Some key concepts:

- displacement: a continuum ranging from individual intellectuals exile to émigré communities to diasporas to deterritorialized, fluid forms of migration

- construction and articulation of nationality and other forms of identity (such as gender and sexuality) within the modern discourses of identity and community; role of subversive/interrogatory practices

- strategic role of networks, both human and technological, in these practices

- relative marginalization of Slavic cultures within these critical discourses
Eastern Europe & Global LGBTQ Studies:

- relative neglect; failure to recognize specificity
- enduring rosy-colored views of the Soviet project
- 1990s: utopian misreadings of lingering pre-Stonewall practices as a utopian alternative
- recent surge of support of activism in the face of renewed persecution (esp. in Russia)
- Eastern Europe’s role in global “anti-gender” campaigns spearheaded by the Catholic Church (see esp. Roman Kuhar & David Paternotte, eds., Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality, 2017)
Witold Gombrowicz
Exile vs. diaspora: contrasting views

- Paul Gilroy: “Diaspora lacks the modernist and cosmopolitan associations of the word ‘exile’ from which it has been carefully distinguished” (“Diaspora and the Detours of Identity”)

- Intellectual exiles in Edward Said’s Representations of the Intellectual (Adorno, C.L.R. James, add here Said himself): strong presence of diasporic concerns in their work and lived experiences.
This consideration allows us to define a force field of productive tension determined by the parameters of the diasporic/exiled intellectual’s engagement with:

1) their local diasporic community;

2) the larger—“imagined”—diasporic network (sustained, in full accordance with Benedict Anderson’s thesis, with the help of print—and now also electronic—media that connects the diasporic communities dispersed around the globe);

3) the local populace, both in the course of everyday living and in the interaction with the intellectual circles; and finally,

4) “the world,” that is, certain universal themes and concerns with which the particular diasporic intellectual is trying to grapple (which themselves undergo a profound impact of diasporic existence).
Who Is Gombrowicz?

- a major Polish modernist prose writer and playwright, championed by some as one of the greatest twentieth-century writers

- “probably the most important twentieth-century novelist most Western readers have never heard of” (Benjamin Paloff, “Witold Gombrowicz, and to Hell with Culture,” http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/witold-gombrowicz-and-to-hell-with-culture)
Gombrowicz’s major texts

- **Memories from a Time of Immaturity** (a collection of short stories, 1933, revised and expanded as *Bakakaj*, 1957)

- **Ferdydurke** (a novel, 1937, establishes his reputation as a major Polish writer; a grotesque text in which the protagonist, an adult man, is forcibly turned back into a junior high school student; adapted into a film in 1991 by Jerzy Skolimowski)

- **Trans-Atlantyk** (a novel, 1952)

- **Pornografia** (a novel, 1960, written in the style of a 19th-century country estate novel, set in Poland during Nazi occupation; adapted into a film by Jan Jakub Kolski in 2003)

- **Cosmos** (a novel, 1965, existentialist in its concerns)

- **Diary** (1953-1969)

Gombrowicz’s central concerns

**Form**, understood not only in aesthetic terms, but generally as the conventions forcibly inscribed upon us, the pressures of prescribed identification. Striving for **Form**, we gain acceptance of others but lose our individual uniqueness; letting ourselves sink into **Chaos**, we remain individually unique but other cannot comprehend and accept us.

**Form** vs. **Chaos** can thus be translated into oppositions of age (maturity/immaturity), social class (aristocrats/plebeians), civilizational tradition (West/East, Old World/New World), cultural background (elitist/mass culture), and sexual orientation (“accepted” heterosexuality/“ostracized” queerness). Since his very first book, Gombrowicz is fascinated by **youth** and **“immaturity,”** positively revalued as openness to multiple possibilities.
The Challenge of Queerness

Identity as “not merely a succession of strategic moves but a highly mobile cluster of claims to self that appear and transmogrify in and of place . . . When . . . a body that carries any of the many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces—nation, region, metropole, neighborhood, or even culture, gender, religion, disease—intricate realignments of identity, politics and desire take place” (Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, Queer Diasporas [2000])
From Gombrowicz’s *Diary*

(written for serialized publication in 1953–1969; in essence, a blog before the Internet era)

- My attitude to Poland is the consequence of my attitude to form: I would like to elude Poland as I elude style, I would like to soar above Poland, as above style, here and there, my task is the same.

- I attack Polish form because it is my form, because all of my works desire to be, in a certain sense . . . a revision of the modern man in relation to form, to form which is not a result of him but which is formed “between” people . . . I, who am terribly Polish and terribly rebellious against Poland, have always been irritated by that little, childish, secondary, ordered, and religious world that is Poland . . . My literary work is guided by the desire to extricate the Pole from all secondary realities and to put him in direct confrontation with the universe. Let him fend for himself as best as he can. I desire to ruin his childhood.
Major move of recent Gombrowicz criticism:

to “reclaim the centrality of homosexuality in his critique of aesthetics and culture, without reducing its importance . . . to the sensational biographic secret” (Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, ed., Gombrowicz's Grimaces: Modernism, Gender, Nationality [1998])
Key text: *Trans-Atlantyk* (1952)

- features a narrator named “Witold Gombrowicz” and uses as a point of departure the author's real biographical experiences; however, it transforms them beyond recognition into a complex phantasmagoria;

- focuses on the key juncture in Gombrowicz’s life: in the summer of 1939 he, a rising star of Polish letters, was invited to take part in the maiden voyage of the country’s new transoceanic liner, the *Chrobry*, from Gdynia to Buenos Aires. Less that two weeks after his arrival to Argentina, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The ship sailed to the UK, while Gombrowicz chose to remain in Argentina, where he ended up staying for twenty-four years.

- Critics (e.g. George Gasyna) have called it Gombrowicz’s most experimental novel.
Unusual textual form of *Trans-Atlantyk*

- *Gawęda*: a Baroque-era nobleman’s oral tale. An important genre of Polish writing in the 17th and 18th centuries, it has, however, been viewed with some disdain by the champions of the national Polish canon, since these works by semi-literate country squires were seen as an epitome of provinciality and backwardness;

- *Gawęda* served as a basis for the Poland’s national epic, Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* (1834; film adaptation by Andrzej Wajda 1999)
Gombrowicz on *Trans-Atlantyk*:

In a sense *Trans-Atlantyk* was born in me like a *Pan Tadeusz* in reverse. This epic poem, written by Mickiewicz in exile over a hundred years ago, the masterpiece of Polish poetry, is an assertion of the Polish spirit inspired by nostalgia. In *Trans-Atlantyk* I wanted to do the opposite to Mickiewicz.

The novel’s provocative message and form, its “irreverence towards grand words and sacrosanct myths” (Stanislaw Baranczak) was credited by many communist-era dissident intellectuals for giving them the mental fortitude to resist totalitarian temptation, whether of the nationalist or of the communist variety.
Ziarek on the novel’s style:

the specific inflection of the Baroque style in Trans-Atlantyk creates dissonance within national identity by parodic repetition of a degraded popular cultural formation . . . the parodic recycling of the obsolete and degraded cultural forms parallels Gombrowicz’s transvaluation of homosexuality—in particular, his contestation of the homophobic representation of [it] as “regression” or “degeneration.” In both cases, Gombrowicz retrieves what is deemed by culture as shameful, inadmissible, obsolete, or regressive and reinterprets it as a hope for a different future (p. 221, 223)
Ojczyzna (Fatherland, Patria) vs. Synczyzna ("Sonland," "Filistria")

Gonzalo, “Portuguese, of a Persian-Turkish mother in Libya born” (p. 37): “But wherefore need you be a Pole? . . . Has the lot of the Poles up to now been so delightful? Has not your Polishness become loathsome to you? Have you not had your fill of Sorrow? Your fill of Soreness, Sadness? And today they are flaying your skins again! And you insist on staying in that skin of yours? Would you not become something Else, something New? Would you have all these Boys of yours but just repeat everything forever after Fathers? Oh, release Boys from the paternal cage. Let them veer off the path, let them peer into the Unknown! . . . Give free rein to those Boys of yours, let them Gallop, let them Run, let them Bolt and be Carried away!” (p. 57)
José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America (2000)*:

It is not clear what Filistria is meant to stand for. . . But what is clear is that the conflicting claims of a doubled male allegiance motivate a tale where both Patria and Filistria are seen in terms of both loss and gain. The narrator may lose a Patria toward which he was always skeptical and whose love he refuses to proclaim even at the hour of war, but he is also wary about his gaining Filistria as part of a new configuration of loyalties. Torn between what Gonzalo calls the claims of the Son (Filistria) and the claims of the Father (Patria), Gombrowicz writes his tale in a code whose language also speaks of both gain and loss (p. 102).
GOMBROWICZ’S NETWORKS DURING HIS BUENOS-AIRES YEARS
Café society

Gran Rex

El Querandí
Cuban expatriates, led by Virgilio Piñera

Both émigrés, they became friends and buddies in... erotic adventures. Gombrowicz, as Virgilio used to say, was very handsome then; to survive he became a male prostitute at the Buenos Aires baths, letting himself be fucked for a few coins... I think this friendship influenced Virgilio considerably, making him more daring, more irreverent. Or perhaps they influenced each other. Their lives were uprooted and grim; they did not believe in institutionalized culture, or in taking culture too seriously... (Reinaldo Arenas, Before Night Falls, p. 80-81)
This book, Gombrowicz’s first novel, which made him a star in Poland in 1937, was translated into Spanish collectively, over meetings in Gran Rex, by a group led by Piñera.
Gomrowicz’s “disciples” in the 1950s
Mariano Betelú, leader of the “disciples,” wearing Gobrowicz’s raincoat (taken after Gombrowicz left for Europe in 1963)
Diasporic Polish intellectuals

Jósef Wittlin

Jerzy Giedroyc
Kultura (leading Polish diasporic journal)
Gombrowicz and Queer Theory:

- Gombrowicz, especially in Trans-Atlantyk, prefigures several crucial moves of queer theory, e.g. Judith Butler’s theory of gender as performative, not only in its original articulation in Gender Trouble, but also in later elaborations, e.g. in “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification” in The Psychic Life of Power.

- José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of deidentification “as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance,” as “the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy.” Disidentification is “a step further thatn cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by dominant culture” (Disidentifications, p. 25, 31).
East European Queer Theorists & Slavist Allies:


- Anita Starosta, *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, Postimperial Experience* (2016) [on “the work of form”; Form and agency, the scandal of “ostentatious indefiniteness”]

- George Gasyna, *Polish, Hybrid, and Otherwise* (2011): Trans-Atlantyk as a Foucauldian heterotopia
The Trans* Message of *Trans-Atlantyk*

In the strange Oedipal fantasy the repressed “mother” in the Polish fatherland returns as a trans-puto to abolish the father regime in the act of second birth. Yet Gonzalo’s “trans” quality allows him to be the mother, the father, the brother, and also the “anal child” (or brother), which altogether subversively escapes Oedipality (and this avoidance would also dismantle the idea of “nationality” which seems a “male” concept, or at least connected to strict gender roles). Gonzalo is the ideal for Witold which the latter is still afraid of. (However, although Witold as the character and as the narrator might consciously not know it, i.e. he disavows it, unconsciously he is already in the state of “trans”—“transpassing,” “transgressing,” “transferring,” “transcending,” “transpositioning”.) [Sobolczyk, p. 101]
Looking at Gombrowicz now

For the writer, loneliness, alienation and the hostility of the critics has been the price he often had to pay, yet he remained persistent in his utopian aspiration to open up the culture to new, as yet unknown possibilities. The case of Gombrowicz and his individual projects, I would argue, are relevant and instructive far beyond his immediate biographic and literary environments. They demonstrate the creative potential, within the context of massive displacements that comprise an ineluctable part of modernity, of a strategic move beyond the arresting melancholy of exile, of an attempt to usher new life into the national and the global through an openness to the new forms and an affirmation of “the coming community” of Filistria.