

## WHO IS THE 'I' IN "I LOVE YOU"?: THE NEGOTIATION OF GAY AND LESBIAN IDENTITIES IN FORMER EAST BERLIN, GERMANY

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### Introduction

In 1998, I had the incredibly rewarding experience of doing audio-taped, in-depth conversational interviews with 100 people in Berlin, Germany who were in long-term committed same-sex relationships. They had volunteered to help me study the linguistic strategies involved in negotiating family integration for their partners. Central to the construction of such relationships is the positioning of each individual in terms of social identities. I'm going to discuss how a number of discursive patterns participate in what I will call a 'stagnation' in the development of homosexual identities, a purposely pejorative term to reflect the anxiety and frustration expressed by interviewees. Although nearly all of these people currently refer to themselves as either *lesbisch* ('lesbian') or *schwul* ('gay') and are committed to fluid gay and lesbian, and in some cases *queer* identities, there are notable differences between the narratives of people socialized on opposite sides of the Wall in the pre-unification Germanies; this is much more pronounced in women, than in men.

### Background information

Homosexual acts between consenting adults were decriminalized in the G.D.R. in 1968, one year before this happened in the F.R.G. But, whereas the topic became popularized in the West in the early 70s and an identity movement drawing inspiration from the Weimar Republic and US urban centers gained momentum, the handful of people who tried to create space for a similar movement in the East were thwarted at every turn by the G.D.R. government and SED party. The government imposed and strictly enforced, regulations which forbade the organization of public meetings or events by individuals and groups not officially recognized by the State. Police force was used on numerous occasions to break up or prevent public gay and lesbian events. Centralized censorship prevented the presentation of homosexuality in print and electronic media, as well as the import of such materials. Apart from occasional jokes and swearwords, *schwul* ('gay') and *lesbisch* ('lesbian') were constructed, to quote interviewees, as "unspeakable" concepts, far from the 'reappropriations' which were taking place in the West

and which encouraged people to challenge heterosexual hegemony by adopting the labels of 'gay' and 'lesbian' with pride. The Protestant Church, as the only officially sanctioned voice of opposition, provided physical space and printing facilities for various non-religious groups, including peace advocates, feminists, and gays and lesbians. This option was unacceptable to many gay men and lesbians for ideological reasons.

Men seeking sexual contact with other men found each other in a number of cruising areas in Berlin parks, public facilities, and covertly designated bars. Women were more likely to meet in spaces defined as *normal* ('normal,' 'straight'), as in "No, we didn't meet in a *lesbian* bar, it was a *normal* bar." Sexual contacts were also initiated by personal classified ads formulated as 'hidden transcripts' in the sense of Scott, 1990, such as : *Frau, 28 sucht Brieffreundin* ('Woman, 28, seeks pen pal [+fem.]'). These, too, were eventually censored.

In the following article, I will discuss the way former residents of East Berlin who currently identify as gay or lesbian, and who are in long-term, committed same-sex relationships, describe their personal transition to gay and lesbian identities. I will focus on two salient themes which emerged as I analyzed these descriptions: first, the role attributed to the fall of the Wall and the language used; second, the differences between men's and women's experience of same-sex sexuality.

### Sexual Identities and Gender: East Berlin

Most of the people I interviewed describe life story events related to the development of sexual identities in terms which roughly reflect "stages" of identity development outlined in much of the sociological literature on modern homosexual identities in the United States. This holds true for people from both former Germanies. For East Germans, however, movement between stages was linked in people's narratives to the *Wende*, in stark contrast to West German interviewees, who did not tend to refer to the *Wende* at all unless they had East German partners (see note 1).

Richard Troiden (1988) describes four sociological stages of homosexual identity development as: (1)

**Sensitivity** - discovering a sense of personal difference, often in terms of gender-associated behavior and characteristics, (2) **Identity Confusion** - discovering erotic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same sex or lack of attraction to members of the other sex, without self-labeling as gay or lesbian, (3) **Identity Assumption** - acting on this difference and defining oneself in limited contexts; and (4) **Commitment** - eventually accepting and disclosing it to other people. I make the assumption that these stages reflect changes in aspects of individuals' self-conceptualization which are linked to social interaction in various social settings and communities of practice in the sense of Eckert, McConnell-Ginnet (1992), rather than homogeneous or pre-determined categories. In this scheme, a 'social setting' is more than physical space, and includes culturally shared assumptions, some of which are embedded in language, such as the socially evaluated roles which a culture makes available to its members. In this case, labels for defining sexual positions and the social evaluation associated with them are relevant. *Schwul* ('gay') and *lesbisch* ('lesbian') are terms which I will consider, as well as some linguistic features which Capps and Ochs (1995) have discussed in the context of a 'grammar of helplessness.'

I interviewed 10 men and 10 women from the former G.D.R. who were over the age of 18 when the wall fell. Five of the women had children and three had been married before the *Wende*, and five reported having had sexual contact with other women before *Wende*, but only two indicate that they had self-identified as *lesbisch* ('lesbian') at that time. In contrast, all ten of the men had been involved in same-sex erotic contacts and relationships, and self-identified as *schwul* ('gay') before the *Wende*, but with varying degrees of commitment to gay identities. Two of the men had been married and had children, but had become legally divorced from their wives before the *Wende*.

In the men's narratives, the *Wende* is attributed with making it possible for them to refer to themselves as *Schwul* and to talk about it outside of gay contexts. For the women, however, it was more likely to be attributed with a pivotal role in the development of their sexual preference. The narratives of women were often characterized by anxiety and frustration with the options they perceived to be available to them in the G.D.R.. Despite living in a state which had ostensibly achieved gender equality, men continued to control a larger amount of social and economic capital, and could accumulate symbolic capital in a wider range of markets. They held all of the higher party and ministerial offices, and were disproportionately represented in at the highest administrative levels in industry and military. In addition, women's roles in the home did not change substantially from the pre-war expectation that housework and caregiving are a woman's responsibility, even though 95% were employed outside the home. In addition, women's sexuality was largely excluded from legal discourses, and women's role in the heterosexual marketplace was constructed as a passive object of male desire.

#### Identity and Space: Personal Narratives

Barbara, a 34-year-old social worker, has been with her partner, Katja, for nearly 6 years. She and her partner are strongly committed to lesbian identities and currently share their lives with many other lesbian couples. For several years they have been trying to have a child. Prior to the *Wende*, Barbara describes her sexual identity as being in a state of limbo: sex with men wasn't satisfying and her attraction to women didn't seem to be an option. She assumed she would have to spend her life, quote "alone." She is convinced that she would never have made the decision to act on her sexual preference if social conditions had not changed (lines 4 - 6).

[B= Barbara/ H=Heidi (interviewer)]

H Hemmungen hattest Du nicht, daß es gesellschaftlich nicht akzeptabel ist?

B Nein, nein, ich glaube, auf jeden Fall, also, z.B. bin ich mir sicher, daß ich in der DDR nie mit 'ner Frau zusammengekommen wäre, das wär nicht möglich gewesen. Also, dazu war diese Ablehnung und Intoleranz also viel zu groß. Da bin ich mir sicher. Also, wir beide sagen, wir beide wären in der DDR nie zusammengekommen. Wir hätten uns, also, erstens mal war ich so im Kirchenbereich und sie mehr so staatlich und das wäre schon nicht gegangen. Nee, ich hätte im, in der DDR hätte ich nie ein Comingout haben können. Ich hätte nicht gewußt, wo man Frauen findet, wo, wo

H you didn't have inhibitions that it wasn't socially acceptable?

B No, no, I believe, in any case, that is, for example, I am sure, that in the G.D.R. I would never have come together with a woman, that wouldn't have been possible. For that, the rejection and intolerance was much too great. Of that I am sure. That is, we both say that both of us would never have come together in the G.D.R.. We wouldn't have, first of all, I was in the church sector and she was engaged with the state and already that wouldn't have been possible. No, I couldn't have had a coming out in the G.D.R.. I wouldn't have known, where one finds women, where, where lesbians are. I didn't know that

Lesben sind. Ich wußte nicht, daß Lesben 'Lesben' heißen.

lesbians are called 'lesbians.'

In this part of her narrative, she makes a direct connection between the *Wende* and her feeling free to chose a female sexual partner, "to come together with a women," she says in line 6, also linking it in line 16 to being able to adopt a lesbian identity in the sense of 'coming out.' Barbara is not alone in making an assertion of this type. She and several other women describe reaching a stage of identity development of confusion and uncertainty about themselves in which, for lack of information and social models, they felt powerless to act. This powerlessness is underscored by the linguistic forms she uses, and suggests a 'grammar of helplessness,' as described by Capps and Ochs (1995) in *Constructing Panic*. Barbara constructs herself as a helpless actor in the G.D.R. by using modal auxiliaries and negation such as "I couldn't have had," (lines 15 and 16) and existential constructions "it wouldn't have been possible" (lines 6 and 7). Comments in her narrative point to an awareness of and frustration at what might be called an 'identity stagnation.' The *Wende*, with its influx of information, and creation of space for explicitly non-heterosexual communities of practice provides impetus for further identity developments to occur.

Barbara's personal narrative of partner selection also reflects a wider social narrative which constructed church and state as two separate, mutually antagonistic institutions. As she states in lines 11 to 14, because she was active in the church and her partner was involved in state activities, the two of them would never have met. This is probably an accurate assessment, given that women's options for meeting potential same-sex partners were limited to spontaneous personal encounters of daily activity.

An important role is also attributed to the *Wende* in the narratives of three of the five women who did have same-sex sexual contact before the *Wende*, but did not consider themselves to be lesbians. Thirty-year-old clerical worker Judith, for example, had had sexual encounters with women, but these were never talked about, not even with her partners, for example a nurse she met while hospitalized (lines 1 to 4). If she, too, was still in a stage of identity confusion, her strategy was one of acceptance without labeling. She lived with various male partners and gave birth to a son, as well as having female lovers, but did not consider herself in terms of sexual identity labels before the *Wende*. Now strongly identified as a lesbian, she says of the time in her life before the *Wende*:

J wir haben nicht darüber geredet..was wir machen, wir haben es einfach gemacht, und wir haben nicht darüber geredet, es war auch nicht so irgendwie um so zusammengezogen sind, oder das es eine ne' längere Geschichte war ..dann muß man irgendwann darüber reden. Aber so, ja, wir haben nicht geredet.

H...und wann hattest du das als Thema mehr gehört?

J ja, nach der Wende war es so dass es viel mehr Information gab, [...]Und dann, gabs ziemlich früh dieses EVA Frauenzentrum, da da war ein Disko, Freitags für Frauen, da waren fast nur Lesben, da bin ich hin...

H Schon in '90 ?

J Ja oder '91 es gibt schon ziemlich lange ich weiss nicht mehr genau,

H und wo stand das in der Zeitung, oder...?

J das habe ich immer von einer Freundin erfahren..da bin ich dahin gegangen ab und zu mal, es war schon ...war schon alles ich wußte ich habe plötzlich ganz viele Möglichkeiten, auch wenn ich die nicht genutzt habe, aber ich hatte vielleicht was anderes zu tun, aber ab es war eine andere

J we didn't talk about it...what we did, we just did it, and we we didn't talk about it. It was also not the case that somehow, uh, that we moved in with each other, or that it was a long-term thing...that one would have to talk about it sometime. But so that we just didn't talk about it.

H and when did you hear more about the topic? [of lesbianism]

J yes, after the *Wende* it was so that there was much more information [...] And then, fairly early, there was this EVA women's center, there was a disco there Fridays, for women, and there were nearly only lesbians there, I went there...

H in 90 already?

J yes, or in 91. It has been around for a fairly long time, I don't know exactly.

H and where did that appear, was it in the newspaper, or?

J I always heard about it from a girlfriend, and I went there from time to time...that was ...that was all. I knew that suddenly I had a whole lot of

anderes zu tun, aber, ah, es war eine andere Atmosphäre, und ich denke also ich habe mich nach der Wende diese Beziehung zu der T. angefangen, mit der ich 5 Jahre zusammen war, und ich denke, wenn es die Wende nicht gegeben hätte, wäre's vielleicht nicht dazu gekommen

possibilities, even if I didn't use them, but maybe I had other stuff to do, ah, but it was a different atmosphere, and I think that I started this relationship with T, who I was with for five years, after the *Wende*, and I think that, if there hadn't been a *Wende*, then it might not have come to this.

Judith highlights in lines 11 to 15 the role of information, feminism, and women's space in her search for a social identity consistent with her own feelings, here connecting these issues with a personal decision to commit herself to a female partner and lesbian identity. I would credit the communities of practice which began to form in such spaces as the EVA Women's Center mentioned by Judith, with being a decisive force in bringing women to articulate aspects of the sexual and social experience and to develop

feminist and lesbian identities. As do many of the other interviewees, she describes a past scenario of public behavior which calls to mind the 'stigma' management Goffman (e.g. 1963) talked about in the 60s, such as concealment of discreditable characteristics. This strategy appears to be so deeply entrenched in her thinking that she does not even talk to her partners about it. As Sabine, the 38-year-old construction engineer I mentioned before put it:

S 'mmmm das das war so ein ein ungeschriebenes Gesetz, daß da nicht darüber gesprochen wird, das lief denn nur so im intimen Kreis ab, und dann war auch ein Tuch darüber, und das EXISTIERTE halt nicht für die Öffentlichkeit

S 'mmmm it it was an an unwritten law that it won't be spoken of there. It happened only in an intimate circle and then there was a cloth over it and it didn't EXIST for the public

Her choice of an object passive, and therefore subjectless, construction in lines 2 and 3 contributes to the invisibility of lesbian sex and expresses the subordinate position which she perceived herself to occupy. Contrasted with "We won't speak of it", the construction "It won't be spoken of" provides no linguistic space for an agent. I imagine that Sabine's experience of being arrested at work and imprisoned has left her more aware of her powerlessness as a social actor than most people with whom I spoke.

Acceptance of a lesbian identity label became an issue for some members of female same-sex couples in the G.D.R., as the next example will show. In this case there is tension between two partners, only one of whom identifies as lesbian. Their relationship began before the *Wende*, and extended into the transitional years after unification, but several patterns which can be seen in their interaction seem typical of the constraints most of the women I interviewed reported experiencing in the G.D.R. Two major issues are a perceived rigidity of gender roles, and the lack of social resources for family counseling and therapy.

Mara is a 46-year-old media engineer who lived through several abusive relationships with women before the *Wende*. Given the lack of state acceptance of same-sex relationships, she felt unable to use family counseling and therapy services which would have been available to a person in a heterosexual relationship, because she feared (with justification) that the medical authorities would only have tried to 'cure' her lesbianism (see note 2). She was emphatic that she did not want that. Her first lesbian relationship, which lasted 7 years, was with a woman she describes as an alcoholic who "broke bottles over my skull." This was followed by a 12-year live-in relationship with a self-identified heterosexual woman, Carola, whose teenage son still lived at home. It would appear that Carola considered herself to be heterosexual despite her erotic involvement with Mara, a fact which Mara said she attributed to the passive role she enacted during sex (lines 17-19), a telling example of social discourses constituting women's sexuality. As Mara tells in the following passage, everyone agreed that Mara was indeed a lesbian, and this was accepted by Carola and her son.

H haben sie [die Familienmitgliedern von C] Euch als 'lesbisch' bezeichnet?

M Nay, nur mich und C selbst hat sich auch nie so bezeichnet

H did they [C's family members] refer to you [familiar plural] as lesbian?

M no, just me. And C herself never referred to herself as lesbian?

H uhhuh	H uhhuh
M am Anfang dachte ik nah ja gut, sie kannte das vorher nicht weil sie hat mir vorher mal gesagt sie wird mich nie lieben können	M in the beginning I thought well, fine, she didn't know that before because she had told me beforehand that she would never be able to love me
H uhhuh	H uhhuh
M uuund	M aaaand
H wie, liebe im Sinne von Sex? Oder wie?	H how, love in the sense of sex, or how?
M nay, mit dem Sex war auch so 'ne Sache. Ich durfte sie berühren	M no, with sex that was also such a thing/ I was allowed to touch her
H uhhuh	H uhhuh
M aber sie mich nicht [...] also sie hat den ganzen 12 Jahre mich eigentlich nicht angefaßt.[...] irgendwann reicht es doch nicht. Ich dachte in die erste Zeit noch gibt sich's noch, sie lernt das das ist ihr neu, sie wird schon mitkriegen, und dann habe ich ihr irgendwann gesagt weißt du was, du bist AUCH lesbisch. Weil sie immer gesagt hat das ich das wäre, aber sie dann nich und ik habe gesagt du bist das auch nay also das bin ich auf gar kein Fall. Und ik hab gesagt was bist du denn, sag's mir mal. Ich bin ganz normal hat sie immer gesagt.	M but she me not [...]that is, she didn't actually touch me the whole 12 years [...] at some time it wasn't enough. I thought in the beginning, it'll change, she'll learn, it's new for her, she'll figure it out somehow, and then I said to her at some point: "you know what, you're lesbian TOO." Because she always said that I was, but she wasn't. And I told her 'you are too.' 'No, I'm not that way at all.' and I said 'what are you then, tell me that.' 'I'm completely normal,' she always said.

For Mara, the fact that Carola allows herself to be sexually satisfied by another woman is sufficient to justify labelling her 'lesbian,' and also for her to expect Carola to accept a reciprocal role in sexual activity. Carola rejects this interpretation, apparently, and insists that by not engaging in a active role, she remains 'normal.' The disagreement with regard to self-reference as 'lesbian' highlights the complexities surrounding a negatively evaluated identity and the behaviors associated with it. This division between an active, more 'masculine' partner labeled the 'lesbian,' and a passive, ostensibly 'normal' female partner is paralleled in the construction of men's homosexuality in many cultures, where only the passive role of being penetrated, considered gender-inappropriate, is labeled homosexual. This form of asymmetry among women would be an interesting subject for detailed study. Although experiences with women such as Carola were described by a number of lesbian-identified women, none of women who rejected the label for themselves were willing to be interviewed. And of course because they do not frequent the kinds of places I used as a source of interviewees, they were not likely to be included in this study. Some women who identified as lesbian did describe stages in their lives, however, when they engaged in same-sex erotic activity, but considered themselves to be heterosexual. This is evidence that the lack of communities of practice within which positive discourses or lesbian culture

could develop, inhibited women from adopting lesbian identities. Where such communities thrive, a set of 'master signifiers' can be reassigned positive value and become part of the overt social dialogue, and take a more prominent role in the presentation of the public self, although they may continue to be rejected by many people.

It is hard to imagine this assertive, articulate woman spending 12 years in a relationship which was as unsatisfactory as the one she describes here, but given the background of her other, more overtly abusive relationships, perhaps not surprising. Even under the most advantageous of circumstances, this is a difficult pattern to break; under the conditions of her socialization and the options available to her, it is all the more understandable that she was unable to do so. Although it was not acceptable to Mara, she did not feel that any better options were available to her. I consider this to be strongly related to Mara's low self-esteem, but also to social circumstances in the G.D.R. which very much discouraged lesbians from finding and associating with each other. I am sure that Mara was aware of the extreme difficulties of finding a female partner, and that as a result, she was willing to compromise more of her expectations.

The relationship survived only a few years after the *Wende*, at which time Mara slowly began to overcome her own misgivings about dealing with

lesbianism. Eventually she went to a lesbian counseling center in West Berlin. There, for the first time, she found people with whom she could talk about her sexual preference. It was not an easy transition. On her first casual visit to the women's center (after having started counseling there), she describes entering the building in the evening and, in order to reach the library, having to pass through a room filled with women (assumed by her to be lesbian) playing cards. She told me she was so shy about walking back through that room that, after she found a book, she sat and pretended to read for two hours until the women left and she could leave the building without being seen. Within half a year she had moved in with Dalia, a blind woman who strongly self-identifies as lesbian and who works at the Women's center. They met at the *CSD (Christopher Street Day 'gay pride')* parade as part of the group of women associated with the center.

Among the people who talked to me, women in the G.D.R. were less likely to recognize, act on, or label attraction to people of the same gender than was the case for their male counterparts, that is, they were far less likely to adopt any manifestations of lesbian identities in the West German or Anglo-American senses. This is consistent with a social discourse which

constructs women as sexual objects, rather than sexually active agents and has the effect of rendering female sexuality, especially lesbianism, invisible. This attitude is also reflected in the wording of laws which, until 1968, had criminalized sexual acts between consenting adult males, but which excluded women. I find it interesting that this situation existed despite the far-reaching economic independence of women in the G.D.R. (based on the high percentage of women gainfully employed outside the domestic sphere). In part, this at least superficial degree of independence inhibited many East German women from participating in feminist activities which in the West provided one of the sources for lesbian identity movements.

As I have said, the men I interviewed had all recognized and acted upon their inclinations and for the most part, identified positively as *schwul* in private circles. Carl, a garbage collector who was 32 at the time of the *Wende*, is an exception. He is the father of three kids, and has been divorced since 1988. He had met a same-sex lover in school with whom he continued to have sex throughout 7 years of heterosexual marriage. Here he describes what he perceives to be a connection between his sexual choices and the state in which he lived.

C wie gesagt, ich mußte mich damals, zu der Zeit, immer verstecken, denn ik hab in der DDR gewohnt, und da war dat Thema war ja tabu...

H uhhuh

C da jab sowat nich 'schwul' oder so wat und deswegen habe ik auch damals auch bloß geheiratet

H uhhuh

C eigentlich um bloß um die Sache zu verdrängen. **Man** konnte auk mit jar keinem darüber reden. Mit meinen Eltern konnte ik damals nicht darüber reden

C like I said, I had to hide myself then, at that time, always hide, because I lived in the G.D.R., and there that topic was taboo

H uhhuh

C there wasn't such as thing as 'gay' or the like and that's why I got married then

H uhhuh

C actually just to suppress the issue. One couldn't talk to anyone about it. With my parents I couldn't talk about it then.

In terms of identity stage, he has faced prolonged confusion about his homosexual identity and adopted strategies of avoidance and denial. Here Carl uses modal auxiliary verbs to express the helpless position he was in: *müssen* ('must') in "*ich mußte mich verstecken*" ('I had to hide myself' - line 1) and *können* ('can') plus negative "*man konnte mit gar keinen darüber reden*" ('one couldn't talk about it with anyone' - lines 11 and 12). Such verbs designate a subordinate position for the speaker in a hierarchy of moral authority, and mask the source of the authority, constructing a condition of opaque powerlessness.

Used to position oneself in narrated events of the past, they also serve to reinforce and recreate the helplessness which is described by leaving it unchallenged. Carl's choice of linguistic forms further highlights his sense of helplessness in that he removes himself from the action by using the impersonal pronoun *man* ('one') in talking about himself (line 11). Also, the impression of having been helpless in the G.D.R. social structure is underscored as he asserts that *so etwas gab es nicht, 'schwul'* ('there wasn't such a thing as 'gay') - one could have sex with men, but being 'gay' wasn't perceived by this and many other interviewees as being a social option (line 6).

Three years after Carl's divorce, his partner, Paul, moved in with him and his mother. In a rather common arrangement for G.D.R. family integration, Carl's mother not only addressed Paul in familiar terms, but very quickly invited him to refer to her as *Mutter* ('mother'). This does not imply, however, explicit awareness or acceptance of a 'gay' identity for her son. When I asked him what words he had used to reply when his mother confronted him about the 'unusual' closeness of his and Paul's relationship, he points out that words such as 'gay' or 'homosexual' were not used because in his family they did not use *Schimpfwörter* ('swearwords').

The exchange took place at a birthday celebration, and involved questioning by Carl's mother and sister. Although it was not Carl's personal choice to discuss the matter, it would also appear that he had

not made an effort to hide his same-sex erotic relationship. In lines 4 and 5 he uses the words "It came out that I was *schwul* ('gay'), that is, *anders* ('different')," amending the use of the word *gay* to the word *different*. Although he considers *schwul* to be appropriate for his conversation with me, it was not part of the terminology used in the family context. He goes on to explain that his sister and mother approached him because "something about him wasn't right ('nicht stimmen könnte')." As in the previous passages, he uses language which highlights the helplessness of his position, and which does not name sexual orientation directly. For example, in response to my direct question in lines 1 - 3, "When did *you* first tell anyone...?", he does not respond to my reference to him as an active agent in the event, but in line 4 tells me that "It came out that..."

H und wann hattest Du das irgend jemand mal mitgeteilt...daß dein Leben auch 'parallel' läuft?

C ahh, sagen wir mal so ..raus kam, daß ich schwul war also anders war, da hat mich meine meine Mutter und meine Schwester darauf angesprochenH ach so

C ja, dat war....nach dem mein Vater gestorben war mein Vater ist 89 gestorben...und da auf ein Geburtstagsfeier von meiner Schwester

H uhhuh

C da hatten die mich darauf angesprochen

H uhuh

C daß irgend was an mir nicht stimmen könnte...

H und die fragten so? Und sie waren zusammen?

C meine Schwester und Mutter, ja ja, auf der Feier kamen sie an, und haben mit mir gesprochen und...ah wie es denn so ist, ja es ist so und so....

H ja erst mal genau ...wie das gesagt wurde? Was haben sie genau gefragt?

C na ik hatte ja damals den Freund aus B.

H ja

C mit dem habe ich mich öfters getroffen und daraufhin hatten sie mich dann angesprochen, das ist ein bißchen bißchen eigenartig, weil ich immer nur mit dem zusammen bin, und immer mal hin fahre und wat dat für ein Verhältnis ist..

H haben sie so gefragt

H and when did you first tell anyone ... that you life also ran 'parallel'?

C ahh, let's say it this way...[it]came out that I was gay, was that is was different, that was my my mother and my sister spoke to me about it.

H oh..

C yeah, that was...after my father died was...my father died in 1989...and there at a birthday party of my sister

H uhhuh

C there they asked me about it

H uhhuh

C that something about me couldn't be right

H and they asked like that? And they were together?

C my sister and mother, yes, yes, at the party they came, and they spoke with me and ...ah, 'how it is then' yes, it's like this...

H yeah, to be more exact...how did they say that?

C well, I had at that time the friend from B.

B yeah

C with whom I met often, and regarding that they spoke to me, that is a little, little strange, because I am always just with him, and I always go

C ja, haben sie so gefragt und so na ja da wollte ich nich und da haben sie gesagt ik könnte da offen mit ihnen reden und so also

H uhhuh

C na falls und so is dat ik mit dem war ik zusammen habe ein Verhältnis und so ja und ah

H und so Wörter wie 'schwul' oder 'homosexuell,' 'anders rum' wurden nicht benutzt?

C nay gibt's überhaupt nich in der Familie bei uns das..ja 'schwul' und

H wird nicht genannt

C wird überhaupt nicht genannt also so Schimpfwörter...die gibt es bei uns in der Familie nich.

H ja genau..und dann hast du zugegeben und die waren dann verständnisvoll?

C ja die waren verständnisvoll von Anfang an

H warst du überrascht?

C ja, sehr überrascht. Ik hatte vor sagen wir daß dat meine Mutter raus kriegen könnte oder irgendwann mal hatte sehr großen Bange vor gehabt

there and what kind of relationship that is...

H that's how they asked?

C yes, that's how they asked and so well, yes, I didn't want to and they said I could talk to them openly and so...then

H uhhuh

C well in case...and so that I was with him/ I together/ have a relationship and so yes and ah

H and such words as gay or homosexual or the other way around weren't used?

C no that doesn't exist in the family by us that yeah, gay and

H it isn't named?

C no, not at all named that is such 'swearwords' ...they don't exist by us in the family

H yes, exactly...and then you admitted and they were understanding?

C yes, they were understanding from the beginning onwards

H were you surprised?

C yes, very surprised. I had about...let's say..that my mother could find out sometime had very great fears about that.

During this whole exchange with his mother and sister it does not appear that Carl is being characterized as a member of an identity category such as gay or homosexual, but that his actions and feelings toward a specific person are being scrutinized and measured against an imagined scale of what they consider to be 'normal' behavior for two male friends (in lines 31 - 34). To Carl's great surprise, they accept this deviation from expected behavior without apparent difficulty (lines 57 - 61). Considering the extreme measures he has previously taken to conceal his homoerotic desire, including entering into a heterosexual marriage, it is easy to believe that he really did not expect such a tolerant reaction. But as Carl's remarks in lines 47 - 52 about the use of 'swearwords' in his family show, they may still have been a long way from actually accepting a homosexual identity for him, and in fact there is little evidence that he had accepted one for himself at that time. Such reservations are reflected in the language he uses to refer to his relationship to Paul in lines 41 and 42, where he makes several restarts: "...and so that I was with him/ I together/ have a relationship and so yes and ah," and avoids naming their relationship in explicit terms.

This attitude appears to have changed since the *Wende*, however, and he is currently together with a very 'out' West Berliner who supplements his income as an office clerk with public travesty performances, a shift which is reflected in the ease with which he refers to himself in the conversation with me as *schwul* but circumvents it when describing events prior to the *Wende*. As is typical for many of the former East German interviewees, the *Wende* co-coincides with a major shift in self-identification, as well as the strategies used to negotiate integration of partners. It is not possible to compare the results of his current strategy, however, as his mother has passed away.

I don't believe it is a coincidence that the only two gay men in my East German sample who got married and tried very actively to 'pass' as heterosexual even though they perceived their sexual and emotional preferences to lie in male to male relationships, were blue collar workers, whereas the men who were more committed to *schwul* lifestyles worked in arts or service professions where tolerance for homosexuality was reportedly higher. Various interviewees commented on what they perceived to be professional constraints related to sexuality, a tendency



which was more pronounced in the former Easterners. This may be attributable to the lack of flexibility of the system to allow people to easily change from one job or type of job to another.

These narratives give some idea of how some speakers perceived their same-gender erotic attraction and the role they attributed to the *Wende*. They also provide a window on how linguistic structures such as a discourse of silence (in the sense of 'erasure') and a 'grammar of helplessness' might have participated in maintaining moral stances, or as Duranti (1993) has called it, the 'moral flow' of a culture, and have inhibited the development of gay and lesbian identities in the former G.D.R..

### The Iron Condom

Gay men from the former G.D.R. sometimes jokingly refer to the Wall as the giant condom which

protected them from AIDS during the first decade of the epidemic. This is misleading, as the wall was only impermeable to most East Germans; after December 1971, West Berliners were each allowed to make one or more visits to the East for a total of 30 (later 45) days per year. In practice, however, the numbers of people infected in the G.D.R. remained far lower than in the West. Even today, (see note 3) ten years after the opening of the border, only two percent of the total number of diagnosed AIDS cases in Germany are reported for all five of the former eastern *Länder* ('states'), including East Berlin (395 of 18,239 cases); 52% are located in the Western cities of Frankfurt a.M., Munich, West Berlin, Cologne, Dusseldorf and Hamburg, with the remaining 46% being distributed over the rest of former West Germany (see note 4). In the discourse surrounding the *Wende*, several references to this (relative) safety factor were made, such as that of Carl:

H und kanntest du, außer deinem Schulfreund, andere schwule Männer?	H and did you know, outside of your school friend, other gay men?
C nay, zu der Zeit da nich, nay	K no, at that time, not
H gar keine	H none at all
C nay nay der [unklar]so wie es hier in West Deutschland so na so 'n Szene gab es nicht in Ost D. War ja nich leider aber....oder oft, manchmal denk ik war dat ein Vorteil war	K no, no the [unclear] so the way it is here in West Germany, such a such a Scene didn't exist in East Germany. Unfortunately not,...or often, sometimes I think that it was an advantage
H ja? In wie fern so	H yes, in what way?
C daß man vielleicht nicht ausleben konnte wie es jetzt ist....	K that one maybe couldn't live the way it is now...
H uhhuh	H uhhuh
C denn die ganze Sache wie AIDS dat war ja damals jar nich	K because the whole thing with AIDS, that wasn't there at all back then

News sources in the East dramatized the AIDS health crisis as a decadent, exclusively capitalist phenomenon, and did not publicize information about cases of AIDS in the G.D.R. This led to a dearth of information on protective measures, testing or safer sex practices. Fortunately, limited sexual contact with the larger numbers of infected individuals in the West did inhibit its spread in the East.

In a collection of life histories of gay men living in the G.D.R. published there in 1987, Jürgen Lemke's *Ganz Normal Anders*, almost no mention is made of AIDS by the 14 men interviewed. When they do talk about it, they refer to social consequences such as the ignorance and suspicion of people around them who are afraid they will be infected by touching a gay man's door knob or using the same toilet. No mention is made of the devastating health consequences AIDS was having elsewhere, nor is there evidence of a discourse of personal loss so pervasive in West German and American narratives of the time.

#### Positive Aspects of Oppositional Identity

Those who found and/or created the 'community' of same-sex oriented people in East Berlin through hidden transcripts and word of mouth describe a strong sense of satisfaction and belonging, and of participating in situations which demanded creativity and resourcefulness. It might have been difficult, even dangerous, to express unpopular ideas in the G.D.R., but people clearly had the impression that members of the state apparatus cared about what they said and did, which is reflected in the quote which starts off this chapter. Nowadays, people complained, their views could be expressed, but they would also be ignored, or only be heeded if they were perceived to represent economic value.

Not every aspect of the unification was received as a blessing by Eastern gays and lesbians. Everyone I spoke to alluded to a much more active private social scene in the East prior to the unification, which took place in private apartments and houses. Several went so far as to say they preferred that time and now missed the close-knit community which they described as being their family, in contrast to the almost exclusively commercial scene which has come to dominate social activity for most gays and lesbians in the former East today, and which is characterized by anonymity. Some of this nostalgia for past solidarity has been replaced by cynicism following disclosures about the extent of

how many people had affiliations with the *Stasi*, but nearly everyone with whom I talked expressed at least some resentment of the way Western ideals and capital have come to dominate their country.

#### Generations from Different Countries

The fall of the Wall essentially created a situation where an entire generation of young people suddenly found themselves growing up in a different country than their parents. This is a situation which occurs only very rarely, for example, following mass migrations or power shifts after military conflicts. In this way, the *Wende* not only encouraged change in the identity development of adult men and women who had experienced a sense of same-sex erotic attraction during the regime of the G.D.R., it also participated in the creation of a more prominent 'generation gap' between parents socialized in the East and their kids who were coming of age at or after the *Wende*. Values which prompted Carl to marry in order to hide what he refers to as 'his difference,' were called into question by this generation, who were quick to adopt the 'be who you are' mentality of Western youth.

I spoke to two young women who were coming of age as lesbians in a suddenly transformed conditions of post-*Wende* G.D.R.. For both of them, family conflict and division were the strongest themes to emerge. As a result of increased exposure to radical West German communities of practice, the strategies which the young people began to use to construct and present gay and lesbian identities shifted quite rapidly after the *Wende*. It is tempting to compare the process to the politicizing of sexual identities which gradually took place in the U.S. over three decades following the Stonewall resistance; in the G.D.R., however, this process was unleashed from one day to the next.

Tara was only ten years old in 1988 when the wall was opened. Eighteen at the time of our interview and currently living with a former West German partner named Tammy, who is 25 years her senior, Tara is very much a woman of the *post Wende* time. She is self-confident, almost militant, in her lesbianism, and proudly sports a slick pierced 'butch' look when she and Tammy go out in their suits and ties. She left home abruptly, without her parents' blessing, after arguments over her sexuality. Her and her partner's interview (held at their request as one of the few interviews conducted with both members of the couple present) focused almost entirely on the current tensions between Tara and her East-German

parents and there are no immediate plans for Tammy to meet Tara's family. Her own contact with them is extremely limited, and interaction with them has focused almost exclusively on practical issues such as moving out and having official documents signed by them.

Billie was 15 when the wall began to crumble, and living with her mother in a small town in the Harz. She had realized that she was lesbian a year before in a process of awareness development which she describes as: *es war wie ein Baum, der man fällt, und dann hat man einem Blick. Bums. Dann war es für mich im Kopf klar. Ich wußte in welche Richtung ich suchen mußte.* ('It was like a tree that one cuts down and then one has a clear view. Boom. Then it was clear for me in my head. I knew in which direction I had to search.') It was a revelation which she did not share with anyone, however, and it was not until she was able to meet other lesbians that she found a community of practice to whom she felt able to talk. She relates that the topic of homosexuality was 'modern' at the time: the first (and only) East German gay film "*Coming Out*" had just been premiered, and an article which contained contact addresses for Berlin women's groups appeared in the Socialist youth magazine, *Das Magazin*. She wrote to one of them and was able to establish contact and eventually friendship with other lesbians. Most of them were older, however, and had children, so she didn't feel she had much in common with them. Upon turning 18 in 1991 she moved to Berlin with their help, and was able to stay with the friends to do the mandatory *polizeiliche Anmeldung* ('police registration') at their address, allowing her to apply for professional training as a youth worker.

Billie's prospects as a lesbian in the small town where she was born would not have been good prior to the unification, but the fact that she was able to gain access to information which allowed her to increase her options in determining her life course indicates that changes were taking place before the Wall actually fell. After two years of concentrating on her education and unsuccessful attempts to find partners, she met her future 'life-partner,' Carola, through a newspaper announcement. The two of them, in turn, began searching for a sperm donor by means of announcements, and now share care giving responsibilities for a 2-year-old daughter, Tanya. The donor, whom they refer to as Tanya's 'father' is allowed to see her twice a month. Neither of these public searches would have been possible during the strict administration in the G.D.R. under

Honecker, although the political loosening which had begun in the late 80s might eventually have created space for Billie and the family she hoped to start.

For Billie's mother, the prospect of her daughter raising children as a 'single mother' would not have raised any eyebrows; her choice to be a lesbian co-mother, however, is a hefty break with traditions deeply entrenched in 40 years of socialist experience.

### Comments on Space, Language, and Identity

In the preceding pages I have considered spatial constraints on certain kinds of behavior, and how these participated in the development of identities. I have considered several ways in which language participated in this process. Individual interactions occur in specific times and places, (settings in the language of Hymes), each with corresponding expectations regarding appropriate behavior, appearance, and speech of the people involved. These expectations are culturally shaped, and are also part of the grammatical knowledge most people participating in a culture learn and use during interaction. This feature of learning is one of the links connecting language to space, and a strong reason for considering them together. Whereas East and West Germans shared similar varieties of the German language, different social constraints of the kind described in this chapter led to different practices and language use with regard to sexual orientation. It seems plausible that strong social and political constraints placed on actions and utterances deemed permissible in public places had a major influence on the formation of gay and lesbian communities of practice and of gay or lesbian identities. The language-related constraints imposed by the S.E.D. which disadvantaged gays and lesbians by silencing any form of non-heterosexual expression are only one manifestation of more general spatial constraints imposed by a regime which claimed absolute authority over all things public, including the sole right to determine what is public.

The members of the central committee which determined the policies of the S.E.D. carried out by the state authorities of the G.D.R. were working with, and building upon, notions of sexuality and public space which they shared with the citizens of the G.D.R.. Their influence, however, extended far beyond that of ordinary citizens. In contrast, by looking at the B.R.D., one can see how people living in a nation which began with exactly the same set of cultural notions, but organized according to different social principles,

developed in an entirely different way, allowing diverse communities of practice to thrive, among them gay and lesbian ones. This probably encouraged not only more gay and lesbian activity, but also the development of fully expressed identities in the sense of Troiden's fourth identity stage of 'commitment,' the stage where individuals accept a gay or lesbian identity for themselves, and disclose it to others.

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### Notes

1. A high proportion of the East Germans in my sample live with non-East German partners: four of the men and four of the women.
2. According to a historical account of homosexuality in the G.D.R. by Gudrun Kowalski (1987), a majority of researchers and authorities on human sexuality favored therapy for homosexuals, the most extreme position (Dörner) being to advocate hormonal treatment to cure or prevent homosexual behavior as a disease, other positions being to depathologize homosexuality, yet to advocate therapy against it because it is unfavorable to society. Not until the mid 80s did the scientific community in the G.D.R. begin to view same-sex sexuality without making social judgments.
3. End of June, 1999 as reported by the AIDS center at the Robert Koch Institute, Berlin, Germany at [http://www.rki.de/INFEKT/AIDS\\_STD/AZ.HTM](http://www.rki.de/INFEKT/AIDS_STD/AZ.HTM)
4. Or two percent of cases are reported among the 20 million former East Germans, opposed to 98 percent among the 60 million West Germans.

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- (Thanks to Ursula Sillge and Micha Unger for their insights regarding resistance in the G.D.R..)