

Letter from the Chair

The Department of German Studies is a unique space for engaging with questions of intellectual, literary, and cultural inheritance; for contributing to contemporary debates; and for exposing the world of difference that diverse idioms can make. The multifaceted tradition of German thought is at once far-reaching and singular, from the “Copernican” revolution in epistemology that was carried out by Immanuel Kant to the radically new turns that it would take in the philosophical and poetic oeuvres of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Hölderlin, and F.W.J. Schelling, and beyond. Furthering the legacy of German Idealism, which had developed the understanding that even ‘sensible appearances are already formed’ through rational activity, thinkers from what came to be known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, including Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, exposed the historical limits and hitherto unrealized possibilities of both rational categories and factual givens, while developing the emancipatory implications of thought, poetics, and aesthetics. During the early twentieth century, another revolution in thinking would arrive with Sigmund Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, disclosing a dimension of subjectivity that both subtends and overrides conscious intentionality, and that we would do well to remember, repeat, and work through, lest we mistakenly believe the future to rest upon self-transparent agency or the better use of apparatuses for projection and control. Beyond the oeuvres of these thinkers, poetry would never be the same in the wake of Holocaust survivor Paul Celan’s poetic elaborations of historical trauma, which address the loss, violence, and suffering of the past through a shattered and shattering language that refuses paradigms of representation. Nor would future claims to “truth” remain untouched by the abyssal discovery of Martin Heidegger that our very ability to speak of what ‘is’ owes itself to historical disclosures of being, raising the question as to the shape that the world has taken in our current epoch of technology.

The faculty members of the Department of German Studies have received international acclaim for their research on the writers whom I have named above, among many others, and we have collectively created a vibrant culture in which leading scholars from around the world visit our Department to share and discuss their work in the form of lectures and workshops. Through their coursework and participation in our departmental events, graduate students and undergraduates alike have forged paths of inquiry of their own into the genealogy of those concepts, technologies, and conflicts with which our present times are fraught—and, equally importantly, they have cultivated the free relationship to linguistic idioms and intellectual histories that only the study of a foreign language can afford.

As Chair of the Department of German Studies, it is my goal not only to maintain but also to build upon the strong foundations for learning, scholarship, and exchange that our faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, and guests have laid, and at a time where their work is perhaps more urgent than ever. Steps that have already been taken to realize this goal include:

1. “Between the Lines: Poetry—Theory—Critique,” the international symposium that I organize each year in conjunction with my graduate seminar, where prominent scholars from other institutions present original research alongside Brown faculty and graduate students on the topic that was selected for the course.

2. The annual reading, lecture, and workshop that is delivered by a prominent contemporary poet from the German-speaking world.
3. The renovation of our departmental library, including the acquisition of critical scholarly editions of those writers' oeuvres that are at the core of our teaching and research.

In addition to these measures, we are seeking to raise funds in order to support the establishment of an annual international summer school, which would allow our graduate students to join graduate students in Germany for focused seminar sessions facilitated by faculty from Brown and our partner institution. Finally, I intend to advocate for the expansion of opportunities to bring leading scholars in our field to Brown and to enhance the research profile of our Department.

As with so many areas of humanistic inquiry that do not serve the ends of instrumental reasoning, however, all of these efforts can be realized only with supplementary support. Should you wish to contribute to the Department of German Studies, please considering donating to our Department by taking the following steps:

1. Click the button, "Give to Brown," which you will find in the bottom-right corner of this webpage.
2. Click "Make a Gift" on the page that will open next.
3. Click "Search for a Fund" on the subsequent webpage, then enter "German Studies."
4. Should no results be found, enter "German Studies" again in the field that appears below the line, "Please write in the fund you'd like to support."

To receive the latest news about upcoming events and opportunities, please write to German_Studies@Brown.Edu and ask to join our mailing list. We look forward to welcoming any and all who are interested in joining our community!

Sincerely,

Kristina Mendicino
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Chair, Department of German Studies
Brown University