so that critics have often

²⁵ Grätz, 'Rückblicke', 202.

²⁶ Silvan Tomkins, 'Shame-Humiliation and Contempt-Disgust', in *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, Durham, NC and London 1995, pp. 133–78 (p. 146).

²⁷ Karin Flothmann, 'Schreiben nach der Vereinigung: DDR-Autorinnen lesen im Frauenkulturzentrum Begine', *die tageszeitung*, 21 June 1991, Berlin lokal, p. 33.

²⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, NC and London 2003, pp. 35–65; Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, pp. 33–40; Eribon, *Insult*, p. 19.

passed over it with a cursory comment.²⁹ Centring the novel on a same-sex relationship draws the reader's attention to the narrator's reassessment of identity, particularly as the relationship started around the time of reunification. The break with the narrator's GDR identity is marked by a symbolic severing of ties to her family: 'Wir enterbten unsere Kinder' (pp. 16, 18). Elizabeth Mittman rightly rejects the utopia suggested at the beginning:³⁰ 'Der einzige Lichtpunkt war Maria' (p. 16). The love between the two has moments of tenderness but is overwhelmingly portrayed as pragmatic and unremarkable:

Ich liebte alles an ihr. Ihre Haut. Ihre Stimme. Ihre Logik. Ihre Wutanfälle. Maria war der erste Mensch, den ich liebte, ohne ihn mir umerfinden zu müssen. (p. 16)

The seemingly idealised love here is offset by Maria's prosaic logic and her rage. Neither partner is perfect: Maria is 'auf alles eifersüchtig' (p. 20) and the narrator is prone to infidelity and infatuations, including one for a Brigadier in her home town (p. 73). Königsdorf's narrator makes few references to their love as a same-sex relationship but, unlike Dieter in *Ungelegener Befund*, this is not due to a traumatic relationship to her queer identity. Instead, comments are in an ironic mode: 'Die Liebe zwischen Frauen besteht im wesentlichen aus Zärtlichkeit und Eifersucht' (p. 20). The same irony is used of the narrator's sudden infatuation for the Brigadier, whose Prince Charming appearance is shattered by his less-than-charming steed: 'Der Prinz fuhr einen grasgrünen Trabi' (p. 73). Her ironic comments on women and love demonstrate a self-critical but confident attitude, which acts as a model for exploring her relationship to her past and overcoming her self-censor.

The novel's first-person narrative and semi-autobiographical tone mark it as an extension of the project suggested in *Ungelegener Befund* of overcoming one's censored self through writing. This is emphasised by the narrator's return to her childhood village and her swim in the mysterious slate quarry which symbolises her family's past: 'Ich tauchte so tief ich konnte' (p. 30). The narrator is not tortured by this past like Dieter in *Ungelegener Befund*, but sets up a dialogue with her former self. Accusations that the novel demonstrates Königsdorf's 'Überwachungsentzugssyndrom' ignore the relentless self-parody in her montage of essayistic quotes and platitudes.³¹

²⁹ See Brigitte Rossbacher, 'Helga Königsdorf: *Gleich neben Afrika*', *GDR Bulletin*, 19/1 (1993), 14–15 (14), and Julia Kormann, *Literatur und Wende: Ostdeutsche Autorinnen und Autoren nach 1989*, Wiesbaden 1999, p. 346.

³⁰ Mittman, 'On the Road', 346.

³¹ Volker Wehdeking, *Die deutsche Einheit und die Schriftsteller: Literarische Verarbeitung der Wende seit 1989*, Stuttgart 1995, p. 141. See Mittman, 'On the Road', 342–3.

Die Träumer müssen schnell auf den Teppich der Realität zurückgeholt werden [...] Deshalb frißt eine vernünftige Revolution ihre Kinder. [...] Der Roman, um den es mir eigentlich ging, war das Leben. (pp. 12–13)

This style recurs each time the narrator discusses the 'Wende'. She both embodies and parodies the figure of the repentant socialist writer, adopting a critical and ironic stance towards her former self and accusing her of having 'den Größenwahn eines Zaunkönigs' and being '[a]ls Politikerin [...] eine Katastrophe' (pp. 17, 22). This is particularly summed up by the surreal cameo of Karl Marx as a hitchhiker who criticises her driving and the pollution in the state which had erected monuments to him: 'Sagen Sie bitte, wie lange kann der Mensch in dieser Luft existieren' (p. 90). By externalising the GDR system in this way, the narrator can symbolically let it go, when a man 'der gar keine Ähnlichkeit mehr mit Marx hatte' gets out of her car (p. 92).

The narrator's reassessment of her past is thus in the same ironic mode as her treatment of her same-sex relationship; indeed, irony is existential: 'es war ebenso selbstzerstörerisch, sie ernst zu nehmen' (p. 57). 'Sie' here refers to Maria's orders that she assert their property rights, but the narrator relates them to authoritarian demands in the GDR when she was 'Leiter eines sozialistischen Kollektivs'. The text is full of such links between the narrator's treatment of her past and her relationship with Maria. It was Maria who prompted the narrator to stop censoring herself – 'ich suchte den Streß, um nicht nachdenken zu müssen' – and who started her talking: 'Wir saßen stundenlang am Küchentisch und sprachen über die Vorgänge im Land' (p. 99). The narrative of *Gleich neben Afrika* is part of this discussion: Maria's demand for a bestseller (p. 24) encourages the narrator to adapt to the new literary market. Königsdorf thus depicts Maria as the catalyst for the narrator's attempts at overcoming her self-censor, linking her reassessment of her writerly identity to her understanding of her queer identity. *Gleich neben Afrika*, although itself hardly a bestseller, can be seen as the product of the narrator's process of writing to overcome her shameful self-censorship.

Writing helps the narrator find a new relationship to herself: '[p]lötzlich schrieb ich wieder mit jener inneren Sicherheit' (p. 108). The change from her earlier writer's block suggests her realisation – 'Ich war im Nichtsehen geübt. Im Vernachlässigen. Im Verdrängen von Fakten' (p. 80) – has helped her put this 'Verdrängen' behind her in her construction of *Gleich neben Afrika*. The narration could be described as queer, with its parodic montage of popular literary and TV genres from the GDR and post-reunification Germany which suggests a process of authorial reinvention. In parodic passages it is invariably the narrator and Maria who perform the archetypal roles, which links the queer narrative back to their same-sex relationship. As if they were in a whodunnit, the narrator pushes Maria out of the way of a rolling hay-bale, for example, which is followed by the 'unheimliche

Stille' characteristic of the genre (p. 59). Then it is Maria who plays the role of the returning lover in a scene from a typical 'rom-com' where the narrator already has two men in the house, and tells them all complicated lies as to why they are all there, before the scene ends in an embrace: 'Und da lachten wir alle beide.' The mood then changes suddenly as Maria demands what the men were doing there before the text cuts to a different scene, setting up a classic soap-opera cliffhanger which Königsdorf leaves unresolved (pp. 75–9). The structure of montage here means that scenes seem out of relation to one another, and this underlines the parodic intent and the productive, queer experimentation which creates a kaleidoscopic play of genres.

Königsdorf's satire of writers imagining spatial utopias after reunification has been discussed extensively elsewhere,³² but this generic experimentation culminates in the narrator's discovery of a banana plantation on an island 'gleich neben Afrika'. Bananas commonly symbolised East Germans' enthusiastic conversion to consumerism, and the narrator acknowledges this irony by remarking on her lack of shame: 'Eigentlich hätte ich mich schämen müssen. Aber ich schämte mich nicht' (p. 120). The bleak ending with the narrator simply observing Maria being bitten by a black widow spider demonstrates that she has not totally overcome the shameful paralysis caused by her internalisation of the GDR's repressive apparatus, but the confident queer narrative suggests she has made important progress, although Maria's fate remains uncertain.

Königsdorf has her narrator in *Gleich neben Afrika* explore her newfound narrative freedom to confront her past and to discuss her same-sex relationship confidently. This is depicted as a 'Befreiung aus einer Einengung', emerging from the silencing effects of self-censorship which dominated writing before reunification, and which persisted beyond the 'Wende'. This process of writing to overcome self-censorship is directly related to characters' queer identities. In 1988 Königsdorf was unable to portray a completely free engagement with a problematic identity shaped by self-censorship: *Ungelegener Befund* is necessarily still a product of the author's self-censorship mechanisms.³³ Where Dieter's narrative can only end with a gesture to the importance of writing in overcoming his inner censor, the narrator of *Gleich neben Afrika* puts this into practice,

³² See Mittman, 'On the Road'.

³³ Königsdorf's justifications of her same-sex protagonists demonstrate that queer sexuality was still subject to self-censorship after reunification: see Georgina Paul, "'Über Verschwiegene sprechen...': Female Homosexuality and the Public Sphere in the GDR before and after the *Wende*", in *Women and the Wende: Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, ed. Elizabeth Boa and Janet Wharton (= *German Monitor*, 31 (1994)), 226–37 (236, n. 27).

experimenting with and ironising modes of writing from the GDR and post-reunification and entering into a distanced and ironic dialogue with her former self. By choosing queer protagonists for texts which do not primarily deal with issues of gender and sexuality, but with the past and self-censorship, Königsdorf can demonstrate the internalisation of GDR power mechanisms by the country's citizens, as described by Mary Fulbrook's term 'participatory dictatorship'.³⁴ This is achieved by analogy to the queer subject who has internalised society's repression in the form of shame. Königsdorf does not show that her characters have completely overcome their self-censors, but *Ungelegener Befund* and *Gleich neben Afrika* as stages in a process of 'Befreiung' demonstrate the potentially productive nature of such an open-ended process of self assessment and reassessment.

³⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*, New Haven, CT and London 2005, pp. 12–15.