Introduction: Intersectionality and queer theory

The relationship between queer theory and intersectionality remains complicated despite obvious parallels between both critical moves. Recent Anglo-American publications have started to address this issue (e.g. Harper et al., 1997; Jackson, 2005; Richardson et al., 2006; Puar, 2007). While both research fields can be linked via an interest in the analysis of multiple and conflicting processes of the formation of identities, they are separated due to a double blank. First, there is a relative neglect of sexuality in theories of intersectionality in gender studies and, second, there is a continuous silence on intersectionality in a predominantly white genealogy of queer theory. Critical perspectives such as queer of colour critique (Ferguson, 2004; Cohen, 2005) and queer diaspora critique (Gopinath, 2005; Manalansan, 2006), queer disability (McRuer, 2006) and transgender studies (Hines, 2006; Stryker and Whittle, 2006) as well as queer Jewish studies (Boyarin et al., 2003) and queer and class approaches (Hennessy, 2006) have tackled the theoretical dilemma and opened up the debate for a multidimensional queer understanding of identity construction. In what is to follow, we try to organise an imaginary ‘trialogue’ between, firstly, the Anglo-American formulations of intersectional and multidimensional queer perspectives; secondly, German versions and re-workings of these ‘travelling theories’ in dis/simultaneous timeframes, socio-historical spaces and contexts; and, thirdly, our proposed reflexive perspective on the practical and epistemological limits of both theoretical cultures. Given our own situatedness in specific academic cultures, the chosen examples come mainly from a German and Anglo-American context.

For a long time, German feminist theory – understood as a heterogeneous field – seems to have ‘delegated’ sexuality to queer theory, resulting in a simultaneous in and exclusion of the examination of heteronormativity in and from ‘mainstream’ feminist research (cf. Hark, 2005). This also affected the relative absence of ‘sexuality’ in lately very active intersectional research.
practices, especially in the social-sciences bound German gender studies (cf. Knapp, 2005; Klinger et al., 2007; Klinger et al., 2008). The new wave of intersectionality research has mainly two foci: Firstly, it is seen as a ‘social relaunch’ or ‘social return’ of feminist social sciences reacting to neoliberalism in order to reintroduce the question of ‘class’ into theory after the delegitimisation of Marxist thinking attached to the breakdown of Eastern European Socialism (cf. Soiland, 2008). Secondly, intersectionality provided a paradigm for gender studies to reflect and to react to growing neo-racisms against non-white/non-occidental migrants and especially the role of white women and feminism in this field (cf. Dietze, 2008). Repeatedly, this focus on intersectionality as a concept conjures the notion of a ‘new’ research paradigm. The invocation of newness has a certain depoliticising effect as it often marginalises earlier works of (German and non-German) feminists of colour and coincides with struggles over the predominance of certain disciplinary approaches in women’s and gender studies. At the same time, the discourse of intersectionality paradoxically impedes addressing racism (cf. Erel et al., Chapter 3, this volume; Haschemi Yekani et al., 2008 for more detailed analyses of these developments). Another problematic aspect of an all too clear-cut usage of intersectionality is that it becomes at its worst ‘a structural container that simply wishes the messiness of identity into a formulaic grid’ (Puar, 2007: 212). In the same vein, many critical voices have argued that, despite the boom of research in intersectionality, what is needed is a stronger focus on the conditions of inequality or power relations rather than on categories.

Concerning this aspect, queer theory, with its focus on a critique of normalisation and the destabilisation of categories, tried to avoid the analysis of asymmetrical power relations as part of identity politics. This, at times, led to a disregard of power hierarchies traversing the field of sexuality and a too narrow focus on gay male metropolitan expressions of sexuality. We agree with critics who call for a revision of both an over-simplified framework of intersectionality and the tackling of a queer neglect of hegemonic identity formations and power. These conflicting approaches to the complex of identity formation and structures of inequality require a continuous de-sedimentation (cf. Derrida, 1978) of identity categories. The reference to categories in our understanding implies a ‘productive instability’ – similar to Butler’s concerns voiced in the chapter ‘Critically Queer’ in Bodies That Matter. To refer to identity categories from a deconstructive point of view ‘ought not to paralyze the use of such terms, but ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense for what purpose the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought’ (Butler, 1993: 229).

Bearing these reservations in mind, we employ the term interdependencies (cf. Walgenbach, 2007) rather than intersectionality, firstly, to highlight that we see each category as ‘dependent’ on other categories, and secondly,