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Aesthetics and Estrangement:

Jenseits des Kafkaeskes

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Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts

German Studies Senior Integrative Project

Professor Suzuko Knott

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Introduction

I first became acquainted with Kafka as a senior in high school in a Barnes and Noble in a strip mall somewhere in the suburban sprawl of northwestern Oklahoma City. A coincidence that I would come to learn much later was that Oklahoma was the mythicised endpoint of the journey for Kafka's character Karl Rossmann in *Der Verschollene*¹. That I would first encounter his work at a large bookstore chain in the state of Oklahoma is something I like to imagine Kafka chuckling about. Karl's journey to the United States is bewildering, and the fact that this journey is to terminate in Oklahoma accentuates something about Kafka's writing that was not readily apparent to me when I first read his work. And that is the theme of alienation or *Verfremdung* that permeates much of his writing.

I prefer the German over the translation in this case because its etymology is more transparent. It contains the word *fremd*, which means "foreign" and although "foreign" and "alien" are more or less synonymous, there is a slight semantic difference between the two, which is helpful in understanding Kafka. Both terms can have a negative connotation, and both have been and still are used in nationalistic rhetoric in an attempt at othering a purported non-native or inauthentic claim to belonging. But while "alien" has a necessary component of fear, "foreignness" can be, and in my opinion ought to be, something to celebrate. However, this approach is not without its own pitfalls, as the "acceptance" and "celebration" of foreign cultural identities and practices can easily lead to a subordination of one culture or a struggle between cultural identities for superiority (the case in Prague during the Austro-hungarian Empire).

But this is not the goal of Kafka's implementation of *Verfremdung*, neither on a broader, cultural level nor on the personal, psychic level of individual characters. What he creates out of the concept of *Verfremdung* functions in many ways like an experiment in making sense of some

¹Kafka, Franz. *Der Verschollene*. Ditzingen, Germany: Reclam. 1997.

of the complex questions that have arisen in modernity. Underlying all his work is an attempt to build an aesthetic out of things that are often absurd, bewildering, and simply frightening. This aesthetic does not rely on a formal conception of beauty, but maybe, in some perverse way, the end goal still approaches something like it. Whatever it is that Kafka's writing "does" to readers, it was certainly something that I was not yet equipped to understand when I picked up the collection of his short stories in the ostensibly culturally monolithic world of suburban, white America. I would have to bring more personal experience to the text before I really began to understand what Kafka had to say.

Although there are glimmers of the *kafkaesque*² in any tedious, bureaucratic endeavor, his ability to authentically represent how the boredom one feels in mind-numbingly boring and bureaucratic spaces such as the *Department of Motor Vehicles* is not the only reason Kafka is worth reading. And it is certainly not the most important reason for me. Kafka became significant and relatable to me only after I'd left Oklahoma and came to the east coast for college (coincidentally following the path of Karl Rossmann's journey, only in reverse). Like Karl, the place where I'd just arrived was bewildering, and though I understood the language being spoken around me, I imagine that we felt many of the same emotions as we stepped out into a place so recognizable yet simultaneously foreign. A particularly alienating chapter came shortly after the beginning of my time on the east coast, as I was forced to travel back to Oklahoma and once again live in my childhood bedroom and take online classes from a glorified closet we hide in whenever there's a tornado in the area. This unusual experience unique to many college students of the Covid era had the effect of showing me how *verfremdet* I had come to feel in a place that used to feel like *Heimat*.

² This is a term that was initially coined by literary scholars but has become widely use in everyday parlance to describe the tedious absurdity of bureaucracy.

A significant shift came when I was finally able to leave the US and travel to Karl Rossman's birth country to study. My German ability was relatively good at this point, but since I'd spent most of my academic career learning the language from the United States, the idea of speaking German in everyday encounters seemed impossibly distant. Most of what I'd learned about Germany had come through the filter of a laptop screen, and it thus lacked the empirical urgency of the living language. This is where I truly came to understand the difference between language as rule-governed signs and signifiers that can be learned from a book, and the social urgency and embeddedness of a language situated in a culture. It was also at this time that I began to relate to Karl, and likely Kafka, in ways I hadn't before. I'd never considered myself as particularly tied to my identity as an "Okie", but being thrown into a culture where I was both foreign but nonetheless passable evoked musings about my personal identity that I'd never genuinely considered. For a long time, I'd considered my home state and region of the country to be rather backwards with no real culture of its own beyond what is often stereotyped. A good example of this is modern country music, of which I was never a big fan. But as I reflected on my position as an expat (albeit only briefly), I began to find myself listening to more and more country and American folk while riding my bike through the streets of my quaint Swabian town.

This was not the superficial sort of music that has become emblematic of a less-educated, conservative voting bloc in the American south, but rather songs of the twenties and thirties. People like Jimmie Rodgers and Woody Guthrie talked with the same twang as folks I knew, and their music had obvious melodic similarities to the superficial stuff they played on local FM radio stations in Oklahoma City. But instead of singing about Bud Light and big trucks, Woody Guthrie was stressing the danger of nationalistic tendencies of people like Charles Lindbergh as well as the liberating capacities of unions and workers' rights. Jimmie Rodgers had the tendency

of giving pistols to women who had been mistreated by their husbands in his songs, and they use those pistols to enact justice in a society that inevitably sided with husbands in spousal disputes. With these examples among others, I had come to realize that there was an identity as an Oklahoman that I felt I could relate to, but it wasn't the stereotypical, mythologized identity that is performed and handed down from one generation to the next. I don't see myself as a part of Garth Brook's Oklahoma, but rather Woody Guthrie's, which was, at the time, the most solid socialist voting bloc in the United States, a fact that is often repressed in the telling of our history. To co-opt Heideggerian language, spending time in Germany allowed me to address my own *Geschichtlichkeit* and cultural inheritance in a more authentic way.

Of course, Kafka never actually stepped foot in America, so his Oklahoma is an entirely imaginative endeavor³. We encounter this most concretely in the poster Karl sees advertising the *Naturtheater von Oklahoma*. Not only does the subject and phrasing of the advertisement represent a particularly European mythos of the American West that may not be entirely accurate, all the events that take place in Oklahoma occur against the backdrop of a distorted America. Karl sees an advertisement for the *Naturtheater* announcing all the wonderful possibilities that shall be made available to those who join, but the poster is written entirely in German. After he decides to visit the theater, the narrator tells us that Karl takes the subway to Clayton, Oklahoma, despite the fact that no such infrastructure would have existed in the sparsely populated territories of the American west.

For me, much of what is at stake in this novel resides in its distortions of places I know. We can ponder whether these distortions come from an ignorance of the realities of American life, but even if that is the case, I can't fault Kafka for it. I see his writing as an experiment at

³ Brod, Max. *Franz Kafka, A Biography*, 2nd ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1960.

making sense of things in an era of tremendous change, progress, and alienation. Even if his Oklahoma shares little resemblance with the factual Oklahoma of the time, we are nonetheless better off having access to both of them. It is precisely because of the distortion of Kafka's America that I find the book so interesting and compelling. In all of his work, the implementation of *des Unheimliches* brings attention to average-everydayness and allows us to reflect on the overlooked absurdities of modern structure and routine.

A tremendous irony in German literary history is that a Czech, Jewish writer, whose manuscripts are owned by the Israeli government has become the preeminent German literary voice among English-speaking audiences. Despite the historical attempts of German literary traditionalists to distance themselves from Franz Kafka, his popularity and creative constructions of a puzzling modernity have cemented him as one of the most significant writers in the German language. However, in Kafka's case, the descriptive nature of the term "German-language literature" proves particularly useful. Notwithstanding the malignant nationalistic tendencies tied up in the notion of a national literary canon, Kafka himself and his work are overtly resistant to neat categorization.

Kafka was not widely published during his life. Before his death, he expressed his desire to his friend and later biographer Max Brod that all his work was to be burned⁴. Obviously this didn't happen, which raises a difficult dilemma for Kafka's readers. Is it altogether ethical for us to read his work, despite the fact that his expressed wishes were meant to forbid that? Although it may be something of an intrusion, I think the answer to that question is ultimately yes, as long as we don't lose track of Kafka's voice in the distractions surrounding the phenomenon of Kafka.

⁴ Brod, Max. *Franz Kafka, A Biography*, 2nd ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1960.

Along those lines, it is important to note that Brod took some rather significant editorial liberties in publishing Kafka's work. The fact that Kafka left three unfinished novels behind which now all appear in print is a testament to this reality. Brod often changed titles and narrative sequences for the purpose of making the work more "accessible and interesting" to the public. For example, the novel *Amerika*, published in 1927, was actually written over a decade earlier under the title *Der Verschollene*. In addition to changing titles outright, Brod also made intrusive editorial decisions. *Der Prozeß* is the most overt example of his liberal editorial attitude. I use the first published title here to emphasize my point; Kafka's original was *Der Process*. Aside from changing the title, Brod essentially shaped the entire plot, because the manuscript Kafka left behind was a collection of "disjointed fragments, each having only the sketchiest relation to the others"⁵. Clayton Koelb goes as far as stating that "Brod took this unwieldy and often obscure pile of papers and turned it into one of the most important novels of the twentieth century. It was in reality a collaboration between a living novelist and a dead one, with Brod supplying the narrative line missing in the manuscripts by a quite intelligent paste-up job"⁶. The sentences were Kafka's, but the story was Brod's, so the argument goes.

Kafka is undoubtedly one of the most well-known German literary voices, but I hesitate to place him in the "German literary canon." This is not out of a desire to deem him an outsider in a broader German literary tradition. The question of placing Kafka is just more complicated than any national literary canon can accommodate. *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka* spells this out well:

Jewish, German, Czech, born a subject of the Hapsburgs at the 'heart of Europe' in Bohemian Prague in 1883, died a citizen of Czechoslovakia on the outskirts of Vienna forty-one years later; a speaker of French and Italian in addition to his native German, Czech, and Yiddish, which he learnt as an adult; steeped in both Jewish lore and German

⁵ *Franz Kafka in Context*, 298

⁶ *Ibid* 298

literature and surrounded by the sound of Czech for most of his life, Franz Kafka was first and foremost an internationalist and a European⁷.

Scholars like to appeal to certain aspects of Kafka's identity for various reasons. We have Gershom Scholem, a contemporary of Kafka's who pin-points Jewish mystical elements in Kafka's writing, based on kabbalistic readings. There's also Walter Benjamin, another contemporary, who is interested in these questions of Jewish identity, but nonetheless feels the pull of Marxist literary approaches. Then a quick Wikipedia search will also tell you that Kafka's Jewishness was never really something to surface in his writing.

I like to think that reading Kafka in a less bleak and foreboding light gives us a view of a Europe that we often find hard to imagine in the decades directly preceding the movements of fascism and German National Socialism. The *CC to Kafka* even points out that, notwithstanding the more connected Europe we have today, the likelihood of a working-class citizen of any EU country to have such a multifaceted identity with personal connections to so many different cultures and languages is slim. The multilingual, multicultural Kafka cannot simply be the outcome of a particularly precocious individual; his Europe somehow facilitated such an identity.

How does this factor make itself apparent in Kafka's writing? It's not entirely clear. Kafka's writings take place in a very vague, but nonetheless recognizable Europe (aside from *Amerika*, which fittingly takes place in America). The sense of baselessness and alienation that pervades his writing could be connected with a lack of stable identity, but I don't read this lack of stability as an inherently negative aspect of European life, neither in my own opinion nor in Kafka's work. His work must be read in the context of a modernizing Europe, but it's not necessarily a criticism of it. An appeal to the fear of future cosmopolitanism would be a fierce, provincial nationalism, which is also present at this time. No, Kafka doesn't seek answers in that

⁷ *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*

sort of fixed, ideological snare, and that is likely why much of his work remains so hopeless and “düster”. He has been thrown into a complicated modern Europe, and he struggles to find his bearings in the complicated sociocultural structures that have developed in metropolitan centers.

This analysis will offer an insight into two major approaches in Kafka studies. Those two approaches are the historical Jewish theological interpretation initially pioneered by Brod and Scholem and the more contemporary cultural/linguistic interpretation of Yasmin Yildiz among others. In focusing on these two approaches, I hope to show the compatibility of the two strategies, which are not seen as incompatible, but often exclusive of one another. Underlying both approaches is an appeal to Kafka’s personal identity (e.g. Jewish, German, Czech, European etc.), despite the fact that this identity is not readily apparent in his fiction, if at all. Given the gray area in which most of these texts exist, particularly those published posthumously, we are presented with something of a double-edged interpretive sword. We might be inclined to look to the social and historical context Kafka lived in to fill in the gaps, but that can lead to a positivistic essentialization, which is precisely what I see as the major error in the history of Kafka scholarship. However, the social and historical embeddedness of any text is undeniable. From these considerations my methodological approach will thus be to look towards social and historical context as any conscientious analysis should, but I will simultaneously try to disentangle that method from an apparent agenda.

The Theological Reading, Generally

There is a long history of what I would call the theological reading of Kafka. Kafka’s Jewish identity was an attractive factor to Jewish scholars both during the rise of Nazism and antisemitic sentiments across central Europe, and shortly after WWII, when discussions (both

academic and casual) of Jewish ethnic and religious identity were of great pertinence. The complexity and embeddedness in a broader theological stance of interpretations taken on by scholars like Gershom Scholem are beyond the scope of this analysis. With that, I hope to eschew any expectation that I will be delving into any radical kabbalistic interpretation of Kafka. What I hope to offer is a general overview of Kafka's work from a Jewish scholarly perspective as well as some interpretive insights from the more theological writings of the German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas. Jonas was a contemporary of Scholem, and although he has extensive theological writing, he is often considered a far more secular voice among postwar Jewish scholars. Using his theoretical frameworks may provide a productive counterpoint to Scholem, whose kabbalistic readings are often said to border on the extreme.⁸

The point here that I'm making is that if we're going to argue that Kafka is an essentially Jewish-religious voice based on his personal identity, we need a lot more evidence. The positivistic attitude that in many ways continues to this day in Israel's reluctance to share Kafka's original writings is predicated on an understanding that Kafka is a fundamentally and essentially Jewish writer. Obviously it is true that he was born into a Jewish family, but that aspect ought to play about as much a role as his German-speaking identity (in my opinion). The point is that Kafka's identity is multifaceted and any identity-based interpretation will need to take account of that complexity if there's any hope to bring something valuable and new. We simply know too much now about Kafka's life as well as the complexities of identity for any one-dimensional appeal to any one aspect of an author's identity.

One of the historically present issues in the study of Kafka is the inclination to paste his texts onto a particular agenda. Although this methodological approach is most readily apparent immediately following the widespread publication of Kafka's work shortly after his death, the

⁸ *Kafka and Kabbalah*

phenomenon of reading Kafka in a strictly identity-based, religious sense is something that existed well into the nineties. Bert Nagel states “The fact that Kafka not only identified himself as a Jew and took up the cause of Judaism, but, perhaps even more importantly, the fact that he still harbored the basic ideas of ancient biblical Judaism as well, all testify to a continuation of the Jewish heritage. Kafka’s God is still the judgmental and punitive God of the Old Testament”⁹. This idea raises a number of interpretive questions. First, and rather concretely, it’s not actually clear that Kafka “took up the cause of Judaism and harbored the basic ideas of ancient biblical Judaism.” As Katja Garloff writes, “Throughout his adult life, Kafka went through phases of intense interest in things Jewish and developed alternatives to the bourgeois-liberal model of assimilation while nonetheless retaining a sense of critical distance from this tradition,”¹⁰ which casts doubt on any objective claims upon Kafka as an essentially and solely Jewish voice. If anything, his personal religious identity paints a particularly modern picture of an individual’s relationship to organized religious identity. But it is not just the positivistic appeals to Kafka’s Jewish identity that give me pause in Nagel’s assertion. Rather, it is the question of “Kafka’s God,” given the fact that Kafka’s religiosity has been evidenced first of all and for the most part by his personal Jewish identity.

I can’t fault Brod or Scholem for founding such a reading, however. Both men fled to Israel during the Nazi occupation of much of western Europe, and Kafka’s work and identity certainly spoke to them in a way that they saw as spiritually significant to the world Jewry post-WWII. Brod developed a narrative casting Kafka as a kind of Zionist luminary in the widely read biography of his late friend. Even when Kafka was still living, his good friend took efforts to cast him as an essentially Jewish author. In 1916, he published an essay in Martin Buber’s *Der*

⁹ *Kafka and Kabbalah 2*

¹⁰ *Franz Kafka in Context*, 209

Jude in which he suggests that Kafka's texts "illustrate the essence of the modern Jew in his feeling of being isolated from everything including himself"¹¹. Brod uses a particularly conservative Jewish interpretation to make the argument that Kafka saw this isolation as sinful, and that his characters are burdened by the guilt they carry around with them¹². His interpretations would go on to set a precedent for a rather narrow allegorical reading of Kafka's work that maintained significant authority for decades. However, it is also thanks to these conservative interpretations that Scholem and Benjamin would go on to develop a more nuanced theological reading of the text, partly in rebuke of Brod's myopic readings. Although a Jewish-theological reading may have been inevitable, Brod certainly played one of the most important roles in establishing this particular thread of Kafka interpretation, notwithstanding the fact that the word "Jewish" never appears in Kafka's texts¹³.

The connection between Brod's interpretations and a Jewish tradition of storytelling is relatively straightforward and doesn't require a very imaginative notion of Judaism to identify its purported relevance. Other writers like Clement Greenberg, who published the essay "The Jewishness of Franz Kafka" in 1955, feed into this tradition by placing his work within the tradition derived from the *halakha* (religious law)¹⁴. Scholem was also interested in the role of Jewish law in Kafka's work, but due to his interest in less mainstream rabbinic traditions (i.e., *Kabbalah*), his interpretations have a somewhat more emancipatory function in comparison to the more conservative religious readings of some of his contemporaries.

For almost all Jewish readings, Kafka's unfinished novel *Der Process* plays a crucial role. The kabbalistic reading posits that the opacity of the Law and how it functions is an allegory for

¹¹ *Franz Kafka in Context*, 260

¹² *Ibid.*, 261

¹³ *Ibid.*, 261

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 264

the relationship God has with humanity. This is evident from the very beginning of the story: “Jemand musste Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne dass er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet”¹⁵ The allegorical reading of this encounter can be read in a rather faithful light to the plight of the Israelites. Jewish philosophical thought in the modern era did make an effort to disentangle the Greek ideals of perfection from the conception of the Hebrew God, and this is precisely what we find in K.’s relationship with authority. Jewish philosophers and theologians in the early 20th century were interested in separating themselves from Greek ideals of perfection that had been coopted during the medieval period by Jews and Christians alike. The increased interest in both existentialism and gnosticism in this period reinvigorated an understanding of a God who was far more human in her sensibilities. This is echoed in *Dem Process* in the sense that these are not the greatly reasoned and worded laws of a philosopher king governing the life of our protagonist, but rather the petty, opaque edicts of a spiteful ruler.

I want to account for the complexities of identity as it relates to literature, but at the same time show the potential downsides of taking such a strict theological approach. The risk I see is that it adheres to the predominant and limiting ideologies regarding language, religion, and identity present in Prague during Kafka’s life. It supports a cultural paradigm that Yasemin Yildiz¹⁶ tells us, although multicultural, is not one to emulate, for it is predicated on a constant struggle for cultural, linguistic, and political hegemony. The result of this fierce, relativistic attitude is not a progressive cosmopolitanism that brings positive cultural understanding between individuals from different cultural groups. Rather, it is an isolating situation, and potentially alienating for individuals who find themselves falling through the cracks of a given paradigm.

¹⁵ Kafka, Franz. 2012. *Gesammelte Werke*. Munich, Germany: Anaconda Verlag., 505

¹⁶ Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. Fordham University Press, 2012.

On the other hand, I am rather unsatisfied with traditional readings that take the entirely opposite approach. Corngold, quoting Paul de Man, states “considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint. These regressive stages can only reveal an emptiness of which the writer himself is well aware when he begins to write”¹⁷. I comprehend the general sentiment of this quote, but on a closer look, it’s hard to identify what this “emptiness” actually means. In the Deconstructive infatuation with signs as structure, and structure as the genesis of oppression, de Man et al. have failed to recognize the social embeddedness and urgency of those signs and structures. The social embeddedness of literature has always been the case, but Kafka brings us a particularly overt example of the limits of Deconstruction in the collision of the “literary” and the “empirical”, as de Man would likely put it. De Man wishes to kill the author in order to free the text, but in the extreme and coincidental case of Franz Kafka, we see that the factual death of the author is a complicated and potentially hazardous kind of emancipation.

I do not claim to understand what the logical or necessary response to an era of literary study based on the radical yet dogmatic open-endedness of text might be, but what I can say is that I see a similar tendency towards one-size-fits-all interpretations of literature in the writing of de Man and Derrida to the ideological conceptions of identity we find in Prague and across Europe during Kafka’s life, for which we will use Herder as a figurehead. The affliction I see in both theoretical approaches is an appeal to interpretive dogma and opacity that runs counter to Kafka, regardless of whether we’re considering the text divorced from the author, or author divorced from text. The point of Kafka, as Benjamin identified in some of his earlier work, is that any interpretative strategies we might reach for have been hopelessly obscured if not stolen.

¹⁷ *The Trouble with Cultural Studies*, 200

It is in the sense of baselessness and denial of typical narrative norms that Kafka is able to deliver such sobering texts.

Kafka, Jonas and the Existential Gnostic

What I hope to have made clear thus far is there has been a general tendency towards extremes in literary theory over the past century. The trends do not necessarily fit well into a liberal-conservative methodological distinction, although certain positions certainly lean more heavily in one direction than the other. As is the case with literary texts themselves, the theoretical is influenced by the environment in which it is produced. In the case of Brod and Scholem, that environment spawned a rather positivistic, identity-based methodology. For de Man and Derrida the most important way into the text was to dismantle structures of authority, but the fatal flaw of that approach was its inability to distinguish between authority and empowerment¹⁸. A potential corrective to these extremes may lie in a *Goldlöckchen-Zone*, which I think could be best represented in a combination of a comparative analysis between Kafka and the German-Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas. The structures of the monolingual paradigm and the post-monolingual condition are valuable approaches to Kafka's work, and I see Jonas as the most logical figure for this comparison because of their similar attitudes and textual confrontations with Jewish identity in a German cultural and linguistic space.

It astonishes me that there haven't already been connections drawn between Kafka and Jonas regarding their connection in what is often referred to as Jewish Existentialism. All that exists in scholarly discourse is a general mention that the two have some distant connection by

¹⁸ What productive purpose does it serve to rob Kafka of his authority in a theoretical sense after that has already been achieved in a literal sense?

way of Martin Buber¹⁹. This may be due to the fact that, although he was an active voice in Jewish philosophical circles, Jonas was not accepted as an essentially “Jewish” theologian/philosopher by the de facto academic authorities in Israel. This gatekeeping strikes me on one hand as a tremendously conservative understanding of what it means to be Jewish, but on the other hand seems to be a representation of the understandable outcropping of postwar Zionism as well as the Jewish crisis of identity post-Shoah. In his biography of Jonas, Christian Wiese finds him to be “a profoundly Jewish, non-Jewish Jew,”²⁰ which in its nonsensical formulation could also serve as a good description of Kafka, though for very different reasons.

Jonas was widely read in Germany and France and is often seen as a key philosophical influence in the European green revolution, but his readership outside of Europe remains far smaller²¹. However, it is in Jonas’ early work on gnosticism as it relates to existentialism that I see the most concrete connection to Kafka. Gnosticism is a pre-Christian religion that posits that although there is an original creator, he is not all-powerful or all-knowing and is not presently available to better humanity. For Jonas and other Jewish theologians of his era, this conception of a creator fit far better with the God of the Old Testament. A “perfect” God, according to the argument, would be able to step in at any point and change the course of history. This leads to the very old question of why God would let evil exist in the world. For Jonas, if there is a God of the Jewish people, it is better that he not be all-powerful and all-knowing. If that were the case, then faith in a creator who allows terrible things to happen would be misguided if not immoral²².

¹⁹ Flohr, Paul Mendes. “Jewish Co-Existentialism: Being with the Other.” In *Situating Existentialism: Key Texts in Context*, edited by Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi, 237–55. Columbia University Press, 2012.

²⁰ Wiese, Christian. *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions*. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2007.

²¹ Scodel, Harvey and Hans Jonas. “An Interview with Professor Hans Jonas.” *Social Research*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Vol. 70, No. 2 (summer 2003), pp. 339–368.

²² This is precisely the existential dilemma raised by Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*.

The creative authority of gnosticism is precisely the paradigm through which authority functions in Kafka's work, both authorially and even within particular texts. The gnostic paradigm is most evident in the inherited-ness of a power structure that makes itself apparent in the form of mindless bureaucracy. In a world devoid of an active creator, structures of rules become the paradigm of authority, and Kafka shows us that is a frightening world in which to live. The spiritual, and even the biological in Jonas' case, are incomprehensible to the bureaucratic apparatus, and what follows is intense alienation, particularly for those who don't fit into neat, structural categories. This isn't something that Jonas states explicitly, but it is a logical outcropping of both his phenomenology and his existential interpretation of biological facts. The nihilistic, objectifying tendency of the natural sciences functions in a similar way to the bureaucratic apparatus. As Jonas states in the *Phenomenon of Life*, "scientific biology, by its rules confined to the physical, outward facts, must ignore the dimension of inwardness that belongs to life"²³.

In *Einem Hungerkünstler* gnosticism is seen in the collision of the biological, spiritual, and bureaucratic²⁴. What comes as a result of this alienation is a question regarding the role of the artist and their art in the modern era. For the *Hungerkünstler*, every aspect of his art comes from an existential necessity. By virtue of his very being, he is called to his profession. But in a very *kafkaesque* fashion, the most fundamental aspect that compels him to fast remains ambiguous. The story follows the unnamed *Hungerkünstler* and explains the gradual decline of hunger artistry generally. Despite the artist's desire to fast for longer, the impresario of the circus limits the fasts to forty days. At the end of the story, the artist is forgotten and left to starve. He

²³ Jonas, Hans. *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*. [1st ed.]. New York: Harper & Row, 1966., xxiii

²⁴ Kafka, Franz. *Gesammelte Werke*. Munich, Germany: Anaconda Verlag. 2012., 190–198

is eventually rediscovered when passersby question why his cage is empty. They find his emaciated body, and he expresses his unfulfillment with his art: “[Ich konnte] nicht die Speise finden, die mir schmeckt. Hätte ich sie gefunden, glaube mir, ich hätte kein Aufsehen gemacht und mich vollgegessen wie du und alle”²⁵. He then dies and is replaced by a young panther that attracts far more spectators.

The gnostic sense of this story is most evident in the circumstances that bring about the creation of art and the constraints on that art. The *Hungerkünstler* initially believes the impresario’s rules are both concrete and natural regardless of where and when the fast takes place. The text states, “Es bestanden natürlich in dieser Hinsicht Unterschiede zwischen den Städten und Ländern, als Regel aber galt, dass vierzig Tage die Hochzeit war”²⁶. With that the artist sees the forty-day limit as a hindrance on his ability to reach his full artistic potential. After he loses his popularity, the *Hungerkünstler* loses the artificial authority that the impresario represented and is free to go on fasting indefinitely. He struggles to find meaning in this unsupervised fast, and that is why he comes to the conclusion that his fasting was an inauthentic art. The *Hungerkünstler* states, “Verzeiht mir alle. [...] Immerfort wollte ich, dass ihr mein Hungern bewundert.” The onlookers assure him, “Wir bewundern es auch,” to which the artist responds, “Ihr sollt es aber nicht bewundern. Weil ich hungern muss, ich kann nichts anders”²⁷. He is not drawn to the art for some grand purpose like striving towards *das Schöne*, *das Erhabene*, or even *eine Ästhetik des Rausches*²⁸. In *Einem Hungerkünstler* art is not an outcropping of freedom, but rather one of necessity.

²⁵ Ibid., 199

²⁶ Gesammelte Werke, 193

²⁷ Ibid., 198

²⁸ *Das Schöne* and *das Erhabene* are two aesthetic categories in Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. *Ästhetik des Rausches* comes from Nietzsche’s *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*.

This story is also striking to me in the way it addresses larger questions regarding art by incorporating conflicting aspects of modernity. The questions that arise are not difficult to formulate, but as is often the case with Kafka, no single question seems to adequately address the ambiguity we are left with in the end. However, two questions relating to a broader German *Denktradition* offer us a starting point: “What is art?” and “for whom does it exist?” The *Hungerkünstler* offers us some radically divergent answers to the first question. In some capacity and perhaps somewhat superficially, art exists as a spectacle²⁹. This is the first approach to the art we see in the text, as the first sentence describes the slow death of fasting as a popular form of public art. The beginning recounts the glory days for the *Hungerkünstler*. “Damals beschäftigte sich die ganze Stadt mit dem Hungerkünstler; von Hungertag zu Hungertag stieg die Teilnahme; jeder wollte den Hungerkünstler einmal täglich sehn [sic]”³⁰. Although a significant portion of the text and key aspects of the plot rely on the fact that the artist is losing his audience, I am not convinced that this is where any notion of “authenticity”³¹ of fasting-as-art is located. This line of reasoning also offers light on the second question I posed. Ultimately the art of fasting is not essentially *for* anyone outside the cage, whether that be the audience or the impresario. The *Wille zur Kunst* and the ultimate significance of that art come from the artist himself:

[Die Anwesenheit der Wächter] war lediglich eine Formalität, eingeführt zur Beruhigung der Massen, denn die Eingeweihten wussten wohl, dass der Hungerkünstler während der Hungerzeit niemals, unter keinen Umständen, selbst unter Zwang nicht, auch das Geringste nur gegessen hätte; die Ehre seiner Kunst verbot dies³².

That the audience and impresario take part in the process just happens to be a coincidence.

²⁹ Debord, Guy, *Society of The Spectacle*. Detroit, MI: Radical America and Black & Red, 1970.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 190

³¹ This is of course a tremendously loaded term. Here I am using authenticity in a way similar to Benjamin’s i.e. an art that maintains a fundamental relationship to the auratic.

³² *Gesammelte Werke*, 191

What we are then left with is the question of the *Hungerkünstler's* artistic necessity of fasting and how that relates to the broader situation. As he explains to the onlooker who finds him, the fasting was not actually brought forth by authentic artistic passion. It was merely a byproduct of the artist's picky eating habits. Of course, this is a complication to my foregoing statement that the significance of art comes from the artist himself, but this is a necessary complication because it ties into the aesthetic conflict that faces the artist. The question that remains at the forefront throughout the story is whether an art stemming from corporeal compulsion is a valid art. This concern is present because of the philosophical tradition of dualism that places reason and judgment in the *Geist* and separates that from the body. The difficulty presented by this paradox must tie into a very personal aspect of writing for Kafka. As Manfred Engel states, even the deconstructionists who attempt to sever the author from the text have conceded that "Kafka's primary aim was not the creation of completed works; rather, writing, the continuous transformation of life into Schrift, was for him an aim in itself—and at the same time, the real and only subject of his texts"³³. Although it is obviously fictitious, the fact that *Ein Hungerkünstler* reflects so heavily on the role of art (albeit an obscure art) necessarily leads us into the broader discourse on aesthetics—a discourse that includes some of the most influential thinkers in the German language, and one that in Kafka's lifetime became increasingly concerned with political and social dimensions.

The social element of the aesthetic as represented in *Hungerkünstler* raises the same complications that are presented by Benjamin's *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, namely the potential eradication of the *Auratic*³⁴. For Benjamin and Debord, art's role as a social spectacle is not a good thing, and it is a location of significant capitalistic

³³ *Franz Kafka in Context*, 54

³⁴ Benjamin, Walter and Hannah Arendt. *Illuminations*. Frankfurt a. M., Germany: Suhrkamp Verlag and Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc. 1968.

Entfremdung. The more spectacular the performance of fasting becomes, the less emotionally and aesthetically invested everyone involved becomes. We see this in the artist's relationship with the night watchmen, who are compensated with a large meal for making sure that the *Hungerkünstler* doesn't eat throughout the night. The narrator explains that some of the watchmen paid little attention to the artist, "in der offenbaren Absicht, dem Hungerkünstler eine kleine Erfrischung zu gönnen, die er ihrer Meinung nach aus irgendwelchen geheimen Vorräten hervorholen konnte"³⁵. The desire to continue the spectacle attempts something fundamental and authentic to the art of fasting, which the *Hungerkünstler* recognizes but is unable to combat. He must begrudgingly accept the circumstances that the spectacle necessitates, but he simultaneously resents its tendency to support superficial, inauthentic art. As the narrator tells us, "die Ehre seiner Kunst verbot dies"³⁶.

Ein Hungerkünstler also addresses aesthetics in a theoretical sense. Understanding or at least the invitation to understand fasting as art presents a complication to the major trends in the German tradition of aesthetic thought. Neither the art of the *Hungerkünstler* nor that of Franz Kafka appeal to formal conceptions of beauty. Nor do they appeal to the sublime³⁷ nor some sort of innate purposiveness. But the work is also not a celebration of the lack of direction. Kafka does not indulge in the intoxication of opposing ideal forms. For the *Hungerkünstler*, and perhaps for Kafka himself, art doesn't come from a recognition and appeal to the ideas of the German philosophical canon, but rather it dwells in an aesthetic based on compulsion. The hunger artist can't help but produce his art. In some capacity this is also a complication to the idea of the Romantic poet, who goes out into nature to find his muse. While Goethe may have sat

³⁵ *Gesammelte Werke*, 191

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 191

³⁷ The sublime here is used in a Kantian sense in its distinction from the beautiful in *Kritik der Urteilskraft*: "Das Erhabene rührt, das Schöne reizt."

under an oak tree to gather inspiration, the hunger artist sits in a cage on a pile of hay. Goethe experiences the freedom represented by the ability to walk out into the *Wiese* and draw on inspiration from his muses, whereas the hunger artist experiences freedom in a way that ties into Jonas' connection between gnosticism and existentialism. In Kafka's case, the fact of existence does not offer the freedom that allows for artistic expression. Instead the facts of existence (be they biologically or historically determined) have manifested as a burden, and it is in the struggle to overcome that burden that the artist is compelled towards art.

Despite the acceptance that the artist as a person is in some capacity embedded into the art they produce, the question of whether the artist plays a role in the broader aesthetic experience is not a settled issue, which is evidenced by the opposing theoretical examples I introduced earlier. But what makes the situation with Kafka so complex is that the biographical and literary facts all exist in such a way that it's hard to privilege any one of them without losing something essential about the whole literary experience. Although I have argued that the religious reading has taken on a rather unhealthy authority over the primary texts, I cannot deny that this understanding is certainly available in regards to both the author and his work, and we would be remiss as readers to completely ignore that aspect in an effort to emancipate the text from the social structure that plays such a crucial role in the formation of meaning. The fact of the matter is that both Kafka's identity and his literature are tied together in a rather complex relationship, and we cannot attend to one side of that complex relationship without implicating the other. The orthodox literary dualism of contemporary literary study that separates author from text has long struggled with this very complication. Benjamin, in his closer interpretive proximity to Scholem, even admits in an uncharacteristically poststructuralist manner that Kafka's texts do all they can to eschew an authoritative interpretation. Conversely, the

deconstructionists who claim a radical disconnection between author and text concede that Kafka's work is essentially a metatext on the purpose of writing. That we see typically staunch, dogmatic methodologies suddenly flip-flop on their positions is evidence that something about Kafka and his work does not fit well into some of the long-held theoretical paradigms.

This makes clear sense when we consider *Einen Hungerkünstler*. By virtue of its subject matter, it functions as a meta-commentary on art. It isn't as if Kafka can write with the same sort of objectifying distance from which philosophical texts on aesthetics operate. He does not address the concept of art and its relationship to the artist in an explanatory, logical way. Instead, we are shown the deeply personal struggle facing the hunger artist, which I interpret as emblematic of the artist in the modern era. And those circumstances are precisely the same for Kafka himself. As a seldom-published but very productive author writing in a language that he doesn't really see as his own, Kafka must have empathized deeply with the hunger artist. And like the hunger artist, he simply couldn't help but produce his art, and this is a fact that many literary scholars find difficult to incorporate into their conceptions of scholarly literary discourse. Simply put, both the Jewish reading and the Deconstructive readings are unable to account for the fact that Kafka's texts were in some way personally meaningful for him, and I see Yasemin Yildiz' interpretation as offering the most encompassing account and giving space for this understanding of his texts.

Kafka and the Linguistic Complexities of Encountering

In Yasemin Yildiz' groundbreaking book, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, she tracks the the history of the highly successful

monolingualization of modern societies and cultures and also posits potential reasons for this development, which only first emerged in late-eighteenth century Europe³⁸. Yildiz explains: “According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one ‘true’ language only, their ‘mother tongue,’ and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation”³⁹. The premise of the post-monolingual position faces an uphill battle, particularly in the German-language context. This is because of latent nationalistic tendencies that have pervaded the the tradition of German thought. The overtly ethnicized German language is most evident in the works of Herder and Wagner, who made strong nationalistic arguments about language, identity, and authenticity. Herder takes a heavy-handed, relativistic position when it comes to nationalism and thought. He takes us from a Romantic notion of nationalism to what I would describe as proto-fascist in his attempt to draw metaphysical connections between language, psyche, and ethnicity⁴⁰. The general ideas Herder presents were passed down through generations, and his linguistic ideology is in no small part responsible for the fact that Kafka spoke and wrote in German. The belief that the “pure” German of Enlightenment writers like Kant and Goethe was a more educated and aesthetically valuable language played a major role in the *Haskalah* and drove many German Jews away from the purportedly Jewish mother tongues of Yiddish and Hebrew in favor of the standardized High German⁴¹. Paul Mendes-Flohr describes the secularization and assimilation of European Jews as a direct result of Enlightenment thinking:

Through the good offices of the European Enlightenment and its ideals of tolerance, the walls of the ghetto—which had restricted the Jews not only to residential enclosures but also to cultural and spiritual seclusion—were torn down. As the ghetto’s denizens rushed

³⁸*Beyond the Mother Tongue*, 2

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2

⁴⁰ Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. Projekt Gutenberg. 1772.

⁴¹ Interestingly, this is likely also a large reason why the Low German dialects also began to decline. The leveling of German linguistic diversity was not just an issue for German Jews, but also for all speakers of nonstandard dialects.

out to embrace the opportunities afforded them by their liberation from enforced isolation, they adopted European secular culture⁴².

This is precisely the social environment from which Kafka is writing, but in his case the cultural and linguistic dimensions are slightly more complicated due to the complex makeup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Prague and other metropolitan spaces were not liberal melting pots of culture as much as they were precarious mixtures of oil and water, with rivaling ethno-nationalistic communities vying for power⁴³.

Despite multiple languages being spoken within a very close proximity, these spaces were still fundamentally situated within a monolingual paradigm because of the dominant ethno-nationalistic ideologies. As a Jew, Kafka existed in a particularly precarious position within that monolingual paradigm because despite speaking German natively and personally identifying with the culture, he was constantly othered by ethnic Germans. This constant othering was not helped by Kafka's unique writing style, which resembles standard German in many ways but is recognizably unorthodox in its composition. This was a fact that Kafka was keenly aware of, and he even wrote in his correspondence with Max Brod that their German sounded too Jewish⁴⁴. The intersection between Jewish identity and the German language became something of keen interest for Kafka in relation to the Yiddish language, which he and many others at the time referred to (somewhat pejoratively) as "Jargon"⁴⁵.

Scholars have long understood Kafka's encounter with an Eastern European Yiddish theater troupe that performed in Prague as a significant and potentially influential moment in the writer's life. Yildiz adds to that understanding by introducing the idea that there was something uncanny in the Freudian sense about this encounter, particularly in its collision of culture,

⁴² "Jewish Co-Existentialism: Being with the Other," 245

⁴³ *Kafka in Context*, 153

⁴⁴ *Beyond the Mother Tongue*

⁴⁵ *Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon*

language, and identity. Since Kafka wrote exclusively in German, arguments regarding his relationship with other languages are based entirely on his non-literary texts and other secondary sources. Yildiz points to Kafka's speech on Yiddish poetry to emphasize, among other things, the uncanniness he felt in relation to the Yiddish language⁴⁶. In 1912, he gave a public introduction for a Yiddish poetry reading, and in it, we can see his intrigue in and alienation from the language. He begins the speech, "Vor den ersten Versen der ostjüdischen Dichter möchte ich Ihnen, sehr geehrte Damen und Herren noch sagen, wie viel mehr Jargon Sie verstehen als Sie glauben"⁴⁷. He continues:

Ich habe nicht eigentlich Sorge um die Wirkung, die für jeden von Ihnen in dem heutigen Abend vorbereitet ist, aber ich will, daß sie gleich frei werde, wenn sie es verdient. Dies kann aber nicht geschehen, solange manche unter Ihnen eine solche Angst vor dem Jargon haben, daß man es fast auf Ihren Gesichtern sieht. Von denen, welche gegen den Jargon hochmütig sind, rede ich gar nicht. Aber Angst vor dem Jargon, Angst mit einem gewissen Widerwillen auf dem Grunde ist schließlich verständlich wenn man will⁴⁸.

What follows is a puzzling combination of remarks both praising and demeaning the Yiddish language. He presents us with this paradox which is typical for Kafka, but unlike his literature, this speech directly confronts a very personal dilemma of Jewish identity. However, this is not an investigation of Jewish identity in the way that Brod or Scholem may want to portray it. It is not about Judaism in a necessarily religious sense, but rather Jewish identity within the cultural and linguistic context of Prague.

Although Yildiz accounts for this in her elaboration, the term "monolingual condition," which is the conflation of nationalist and linguistic identity, fails to emphasize its connection to culture. The monolingual paradigm is frequently weaponized for the purpose of conflating language, culture, and identity for nation-building. What Kafka explains and likely

⁴⁶ *Beyond the Mother Tongue*

⁴⁷ *Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

unintentionally shows in the *Einleitungsvortrag* is that these concepts are completely driven by ideology. In his encounter with Yiddish, he finds a language that is ostensibly essentially Jewish. It has the potential to become a Jewish mother tongue and thus give credence to the idea of a Jewish national identity. But it is also in its similarity to German that this idea becomes uncanny for Kafka⁴⁹. How can a language that is so culturally tied to Jewish identity bear such striking similarities to the language of Goethe and Schiller that German Jews have tried over generations to adopt? In this case, this is a question facing European Jews, but in a broader sense, the same question faces all ethnolinguistic identities in Europe in the modern era. For the staunch nationalists who stand resolutely in their ethnic and linguistic identities, the answer to this question lies in more strictly defining and guarding that national identity. That anxiety is what brings forth Kafka's bureaucratic structures of power that exist for the sake of their own power.

This is where Kafka's exploration into ambiguity makes the most sense. Modernity, marked with its gnostic or existential stance of a lacking authority, poses the question of meaning and belonging to everyone, but that question is far more pressing to those who don't fit easily into neat, structural categories. The Deconstructive goal was to address this problem and undo the oppression that comes as a result. But as I hope to have made clear, this approach loses its strength in its dislocation of the text from the immediate context. Indeed, part of that context is the structure of oppression, which in Kafka's case was the constant feeling of being "other" from both German and Jewish culture. But doing away with that context robs us of a very important contextual element that gave rise to these literary experiments into the extremes of ambiguity and authority. Yildiz' account makes clear that the core of Kafka's art lies in the constant attempt to authentically own something that has such an ambiguous metaphysical basis. For the *Hungerkünstler*, that ambiguous entity is his art. The same is true for Kafka, but unlike the

⁴⁹ On the Question: 'What is German?' and *Beyond the Mother Tongue*

character from his story, the implications of “ownership” in Kafka’s art are wrapped up in questions of linguistic, ethnic, and cultural identity. The simple fact that Kafka *chooses* to write in German is a testament to this.

Somewhat ironically, a lasting interpretation I have of Kafka and his work has a lot in common with Martin Heidegger and his anxiety of modernization. Both writers recognize the debasing qualities that metropolitan life is trending towards in the 20th century, but unlike Heidegger, Kafka has the first-hand knowledge of urban life. Kafka does give credit to the argument that it can be an alienating environment, but instead of taking a resolute nationalistic stance, he develops an aesthetic that attempts to deal with that alienation. He dwells with the ambiguity that exists in his life by virtue of his identity, and what he creates is not necessarily beautiful in an idealistic sense, but it does do its part in attempting to address certain difficulties of modernity. To quote the English poet John Keats, what Kafka represents most of all is a negative capability to be “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”⁵⁰ This negative capability doesn’t look the way it did for the Romantics, but I consider the ability to dwell in uncertainty and produce meaningful work to be one of the most foundational aspects of being a good artist. Above all, this was Kafka’s skill and his compulsion, and it is because of that that his works continue to be read and continue to elicit valuable interpretations.

⁵⁰ Keats, John. “On Negative Capability: Letter to George and Tom Keats, December 1817.”

CISLA Addendum

After my first semester of college, I remember coming home, sitting around the dinner table and trying to explain some of the things I'd been thinking about. It was pretty common for my parents to ask me and my siblings what we'd learned at school that day when I was growing up, as I'm sure is the case with many families, but that night sitting around the dinner table, I found it more difficult than normal to explain the type of things I'd learned in my first semester. I remember throwing around the pseudo-theoretical literary jargon that I'd come to learn from texts I couldn't really comprehend. I don't remember what I was trying to say or explain, but I'm sure it wasn't particularly substantive or insightful, and I left home feeling a lot like Holden Caulfield as I boarded my connecting flight from Oklahoma City to Philadelphia.

I distinctly recall a conversation I had with my mom during that winter break in which she told me that for her each year of college felt completely different from the last. Of course, this was a long time before COVID was on anybody's mind, and because of that it now feels fairly naive. Obviously the pandemic has played an unquestionably significant role in my college experience. During a time that most college students leave home in order to have their first experience of quasi-adulthood, many of us were forced back to our childhood homes, which for many, including myself, was not a particularly easy transition. Back in spring 2020 when I had to pack up all my belongings and drive halfway across the country, I remember feeling like I was just coming into my stride in college. And suddenly I was living with my parents again while simultaneously trying to make the most of my time as an undergraduate, taking classes from the closet we seek cover in whenever there's a tornado in the area.

While the pandemic certainly impacted all of us in some way, I consider myself tremendously lucky not to have lost someone to the virus. Many of my peers talk about how we,

the class of 2022, got the worst of it all. After all, we had a majority of our college experience affected by covid restrictions in some way. But a topic I haven't heard discussed in quite a while is the effect that so much death and tragedy has played on us all and the mark that has left on our time at Conn. At the time of writing this, there have been over 1,000,000 deaths associated with COVID, and that is just the easily quantifiable tragedy. As we humans tend to do with large, world-altering events, the pandemic will eventually become a useful demarcation in our collective memory, and all the events that have become associated with this era will likely be wrapped into my memory of my experience in college.

The first lockdown began, as I'm sure everyone who lived through it will recall, in March 2022. In hindsight, I feel somewhat embarrassed that my first reaction was frustration that the virus would potentially inhibit me from studying abroad. Before I had even decided to study German, I knew I wanted to study abroad. I can't recall exactly what my mentality was back then, but I think I was interested in the somewhat superficial aesthetic of being an American expat in Europe. This superficial interest in a foreign culture, a nasty habit of some Americans abroad, really began to bother me the more I learned about it. This phenomenon is certainly less apparent when white Americans like myself visit predominantly white countries like Germany. But the exploitative practice of treating a culture as an essentialized, aesthetic good can occur even in spaces where a "foreigner" is able to "pass" for a local.

I don't claim to have any definitive answer to the question *How can one's personal, national, or cultural history shape possibilities for the future?* But being a member of CISLA has offered ample opportunity to reflect on this idea. Although almost every aspect of the curriculum in the center touches on this idea, Prof. Bhatia's section in IS 201 was the first time the question of personal positionality was addressed in an academic setting. It was also one of the most

personally valuable learning experiences I've had at Conn. Although I never studied any psychology or human development while I was in college, Prof. Bhatia's lectures on positionality played a significant role in my framing my experience studying abroad in Germany and eventually in the framework of my SIP, as I ended up investigating elements of Kafka's positionality from the perspective of the "postmonolingual paradigm."

As I stated in my project's introduction, moving from Oklahoma to Connecticut was not the easiest shift for me. Aside from the tremendous stress and anxiety that results from the symbolic transition from adolescents to pseudo-adulthood, I was displaced from the only place I'd lived in my entire life. I hadn't assumed that everything would be exactly the same as back home, but I also didn't anticipate that the social interactions would be as different as they ended up being. It wasn't until joining CISLA sophomore year that things began to become more normalized. This was partly from the self-reflective academic strategies that Prof. Bhatia introduced, but it was mainly because of the tremendous cohort of peers and friends that I got to know through the center.

Going back home halfway through my sophomore spring semester killed the educational momentum I was beginning to pick up. The interesting thing about spending so much time learning from a laptop screen is that, for me at least, it plays tricks on the mind. In the isolation of my basement in Oklahoma City, trying my best to write something valuable in German about Weimar-era film, I sometimes found it hard to believe that what I was doing had any bearing on the real world. This doubt manifested itself in the typical "economic" argument against liberal arts education (i.e. "But what do you think you'll do with that German degree?"). But it also made me question whether all that I'd learned, be it language or culture, had any empirical bearing on a real place. That thought strikes me as ridiculous now, but I recall during some of the

more isolating and alienating times during the pandemic that it was a real generator of anxiety. This was also when I realized that my positionality had fundamentally changed, and that I didn't really "belong" in Oklahoma anymore, or at least not in the way I used to feel a sense of belonging there.

I was very fortunate to get the opportunity to study abroad. I understand why this is such a crucial part of the CISLA experience, because my time abroad contextualized my education in a way that I don't think would have happened any other way. One of my favorite experiences when traveling outside of the country is the uncanny feeling that comes over me when I finally step out of the airport and into the average everydayness of a new culture. While learning a language and culture entirely online represents the discomfort of not being able to experience the tangibility of a new culture, the feeling of being completely jetlagged and bombarded with the sights, sounds, and smells of somewhere new was for me the ultimate fulfillment and reassurance that I was on the right track. I was already fairly conversational in German when I arrived for my time abroad, but what I experienced upon first arriving was the important distinction between factual grammatical knowledge and the understanding of the urgency that is characteristic of spoken language. This is something that we often take for granted in our "mother tongues," but it's the first thing you notice when you begin taking part in the speaking community of a new language.

The strategies for thinking about positionality were more important after moving to a new country than they ever were before. The culture of the United States and that of particularly western Germany are not very far apart, thanks in part to the influence of American politics and culture in this part of Europe. What I find the most interesting in the collision of these two cultures is the way they approach multilinguality. The fact is that most Americans visiting

Europe do not speak any language other than English. I think there is a general sense that any German you meet on the street would at least be able to hold a conversation in English. This was my assumption because every German person I'd ever met was relatively confident in their English. In Germany, I came to learn that this issue is far more complicated than I had previously thought it was. English-speaking ability among Germans is heavily influenced by education, which is in turn heavily influenced by class, which is in turn heavily influenced by issues of race, migration, and the still prevalent east-west divide. We often consider the classist distinctions and barriers that exist within a single culture or society and, at least the more liberal progressives, do what we can to address those hurdles. But something I'd never before considered was that there would be a very clear, more or less measurable barrier underlying certain assumptions of multilinguality.

As a monolingual American, the perspectives of a foreign country you have access to are inevitably tilted towards the perspectives of a more educated, wealthier social class. This has broader implications on both a personal as well as on a societal level. This ties directly into what Prof. Bhatia spoke about regarding the colonial biases inherent to our current epistemologies. When we are trying to understand a culture, we must think very critically about how we've come to acquire the knowledge that we have. If we don't do this, we threaten to make generalizations that at a minimum are incomplete, and at their worst are harmful to individuals who fall outside of the theoretical framework of the methodology.

Now, I know it seems like all of what I just stated was a bunch of academic-sounding jargon about how we ought to approach new cultures. But the point I'm trying to make is actually very simple at its core, and it's something that I've come to learn throughout both my time in college generally and specifically through my work in CISLA. And that point is that I

think one of the most important things we can bring to the task of research is a genuine love of what we're doing, which may tie into the question, *How can we address the material, spiritual and ethical challenges facing the world today?* Perhaps I'm an idealist, but I think if more people had this mentality when it comes to researching and sharing that research, there would not be such cynicism about academia generally and the liberal arts more specifically. Although the peers and professors I've worked with in CISLA are not the worst offenders when it comes to this issue, I think all of academia would benefit from making the production of "new" knowledge far more accessible to the average person.

When I think back on my time in college, the classes I learned the most in were the ones I took with professors who were supremely passionate about the subject they were teaching. Prof. Bhatia was a terrific example of this in IS 201 as well as Prof. Steiner. I enjoyed Prof. Steiner's section on African art so much that I ended up taking his semester-long course on the subject, which was one of my favorite courses I've taken at Conn. Although I am not an art history major, nor had I ever had a very strong interest in African art, this course was a highlight of my time at Conn College. To quote the college website quoting me in the *Class of 2022 Senior Stories*, "Professor Steiner is tremendously passionate and knowledgeable about the subject and shares the subject matter in such a way that you can't help but take on that passion yourself." Not only did I learn a lot about African art in that course, I also continued to reflect on the CISLA questions, particularly how they related to the exploration and presentation of culture and identity. But above all, Prof. Steiner offered me a great example of how to share and explain a topic in a meaningful and pedagogically effective way. This is an example that I did my best to emulate in my SIP and that I will continue to keep in mind as I move forward, whether in teaching, academics, or in any other facet of my life.

Although it was sometimes difficult and often frustrating, I am very happy that I had the opportunity to be a part of CISLA. I think some of the marketing language this school uses to describe our take on the liberal arts is sometimes cliched (Defy Boundaries! Put the Liberal Arts in Action), but the idea of “internationalizing” my education is something that I firmly believe in and thoroughly support. There are simply too many complex, globally connected issues facing us these days to limit ourselves to myopic perspectives, and I think this is something that the general mission of CISLA addresses quite well. I also found it invaluable that the structure of our cohort allowed us to share our work with our peers and to learn from each other. After listening to some of my classmates present on their research this spring, I was completely taken aback by the caliber of work they all were able to produce on topics ranging from right-wing German populism, to the correlation between birthrate and economic growth in Singapore. This was an experience I don’t think I could have had at any other college.

My final takeaway from the program is that the issues facing a global society are tremendously complex. We saw this firsthand as sophomores when the COVID outbreak began. The frustration many have with the humanities is that we don’t often reach concrete answers to the metaphysical questions we pose, if at all. But when it comes to complex problems that have such complex implications on the world, sometimes the first step is simply recognizing that questioning and thinking through things are part of the process of understanding. In a country and world that often push individuals towards objectifying certain elements of human existence that are ultimately personal and subjective, I think it’s quite okay for us to do a bit more humanistic, metaphysical musing. And I’m very grateful that I got the opportunity to do just that during my undergraduate education.

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