Dissertation Abstract

I am thankful to have the generous support of the ZtG and funding from the DAAD in the coming year while I research and write my dissertation project for the Ph.D. in Germanic Languages at Columbia University in New York. I have provisionally titled my dissertation project, “Tracing Transgender Feeling in Sexual Modernism: Gender and Queer Affinities between Early 20th-Century Literature & Science.” My dissertation explores how gender variation and feelings of gender incongruence provided an important social impetus at the turn of the 20th century for scientific and aesthetic innovations and enabled novel explorations of human personhood, embodiment, social difference and marginality in a range of artistic and scientific forms in German-speaking culture. During this period, which some scholars have referred to as sexual modernity or sexual modernism, various competing models arose to explain the physical, emotional and spiritual disposition of gender-variant individuals and their shared tendencies, their sexual proclivities, and their social role and value in relation to an increasingly prevalent and consequential understanding of gender-typical behavior and “normal” sexuality.

The phenomena of gender variation, cross-gender identification, and sexual intermediacy gained social traction and visibility during this time, not only as political and social problems or deviations demanding careful attention from medical, scientific and legal experts, but also (and in my estimation, more compellingly) as creative and productive modes of experience, as a distinct “structure of feeling” (to borrow Raymond Williams’ concept), which developed into aesthetic, literary and cultural figures closely linked to the conditions of European modernity. Gender variation and experiences of a transitional or intermediate character appear in multiple domains of science and literature during this period, from medical and human-scientific texts (not only in the emerging field of sexology, but also in related fields like anthropology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis), to literary and poetic works of multiple genres and styles, as well as political and journalistic writing for popular and niche audiences alike.

Decades before transgender identity and the more particular (and for some, troublesome) concept of transsexuality became solidified as a diagnostic category and a standardized set of medical and legal practices in the mid-20th century, gender variation circulated in modern German-speaking culture as a diffuse set of feelings and social phenomena that organized “queer” and sexual minority communities and their politics and also, more broadly, propelled diverse forms of aesthetic and literary production within modernist movements *beyond* these more “minor” social spheres. On one hand, my dissertation investigates how gender variation conceptually united a range of social categories that have since disappeared, been marked as historical or “obsolete,” or otherwise been distilled into a limited number of normative social identities like homosexuality and transsexuality. In re-exploring categories like sexual inversion, transvestism, the third sex, and sexual intermediaries (*Zwischenstufen*)through this lens, I intend to avoid the reductive interpretation of these experiences as mere proto-forms of male homosexuality, as some works in the history of sexuality have tended to do.

In resisting this conceptual reduction and by offering a more capacious and “democratized” notion of transgender feeling and social dysphoria rooted in the experience of gender variation and marginality within the normalizing conditions of modernity, my project constructs a more nuanced history of queer genders and sexualities from a German-speaking context, which has had a significant influence on future developments of sexual knowledge and politics on a global scale. Beginning with scientific and medical writings of the late-19th century (e.g., Magnus Hirschfeld, Iwan Bloch, Albert Moll) and moving into modernist literary and artistic production (e.g., Rainer Maria Rilke, Else Lasker-Schüler, Robert Musil and Thomas Mann), I seek to illustrate in my dissertation how gender variation became a driving figure of literary and scientific modernism at large, not merely an index of *marginal* experiences, nor simply the target of reactionary political fractures or normative interventions. Thus, I argue in this project that gender variation and transitional, incongruous and intermediate experiences of gendered embodiment – what I am organizing under the heuristic of “transgender feeling” – offer a productive analytical framework that can open up new perspectives on modernist culture and aesthetics and provide more nuance in our understanding of the history of queer politics, sexualities and genders.