

WHO WE ARE: INTERVIEW ISSUE

Photo: Adam Jones



WHOSE KAFKA? INTERVIEW WITH DR. KATA GELLEN

A bookstore in Prague displays an array of Franz Kafka merchandise including books, mugs and even matchboxes. This motley collection is evidence of Kafka's continuing popularity and, for some, it is proof that the popular image of the author gets him completely wrong. However, even among experts there is not agreement about who Kafka was, what his work does, and where both belong. This characteristic of Kafka's legacy is the focus of Duke German's interview with our own Dr. Kata Gellen.

DG: When did you first begin reading or working on Kafka? What was it about his work that appealed to you and how did it shape your engagement with the world around you?

KG: I think I first read Kafka in high school, and then again in a seminar in college. But it wasn't really until I got to graduate school that I really connected to Kafka's writing and his modes of perceiving and describing the world. On the one hand I was reading his letters and diaries and felt like I could relate on a very personal level: his anxieties about work, his frustrations with family, his misgivings about himself—all of this felt so close to me. On the other hand I was drawn to

the language and figures (metaphors, images) Kafka develops to describe the worlds in which his characters find themselves, and so much about this language and these figures is impenetrable, even paradoxical. What exactly do Kafka's characters see and hear? I began to be convinced that Kafka's characters are all in some sense aliens, and this estrangement fascinated me too. After all, Kafka is not actually describing magical or fantastical worlds, in my opinion, and yet the status of metaphorical language is so complex and uncertain that his characters end up doing impossible things. This is one of the main points that I try to make in the book I am writing on Kafka: that Kafka uses literature to describe perceptual phenomena that cannot be represented in other art forms, and cannot even be experienced (in the real world), but are in some sense thinkable in and through literature.

DG: Tell us about some of the speakers and events happening in the current Kafka series. What are some of your personal highlights, or questions you're most excited about looking at?

KG: We've had a wonderful, diverse, and international line-up of speakers and guests, almost all of whom have given a public lecture and led a session of our faculty seminar.

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MARTIN DAWSON: YEAR ONE CAROLINA-DUKE PHD PROGRAM

Martin earned his B.A. in German and Music at the College of Charleston in 2013. While there he received a grant to study the first French translations of Mozart's *Zauberflöte* at the Bibliotheque nationale de France. During the 2013-2014 academic year, Martin taught English and American culture in Austrian secondary schools as part of a teaching assistantship offered by the Austrian Fulbright Commission. His research interests include the interaction of music and literature, the history of translation practices, and drama and theater studies, particularly the function of sound design in modern theater.

DG: What is it like being at two universities?

MD: Last semester, it was a little more apparent to me, since I was commuting between the two on the same day. This semester, it almost feels like I am at one university; the way that things worked out, all of my classes are at UNC this time around. That being said, what constantly reminds me that I am part of two graduate programs is the wealth of materials I have access to, both online and off. It is always reassuring knowing that when the book you need is checked out at one library, another copy is usually waiting for you at the other.

DG: How do you like the area? What sort of things do you do here?

MD: After visiting both universities in the summer, I decided to look for a place in Durham and that has worked out for me so far. I've only recently started really exploring the area, whether setting up in local cafes to get some work done, or sampling the diverse food options around town.

DG: What kind of work are you doing in your first year in the program?

MD: This academic year I have focused on getting to know the intricacies of the program and exploring the discipline through the courses offered. I have been reading more than ever, but, more importantly, I have been concentrating on posing questions, leading either to class discussion or a topic I can explore in my research.

DG: What do you plan to do in the future?

MD: This summer I am hoping to take some steps towards later program requirements: the Writing Proficiency Review, and a third research language. I also want to take some time to return to particular areas of interest and fill in some gaps in knowledge that I discovered during my coursework this year. •

CATCHING UP: CAROLINE KITA

Caroline Kita is Assistant Professor of German at Washington University in St. Louis. She received her Ph.D. in German Studies from Duke University in 2011.

Professor Kita's scholarship focuses on German and Austrian culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is particularly interested in aesthetic philosophy, the connections between literature and music, and in applying theories of musical narrative to "read" symphonic works as texts. Her publications investigate the literary and philosophical writings of the Austrian-Jewish poet Siegfried Lipiner and his friendship and intellectual exchange with the composer Gustav Mahler. Currently her research examines religious and cultural identity in the works of Jewish writers and composers in Austria from the turn of the twentieth century to the Second World War, including Richard Beer-Hofmann, Stefan Zweig, Arnold Schoenberg and Franz Werfel.

DG: You're currently in Durham for Duke's German Jewish Studies Workshop. Can you tell us a bit about the work you're presenting here and how it fits into your broader research at the moment?

CK: My presentation at the German Jewish Studies Workshop is something of a spin-off of my current book project, which focuses on Biblical Music Dramas by Jewish writers and composers in Vienna in the years leading up to the First World War. While working on this project, I stumbled upon Franz Werfel's biblical drama, *Der Weg der Verheißung*, which was actually commissioned by American Zionist Meyer Weisgal as a large-scale biblical pageant tracing the history of the Jewish people. The work was translated into English as *The Eternal Road* and performed in New York in 1937, directed by Max Reinhardt and with music by composer Kurt Weill. This second

project examines the adaption of German Jewish biblical dramas for the American stage and explores some of the tensions or conflicts between the authors' original visions for their works and their "rebranding" by Zionist cultural organizations in the inter-war years, as a way of raising awareness and support for the Jewish cause.



Franz Werfel



Gustav Mahler

DG: One of your approaches applies theories of musical narrative to music in order to read it as text. Could you guide us through a brief case study in this approach? What kinds of conclusions can you unlock this way

that would be inaccessible to other approaches?

CK: I came to the study of German through music - I've played viola since I was a child and I first decided to learn German so that I could study music during a semester abroad in Vienna, Austria. As a musician, I've always felt that music has a story to tell and have been attuned to the role that the "voice" of my instrument plays within the larger context of a musical piece. When one studies German culture in the long nineteenth century, the interplay of music and literature is inescapable. On the one hand, composers were voraciously reading literature and philosophy and experimenting with techniques such as tone painting or with the creation of music themes as "characters" that develop throughout the work. If one looks at the music of Gustav Mahler, for example, which I wrote about in my dissertation, one finds a number of layers of music narration. First, one can look at the actual musical settings of texts - Mahler was a prolific *Lieder* composer and in listening to his songs, one can note how his use of instrumentation, dynamics, rhythmical figures such as a marches or dance tempos emphasize, or draw attention to specific aspects of the text. Yet still another layer of meaning can be gleaned when one studies the integration of these *Lieder* into his symphonies. One of the great Mahler puzzles has been, for example, his setting of the "Midnight Song" from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* in his Third Symphony. What is the meaning of Mahler's setting of this text, when read in the context of a musical work that is described as the evolution of the world through nature and mankind to the love of God? In the Nietzsche example, this song was included as an individual movement within the symphony, involving the performance of a solo singer, yet other times Mahler borrows themes from previously composed songs in a method of "self-citation" that opens up another angle of reading the work. These are just a few examples of how one can "read" narrative in music.

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GREETINGS FROM THE CHAIR

As I write this, my second semester as interim chair of Germanic Languages and Literatures is drawing to a close: departmental meetings have concluded, commencement approaches, and excitement about another summer of Duke in Berlin builds. My term as head of the department is also coming to an end, and so it seems appropriate to share with you some reflections on what has been a terrific, and transformative, year for our department. The title “interim chair” suggests that the occupant is a placeholder, someone tasked to maintain a program until a regular chair can be designated. “Placeholder” was not an option for me, however. Early in the Fall, we were confronted by two

significant challenges: the retirement of Michael Morton, whose courses on German philosophy and film drew many undergraduates into our department; and the departure of William Donahue, whose tireless years as chair built the program—including Duke in Berlin—as we now know it. However, in recognition of the importance of German to the undergraduate, graduate, and global curricula of Duke, the administration responded to our needs with alacrity, and authorized a nearly unheard-of dual faculty search, with both appointments to be made at the associate professor (with tenure) level.

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I have always been interested, however, in both sides of the coin – in music’s narrative quality but also in literature’s musical quality. I’m fascinated by the works of writers who were listening to music, playing it themselves, writing about it, adapting musical forms and structures to their writing – consider the number of German writers who were influenced by the music of not just Mahler, but Beethoven, Wagner and Schumann (think of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s stories, or Thomas Mann’s use of musical forms or leitmotifs in Tonio Kröger or Schnitzler’s musical citations in *Fräulein Else*) – An understanding of music and narrative can provide so much insight into German culture and into the meaning behind the form and structure of many literary texts.

DG: What changes do you foresee in the field in the next ten years? This could be in terms of both research and pedagogy. What kinds of roles do you see Germanists playing in intellectual discussion, inside and outside of the university, that other fields can’t offer?

CK: I expect that German Studies is confronting and will continue to confront the same challenges that many Humanities departments face over the course of the next ten years – the need to stay relevant. I am happy to see a lot of people in our field embracing this challenge and finding ways to adapt our traditional approaches of reading and interpreting literature to be accessible to a wider audience. I think of the great work that a number of my colleagues at Washington University in St. Louis are doing in Digital Humanities, or the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration that has always been a hallmark of the Duke and UNC programs – these are the kind of initiatives that will continue to keep our discipline vibrant. As far as conversations outside of the university are concerned, there are so many ways that the training we receive in a language and literature doctoral program can be applied.

Critical thinking, close reading, the ability to write and speak articulately, not to mention the incredibly valuable skills we gain as teachers in the classroom – adapting to teaching new material, working with people from a variety of different backgrounds – these are tools that are much needed in the world today. There has been so much negative press in the last few years about the status of the academic job market, but I think there need to be even more positive words spoken about the work that Germanists can do and are already doing outside of the university setting as well – as teachers, journalists, policy makers, administrators – there are so many ways that we can make a difference.

DG: What advice do you have for graduate students currently in the program? How can they best prepare themselves for the lifestyle and responsibility of being a full-time professor?

CK: As far as advice goes – I hardly think I have it all figured out yet! But what I’m learning right now is the importance of staying goal-oriented and focused on the project (dissertation, book, article, whatever it might be). There are a lot of distractions out there and I think the people who are most successful and happiest in the profession are those who know how to stay engaged with their work and know how to prioritize. Also, find good mentors - there are a lot of inspiring teachers, brilliant researchers and generous and thoughtful collaborators in this profession. Find people who do work that you admire, who are good colleagues and who are respected by their peers and students. Seek advice from them and try not to get caught up in the negativity and frustration that can sometimes cloud the world of academia. Stay positive, stay focused, just keep on writing. That’s the best advice I’ve received so far. •

KATA GELLEN

FROM COVER

We've also had a roundtable with local Kafka experts, and a film series on "Kafka and the Kafkaesque" movies.



Dr. Gellen and
Dr. Vivian Liska

Every single event has been exciting and stimulating for its own reasons, but for me the highlight has been the seminar itself. The seminar consists of faculty and graduate students, mostly from Duke, and it's such a thrill to get to speak about Kafka with other scholars who care deeply about his writing and are invested in his work. Vivian Liska (Antwerp), for example, guided us through a short, early, and rather understudied text by Kafka for two hours, and she had all of us on the edge of our seats. At the start of the seminar, few of us knew what to make of this difficult and odd text, "Conversation with a Praying Man." By the end of it Prof. Liska had convinced us that it was about the transformative potential of literary narrative—a potential that the text was actively performing on us in the process of reading!

DG: Kafka has been one of your main focuses while at Duke and you have organized many events including film and lecture series about his works and their influence. How have these events changed your perception of Kafka? How have they affected your own engagement with the world and others?

DG: Every time I teach, speak, or read about Kafka I become more and more convinced that he is the most interesting author I have ever encountered! I was just teaching the "Letter to the Father" in my advanced German class today, and our discussion led me to a new understanding of this text. Kafka is at great pains in this unsent letter to show that he understands his father's

perspective, and that he accepts it. He goes so far as to give multiple reasons for his father's severe judgments of him, in an effort to convince the father (or himself?) that he really and truly grasps his view of him. But together with my students we raised another, perhaps more fundamental point: does Kafka understand that his father simply doesn't care? Does he understand that his father does not even think of himself as someone with a "perspective" to be "grasped"? And so Kafka's entire endeavor is misguided, if the point is to achieve some sort of interpersonal understanding, since he has overvalued all the experiences he describes. Of course if the point is to see what a master of linguistic manipulation Kafka is and to grasp the depths of his own self-effacement—well then Kafka succeeds brilliantly. I guess what I am trying to say is that I never get bored of Kafka. I can read and reread his works. I can teach him again and again. I can write and think about his works day after day, and something new always emerges.

DG: The "Whose Kafka?" series points to the multitude of interpretations and claims to Kafka, both historically and today. What is it about Kafka's work that makes its reception so diverse and rich?

KG: You're right, this was precisely the motivating idea of the seminar: why has Kafka proven so relevant, significant, and inspirational for so many thinkers, schools, and movements? He was very important for the Existentialists in the 50s and 60s. He has been critical for the development of German-Jewish studies as an area of research. He has a central place in the notion of high modernism. He played an important role in post-colonial discourse and is crucial to the discussion of "minor literature" and world literature. He has even been appropriated for various political movements. In short, Kafka's works have had an incredible afterlife. The best way to put it is that Kafka always seems to have an audience. For it is not the case that his works are "general" or "broad" so that they speak to a wide group of readers. Rather, his works seem to capture something universal in their specificity—and here again we

arrive at a significant appropriation of Kafka: as a philosopher of the universal.

DG: In *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson writes that "concepts such as anxiety and alienation are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern [...] alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject". Yet despite such shifts, Kafka's work, which deals often with anxiety and alienation, remains relevant and poignant. How are such aspects of Kafka's work different for today's world and readers than they were in his time? In what ways is today's Kafka a different one from the Kafka of his own time?

KG: It's probably the case that we always read through our own historical moment and our own personal experience. What choice do we have? This goes back to the last question: Kafka is always relevant, he speaks to every moment and to every generation, because he expresses universal concerns in particular, accessible forms. Accessible not in the sense that his texts are easy, but in that they are for everyone—he is not an elitist. I think that anxiety and alienation can persist as feelings and experiences in the postmodern world; in some sense our multiple affiliations and fractured identities are just another manifestation or expression of anxiety and alienation. Perhaps I see more continuities than discontinuities between modernism and postmodernism. Also, there is Kafka's humor: every time I read Kafka and every time I teach Kafka, this comes out more and more. I think that the "Existentialist Kafka" cast a long dark shadow, a veil, over Kafka, which has slowly been lifted over the last few decades. The humor in Kafka is not just about absurdity. It is also about word play, bodily humor, slapstick. There are important connections between Kafka and Charlie Chaplin, for example. Today I asked my students how they understood the term "kafkaesque" and one very bright student responded: "a mixture of the uncanny, the hopeless, and the comic." I doubt a student reading Kafka in the 30s, 40s, 50s, or 60s would have said the same! •

GREETINGS

FROM PAGE 4

Thanks to the enthusiasm and commitment of a terrific search committee—Thomas Pfau (chair), Kata Gellen, Jakob Norberg, Bryan Gilliam (music), and Eric Downing (representing UNC)—I am thrilled to report that two terrific, energetic new faculty with proven track records as dynamic undergraduate teachers, thoughtful graduate mentors, and groundbreaking scholars will be joining our department in the Fall:

Stefani Engelstein: Professor Engelstein will join us from the University of Missouri, where she has taught since 2007. She received her BA in Literature from Yale and her PhD from the University of Chicago in Comparative Literature. In addition to her scholarly work in German literature and culture, she directed the University of Missouri's Life Sciences and Society program from 2009-2014. Her research traces the circulation and transformation of key ideas and questions from a range of fields: the life- and human-sciences, political theory, gender theory, and literature from the mid-eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, with an emphasis in the Enlightenment and Age of Goethe.

Professor Engelstein is the author of *Anxious Anatomy: The Conception of the Human Form in Literary and Naturalist Discourse* (SUNY 2008) and co-editor of *Contemplating Violence: Critical Studies in Modern German Culture* (Rodopi 2011). Professor Engelstein's current book project is entitled *Sibling Action: The Genealogical Structure of Modernity*. Throughout her writings, and in her teaching as well, she constructs intellectual histories that interweave close readings of literature with history of science to provide tools for critiquing the contemporary world.

Henry Pickford: Professor Pickford comes to Duke after spending the academic year in Weimar as a Residential Fellow at the Humanities Institute of the Kolleg Friedrich Nietzsche (Fall 2014) and at the Universities of Frankfurt and Amsterdam (Spring 2015) as a Visiting Fellow. He received his BA in Russian and Math from Dartmouth, his PhD in Comparative Literature/Philosophy from Yale, and (subsequently!) an MA in Philosophy from the University

of Pittsburg. He has taught at Northwestern University, the University of Colorado, and will be a visiting professor in Shanghai this summer, before his move to Durham.

Professor Pickford edited and translated *Critical Models: Catchwords and Interventions by Theodor W. Adorno* (Columbia University Press, 1998; revised edition 2005) and is the author of *The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analyses of Holocaust Art* (Fordham University Press/Oxford University Press, 2013); his current research project, *Expression, Emotion, and Art: Thinking with Tolstoy and Wittgenstein*, is under contract with Northwestern University Press. At the University of Colorado, he co-founded and created the curriculum of the graduate program in Critical Theory, and he is a founding member of the Association for Adorno Studies. Professor Pickford's interests and expertise span Comparative Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Studies; and his areas of research and teaching include: Critical Theory, Aesthetics, Ethics and Literature, Marx, Nietzsche, Holocaust art, Heidegger, and German Idealism.

These new additions promise to energize and enliven our small and robust department in a variety of new ways, from the creation of new courses to the organization of new seminars, conferences, and guest speakers. Fall 2015 will be a terrific new beginning for German at Duke!

There are, of course, many other terrific accomplishments and events worth noting from this year at Duke: a fabulous (and large) cohort of graduating majors and minors; the first graduates of the Carolina-Duke graduate program; books authored by faculty and prizes won by students. This newsletter is a forum for sharing all of our accomplishments, and I know you join me in welcoming Professors Engelstein and Pickford into our community.

With all best wishes to everyone for a terrific summer and a dynamic new academic year...



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