Dear Readers,

This newsletter commemorates a quite abnormal semester. Condensed into thirteen weeks and through a hybrid of online and in-person instruction, Duke German successfully completed the Fall semester of 2020. The success of this semester is the result of the hard work of our students, but also the careful planning of our teaching staff, including both faculty and graduate students. In keeping with tradition, this Fall newsletter serves as a spotlight into our Graduate Program, but this semester it is especially important to note the accomplishment of all students, undergraduate and beyond. We have two series of interviews, exploring the obstacles of teaching in person during a pandemic, as well as the challenges of beginning graduate school with online coursework. In our graduate student spotlight, you will find summaries of the research of two of our advanced Ph.D. students: Martin Dawson and Lea Greenberg. We hope you enjoy our newsletter!

Editors Lukas Hoffman and Amy Jones

WHAT'S INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Teaching during a Pandemic: In-Person Perspectives from Dr. Stefani Engelstein and Dr. April Henry

Getting to know First-Year Ph.D. Students Tim Ellison and Amelia Leonhardt

Graduate Student Research Spotlight: Martin Dawson and Lea Greenberg
Most of the German department decided to teach from home this semester, but a few intrepid instructors taught in person – masks and all! We asked them a few questions about their experience.

1. What has been the most surprising or unusual experience you have had teaching on campus this fall?

Stefani: How normal teaching in person has been and how significantly being back in an in-person environment improved my overall quality of life. Also, just the intensity of seeing somebody you know. If I run into a former student, a library staff person I know, or I see a colleague, we stop and have a long conversation (masked and at a distance, of course), and it feels like a holiday from isolation.

April: My students are eager to meet with me in person. This has led to several outdoor lunches on and off campus. I have also had the pleasure of showing students nearby trails. In some ways, I feel more connected to my students. We have a shared experience: life during a pandemic.

2. What do you miss most about being on campus before coronavirus?

Stefani: I miss just being surrounded by students laughing and talking in groups. I associate campus with a palpably strong social fabric that is not really in physical evidence now.

April: I miss witnessing the development of strong friendships that are often formed in my language classroom. Due to Covid, students keep their distance from one another and do not have opportunities to develop long lasting friendships.

3. What techniques have you used to make teaching with masks and physical distancing feel more “normal” for the students? What are students’ favorite activities?

Stefani: Before the semester started, I considered all sorts of unusual techniques, like augmenting normal gestures in class with an invented emoji sign language. It turns out though that there was no need, because we immediately adapted to the current situation to such an extent that communication has felt entirely normal.
(Stefani cont.) Students always appreciate pair work and small group work, but I think that is particularly true this semester. I also noticed that the students all learned each other’s names much more quickly than usual.

One thing we have been doing this semester is an occasional check-in, where we go around the room and ask everybody how they are doing. Because the class is on critical race theory, the rounds usually focus on experiences surrounding racial issues – for example, when the current president issued an executive order withdrawing federal support from classes on critical race theory. I think it is important to have a group dynamic that fosters trust and respect in every class, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues.

April: In all honesty, I continue to use all the same teaching techniques. Students continue to work safely in small groups and/or in pairs. They enjoy these activities the most because they spend a significant amount of time alone in their rooms.

4. Are there any quotes from German literature or philosophy that resonate with you as you teach and exist on this new version of campus?

Stefani: I taught Kafka’s *Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse* this semester. Normally, Kafka’s worlds are not ones the reader is eager to exchange for the real world, and I don’t know that I would volunteer to join the mouse people. However, an enormous amount of the tangible description in the text is concerned with warm bodies flowing in groups and pressed against each other and the comfort taken from that physical proximity. It reminds me of a crowd at a concert, or in a club, or at the fireworks on the 4th of July. I’m not always comfortable with the idea of mass gatherings, but this fall, there is a visceral way that those descriptions of physical contact speak to me.

April: This is not from literature, but it resonates with me: “Das Pech, was mer net hawwe, ist unser Glück” (aus Frankfurt am Main).
GETTING TO KNOW FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS TIM ELLISON AND AMELIAH LEONHARDT

Interview by Amy Jones

What is it like to start graduate school during a pandemic? We asked two of the first-year students in the Carolina-Duke German Program!

Tim Ellison

Ameliah Leonhardt

It might be strange to think of the positives of starting grad school during a pandemic, but hopefully there have been some good moments among the challenges! What has been your favorite part about this semester?

Tim: I think it is in fact grad school that has enabled me to cope with the challenges of the pandemic. Instead of watching the news in terror, I can participate in a conversation in class that has nothing to do with the pandemic at all.

Ameliah: Although this has certainly been an odd semester, being able to have classes via Zoom is something I am continually grateful for. I keep reminding myself that I am still able to engage with people, as well as engage in conversations about texts, even if we aren’t face-to-face.

What has been the most challenging part about starting graduate school at this point in time?

Tim: It is more difficult to have casual conversations with people or to develop social bonds. But there are ways of trying, at least!

Ameliah: I agree with Tim. It’s been a bit hard to have organic conversations with people; I always really enjoy the kind of chatting that happens when you run into students in the lounge or on campus. But we still have social hours via Zoom, and in my cohort, we have found ways to stay connected.
What are you most looking forward to during the program?

Tim: I look forward to participating in one of the many exchange programs that will get me over to Germany!

Ameliah: I look forward to finding new texts and authors I wasn't aware of before, both through coursework and beyond. It’s always so exciting to discover such hidden gems!

Are there any quotes from German literature or philosophy or texts that you find particularly comforting or fitting for this historical moment?

Tim: Good question... At one point in his “This Too a Philosophy of History,” Herder addresses the earth as “Strange ball!” The pandemic has highlighted for us the strangeness of our sudden recognition of our shared vulnerability. It has also led to strange scenes across the globe: empty streets in Milan and New York, field hospitals in Prague and Warsaw, and an endless sea of masked faces.

Ameliah: Though the book certainly isn't happy, I've been obsessed with Wolfgang Koeppen's Tauben im Gras. It takes place right after WWII, and follows Germans and Americans dealing with the war's repercussions. It's simultaneously devastating and beautiful, and is a stark reminder of how broken, yet tenacious the human spirit can be. I find comfort in such reminders that other people in the course of history have had much to overcome and that human connection is the key for this overcoming. In these times, when human connection is so difficult, it's all the more important to fight for it, even if it is virtually!

What is your top tip for future students in their first semester (German or otherwise)?

Tim: Communicate openly with your cohort-mates. You are likely having similar experiences!

Ameliah: Tim said it well! Also, finding a balance between work/studying and life outside of it. Even if you're bad at finding this balance at first, keep trying until you find it!

And finally, what are your plans for the long break?

Tim: German literature and philosophy and poetry are wonderful, but, with all the melancholia and Weltschmerz, I do sometimes long for a little light-heartedness. I think I want to reread Jane Austen’s Emma – a consummately English comedy of manners that I suspect has no parallel in the German tradition (I could be wrong...).

Ameliah: I also plan on reading a mix of German literature (perhaps more Koeppen – Tauben im Gras is the first in a trilogy!) and non-German literature (Philip Roth's American Pastoral, among others). My fix for the lighter side of things comes from movies and television, so I’m also planning on watching plenty of Curb Your Enthusiasm.
Martin’s research examines how poets of the German late romantic and restoration periods, between 1830 and 1860, engage with problems of temporal scale as a means for disrupting the systematizing drive of technological, cultural, and industrial advancements during the nineteenth century in Germany. His dissertation, *Transports of Imagination: Poetry and the Rehabilitation of Experience, 1830-1860*, focuses on the lyric works of Joseph von Eichendorff, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, and Eduard Mörike. Whereas these poets are often read as nostalgic, quietist, or political conservatives, Martin argues that they enact in their readers an experiential, temporal dilation that can in turn serve as a normative standpoint of critique and explore alternative forms of experience with political implications.

His research draws out the critical potential of these works by considering them within the cultural context of their appearance, as interventions in the developing political, technological, industrial, and scientific advancements of this period. The development of biology, paleontology and ecology as disciplines, the growing interest in genealogical studies, the increasing importance of national identity, and the invention of the steam engine and photography contribute to increasingly teleological formulations of “progress” along with temporal modes of experience that favor momentum and acceleration at the expense of contemplative and exploratory ways of being in the world. With an attention to questions of scale and temporal ambiguities, his research seeks to dislodge these authors’ contributions from these more teleologically-inflected notions of time through an engagement with the very developments that precipitate them. The invention of photography and the steam engine, along with artifacts such as fossils, graves, and architectural ruins, shift temporal focus to the past, to be sure, but these artifacts also disrupt linear notions of progress.
Lea’s dissertation (Curious Daughters: Language, Literacy, and Jewish Female Desire in German and Yiddish Literature from 1793 to 1916) examines the interplay of language politics and romantic politics in German and Yiddish literature confronting the challenges faced by Judaism in the long nineteenth century. The project brings into dialogue both German and Yiddish literature, from farces (Halle-Wolfssohn’s Silliness and Sanctimony, 1796) to the literature of a new German Jewish elite (Lewald’s Jenny, 1843) to nostalgic ghetto fiction (Kompert’s A Lost Child, 1851) to the popular stories of Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye the Dairyman. This diverse body of literature uses a concern with the sexual purity and loyalty of the Jewish daughter to depict anxieties toward Jewish assimilation into the non-Jewish world. Yet these texts also share another layer of the daughter’s subversion: an act of rebellion in the form of a linguistic or cultural departure from tradition. Each of these works depicts how Jewish daughters’ adoption of European language and literacy operates in conjunction with their romantic transgressions. She considers the pivotal role of the Jewish daughter and what a fixation with this figure encodes. Lea reads these works in conversation with the gendered discourse on Jewish language and the history of Jewish women in the nineteenth century; these dynamics create a framework for understanding an ambivalence toward new modes of Jewish life in this period. By bearing the onus as cultural gatekeeper, the daughter figure blurs the lines between religious and social categories or explodes these dichotomies altogether. In this corpus of texts, she is the catalyst for negotiating what it means to be Jewish in a modernizing world: one that is informed by the Enlightenment and the ideal of Bildung; one in which Christian and Jewish communities are in closer contact; one in which technology has transformed the movement of people and ideas. The daughter spurs questions of renewal, redefinition, and the re-imagining of a Jewish future in new contexts.