

“Queer Theory in Transit. Reception, Translation, and Production in Polish and German Contexts” focuses on the interdisciplinary theory of non-heteronormative cultural codes and identifications formulated in the late 1980s and its dissemination to Germany, Poland (among other European and non-European countries) since the 1990s. Despite inspirations from non-US based scholars, notably Michel Foucault, queer theory became dominated by scholarship in the United States. Read in translation and in the original English, this scholarship inspired academic work in Poland and Germany. Scholars in the humanities and in social sciences were drawing on US sources for concepts with which to analyze and interpret cultural texts and phenomena. Their output was significantly biased in favor of these sources, even as their own locally produced work did not easily penetrate to other languages and other academic environments. This setup promoted US dominance in the field. Even though German and Polish scholars working in queer theory have been cooperating for almost two decades, holding joint conferences and issuing publications since the early 2000s, this cooperation remains poorly recognized.

US-produced queer theory began to view its own dominance as problematic because it tended to obstruct local legal contexts, social realities, and cultural traditions. Polish queer theory also began to critically address the Western, and for the most part US-American, model of LGBTQ historical development as largely unsuitable to the Polish context, which includes the historical absence of criminalization of same-sex activity, the forced absence of political organizing before the end of the 1980s, and the continuing lack of recognition of same-sex unions. We are calling on Edward Said’s concept of “travelling theory” to emphasize the importance of local contexts in formulating and applying theoretical concepts.

This project will examine the reception of queer theory in Germany and Poland, including the debate on the pitfalls of globally conceived scholarship (which often means US-based scholarship), its assimilations to the local contexts, the critique with which it was sometimes met, the translations of its founding texts, and the original contributions from Polish and German academics. Detailed focus on the local corpus of queer theory’s critical reception, the translations of its canonical works, and original outputs will allow us to see the local specificity of queer readings, queer theory’s applicability for locally grounded analyses and interpretations, and conceptual framings arising from the Polish and German academic environments, as well as cultural and linguistic contexts.

The project’s comparative perspective will help make the local specificity more prominent and emphasize that contemporary work on non-heteronormative aspects of culture is locally grounded, and not merely a cultural and academic import. At the same time, knowledge transfers and cultural transfers between Germany and Poland will be presented as an important complement to local scholarship and a way of overcoming the dominance of US-based scholarship.