



PHOTO: MELIA HAMBACHEN

A column of international perspectives on queer Berlin by expats on rotation

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## “obsessive orderliness”

> Forgive me, *Vaterland*, for I have sinned. Yesterday, I recycled wine bottles at 13:27, violating sacred afternoon quiet time with the shattering glass – even though the *Ruhezeiten* are printed right there on the bin. Today, when ordering coffee, I forgot the accusative case. And last weekend, while visiting a museum with my girlfriend, I let her convince me to jump to the front of the long line outside – even though only she has the *Jahreskarte* that lets you skip lines, and I don't. Can I ever be absolved?

It's not that I love rules. I've broken plenty in my lifetime, from minor to hell-of-a-lot-of-jail-time, and gotten away with it. However, living in Germany has made me neurotic about rules. I mean, Germany is stereotyped as the land of regulations and obsessive orderliness. Uniformed “orderliness officials” from the *Ordnungsamt* patrol the streets, for crying out loud. But everyone knows the stereotype doesn't really apply here. Berliners jaywalk with aplomb, piss wherever they please and have sex in parks and smoke on the U-Bahn platform right next to signs saying it's *verboten*. Why do I let rules rule my life, when others clearly don't do the same?

First, being yelled at (or just berated) by a German is scary. The German yell is like none I've ever heard: deep and guttural, quivering with aggravation. Like an opera singer, the German yeller uses their entire diaphragm, even if your offense is little more than yawning without covering your mouth or obstructing the tram aisle with your leg (both true stories). For those of us who grew up with Nazi films churned out by Hollywood, the villain of our nightmares is wearing a black uniform and yelling, “Halt!”

Harrowing though the punishment may be, reason two is greater: Being an outsider here means I feel compelled to fit the role of Good Little Foreigner. For in Germany, there are the Good Foreigners and the Not-So-Good Foreigners. The former are, namely, white. But also good at assimilating, which means not just speaking the language, but also being subservient to the German way of doing things, playing by local rules and customs. When I obey, I'm doing it for a fantasy jury that follows me everywhere. When I go out of my way to recycle my glass at an allowable time, I fantasize about a uniformed German appearing and rewarding me with a gold star on my residence permit.

Enough. Berlin is my home. In most ways, I feel like I belong here. Taking that feeling to the next level means losing the internalized anxiety about having to be good and *ordentlich* to be accepted. I'll begin with something small, like lighting up on the U-Bahn platform. Guess I'll have to start smoking. <