

Queer approaches

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Abstract:

Queer methodologies have opened up myriad avenues of productive scholarly inquiry into literature and culture, thanks to the fluidity of the very word *queer*. Scholars face the challenge of redefining and retheorizing queerness in each new cultural or historical context, while at the same time allowing it to remain open and relational, to maintain its playfulness and malleability. Through the lasting influence of foundational theorists Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, Judith Butler, and Teresa de Lauretis, *queer* has acquired two distinct but intertwined senses, referring on the one hand to nonheterosexual desires or nonbinary gender embodiments, and on the other hand to the troubling of established norms or discourses. In her pioneering book *The Queer German Cinema* (2000), Alice Kuzniar observes that queerness is useful for interrogating distinctions like masculine/feminine, gay/straight, and normal/perverse because it “destabilizes identifications that would adhere to one pole of the binary and acknowledges that individuals often experience their subjectivity hybridly, contingently, and sequentially” (6). This is one of the constellations of meaning that circulate around *queer* and *queerness*: an array of nonmainstream, nonessentialist, and nonmonogamous gender and sexual positionalities that include homosexual, bisexual, questioning, trans, intersex, asexual, polyamorous, and pansexual identities and practices. While *queer* has emerged as a shorthand referent for such embodiments and desires, it refuses to signify cohesively and inevitably fails to capture the diversity of the positions it describes.

Keywords: queerness | German studies | queer studies | queer theory

Article:

Queer methodologies have opened up myriad avenues of productive scholarly inquiry into literature and culture, thanks to the fluidity of the very word *queer*. Scholars face the challenge of redefining and retheorizing queerness in each new cultural or historical context, while at the same time allowing it to remain open and relational, to maintain its playfulness and malleability. Through the lasting influence of foundational theorists Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, Judith Butler, and Teresa de Lauretis, *queer* has acquired two distinct but intertwined senses, referring on the one hand to nonheterosexual desires or nonbinary gender embodiments, and on the other hand to the troubling of established norms or discourses. In her pioneering book *The Queer German Cinema* (2000), Alice Kuzniar observes that queerness is useful for interrogating distinctions like masculine/feminine, gay/straight, and normal/perverse because it “destabilizes identifications that would adhere to one pole of the binary and acknowledges that individuals often experience their subjectivity hybridly, contingently, and sequentially” (6). This is one of the constellations of meaning that circulate around *queer* and *queerness*: an array of nonmainstream, nonessentialist, and nonmonogamous gender and sexual positionalities that include homosexual, bisexual, questioning, trans, intersex, asexual, polyamorous, and pansexual identities and practices. While *queer* has emerged as a shorthand referent for such embodiments and desires, it refuses to signify cohesively and inevitably fails to capture the diversity of the positions it describes.

The queer turn in German Studies of the 1990s and 2000s brought scholarship that—instead of merely applying twentieth- and twenty-first-century ideas to earlier centuries—used queer methodologies to explore nuanced expressions of desire, intimacy, and fantasy in the cultural production of earlier centuries. Classical literature became an early focal point in the burgeoning discipline of queer German Studies, which sought to name the unnamed by excavating unspoken or previously unacknowledged same-sex attractions. Kuzniar's edited volume *Outing Goethe and his Age* (1996), Robert Tobin's *Warm Brothers: Queer Theory and the Age of Goethe* (2000), and Susan Gustafson's *Men Desiring Men: The Poetry of Same-Sex Identity and Desire in German Classicism* (2002) undertake critical reevaluations of affection and intimacy in works by Goethe, Kant, Kleist, Moritz, Schiller, and Winckelmann, thereby challenging the narrative that normalizing and pathologizing discourses of sexuality did not emerge until the nineteenth century. Randall Halle tackles the heteronormative assumptions at the foundation of early modern to contemporary scientific and political thought in *Queer Social Philosophy: Critical Readings from Kant to Adorno* (2004). Christoph Lorey and John Plews's anthology *Queering the Canon: Defying Sights in German Literature and Culture* (1998) likewise interrogates intellectual traditions and historiographical norms. Lorey and Plews's contributors analyze deviance and disruption in nineteenth-century laws, philosophy, music, and sexology alongside the canonical writing of Thomas and Klaus Mann or Ingeborg Bachmann, while also pushing against the canon's exclusions by investigating the work of Anna Elisabet Weirauch, Monika Treut, and Rosa von Praunheim.

The shared etymology of the English *queer* and the German *quer* points to another meaning, one that validates the awkward and the marginal, the ambiguous and the contradictory. Queer theory is the practice of *quer denken*, thinking outside of the box, viewing one's object of study in ways that disturb established scholarly norms or disciplinary boundaries. In “Why Queer German History?” (2016), Jennifer Evans asserts that “a queer methodology [...] asks us to linger over our own assumptions—individual as well as societal—to interrogate the role that they play in the

past that we seek out, discover and recreate in our writing” (371). Evans advocates the queering of German history by attending not only to same-sex desiring and gender variant subjects, but also to contingencies, ambiguities, and especially omissions. Along similar lines, Kyle Frackman takes contradiction and ambivalence as points of departure for excavating how East German queer identities were experienced and performed—aesthetically as well as politically—in an era where tolerance was predicated on invisibility (“Coming Out of the Iron Closet: Contradiction in East German Gay History and Film” [2013]; “Persistent Ambivalence: Theorizing Queer East German Studies” [2018]).

Implying transgression, the verb *queering* designates a movement against the grain or into new territory. Beyond sexual practices, the directional adjective *queer* resists a straight narrative through decentering, reorienting, and even awkward gestures. Embracing awkwardness as both a conceptual and a thematic axis, Carrie Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle's *Awkward Politics: Technologies of Popfeminist Activism* (2016) mobilizes feminist and queer studies to explore the messy entanglements of theory and practice in contemporary German popular culture. Recent queer German scholarship revisits medieval and contemporary literature and music to trouble hegemonic readings of partnership and happiness in Christian and specifically Catholic traditions (see Kling [2012]; Pflieger [2017]). Such work productively expands beyond reductive understandings of *queer* as a label for sexuality to wider gestures that acknowledge incoherence and celebrate the proliferation of meaning.

Intersectional, transnational, and crossdisciplinary queer scholarship productively decenters German Studies by interrogating notions of belonging. In “How Jewish Is German Studies? How German Is Jewish Studies?” (2009), Leslie Morris proposes an “off-center” approach to German-Jewish Studies that queers categories and emphasizes how identity is imagined, projected, declared, and performed (viii-ix). Fatima El-Tayeb queers ethnicity in a reconceptualization of blackness as eclectic, fractured, and mobile and that validates dislocation. In *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011), El-Tayeb offers a theoretical model of the diaspora that successfully deconstructs popular conceptions of a raceless and secular European community. Queer antiracist critiques of ethnicity extend these lines of inquiry to constructions of whiteness, Germanness, Turkishness, and Muslim identity (see Boovy [2016]; Clark [2006]; El-Tayeb [2013]). As Sedgwick observes in *Tendencies* (2003), such queer scholarship “spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality crisscross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example” (9).

Intersections among queer theory, aesthetics, and genre studies form another productive node of scholarly inquiry. As Lorey and Plews suggest, “queerness occupies spaces in which it is possible to create polyvalence where both sexuality and textuality are concerned” (xix). For Barbara Menzel, masochistic aesthetics are a lens for investigating the junctures between fantasy, pleasure, and the staging of power in the work of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and twentieth-century directors (*The Representation of Masochism and Queer Desire in Film and Literature* [2007]). The politics of pleasure also take center stage in Jennifer Creech's monograph on gender, genre, spectatorship, and socialist subjectivity, *Mothers, Comrades, and Outcasts in East German Women's Films* (2016). Focusing instead on the unsettling qualities of German cinema, Smith-Prei brings queer aesthetics to a discussion of

pedagogy in “Queer Borderlands: Teaching Monika Treut's *Jungfrauenmaschine* in the Foreign Language Classroom” (2010). In my own research, I have argued for concepts of queer literary genre and advanced a theory of queer style (see Stewart [2014]). Bridging the gap between intellectual discourse and queer cultural production, studies of queer aesthetics showcase the myriad ways in which desire is sublimated and comes to expression, structurally or symbolically. Though Rolf Goebel lamented the “marginalization of queer issues in German Studies” in 2006, queer studies are no longer at the fringes today (“Queer Berlin: Lifestyles, Performances, and Capitalist Consumer Society” 485). Indeed, they are critical to expanding the frontiers of our discipline.

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