

AHRC project 'Kafka's Transformative Communities'

Since his untimely death, Franz Kafka (1883-1924) has become a global phenomenon. Over the past century, every generation has discovered 'its' Kafka. Across seismic shifts his texts have spoken to readers from all walks of life, as reflected during the Covid pandemic, when memes about Gregor Samsa trapped in his bedroom went viral. Both Kafka and his protagonists are often cast as isolated entities existentially disconnected from their surroundings. *Kafka's Transformative Communities* challenges this image by foregrounding a central but neglected aspect of his work: community. Community is a constant thread in Kafka's writings, from his earliest texts to his last story and artistic testament, 'Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse-People', whose artist-protagonist is defined by her (often strained) relationship with the collective. Our project uses Kafka's engagement with community as the springboard for a distinctive engagement with his texts, contexts and legacy.

Our project is structured around three themes. First, the Community theme (led by PI Carolin Duttlinger) explores how Kafka's literary depiction of groups and collectives is shaped by, and in turn responds to, the central role of community in his immediate Jewish and wider Austro-Hungarian context. Widening the project's spatial and temporal focus, the second theme, Worldliness (led by Co-I Barry Murnane), focusses on Kafka's role as a world author, looking at his reception in different times and places, while relating this status back to his own writings - his engagement with the power dynamics of a globalising world, in an age of colonialism, war and empire. Third, the Transformation theme (led by Co-Is Katrin Kohl and Lucia Ruprecht) assesses Kafka's posthumous legacy in different art forms and media and their respective audiences. Our project does not treat such creative responses as an afterthought but as forms of investigation and interpretation in their own right.

To mark the centenary of Kafka's death, we are organising a major Kafka exhibition at the Weston Library, which is home to Kafka's original manuscripts. In addition, our project will fund creative partnerships with leading artists and cultural institutions. Choreographer Arthur Pita will produce a new dance adaptation of Kafka's story 'A Hunger Artist', while playwright Ed Harris will create two new radio dramas of his novels *The Trial* and *America*, which will be broadcast by BBC Radio 4. Composer Can Bilir will write a new song cycle which will premiere at the Oxford International Song Festival in 2024, and editor Anna Kelly (Abacus) has commissioned a new anthology of short stories, *A Cage Went in Search of a Bird*, inspired by Kafka featuring leading contemporary authors.

These partnerships are central to the impact of our project in academia and beyond. In addition, two conferences, *Kafka Transformed* (2024) and *Kafka in the World: Life, Death and Afterlife* (2025), will take stock of Kafka's legacy while connecting scholars from different disciplines around the world. Travel bursaries will encourage the participation particularly of freelance artists, Early Career Researchers and academics based in emerging economies. These conferences are central to our aim of building a broad and inclusive research community, as facilitated by the launch of a new Global Kafka Network. Hosted by our new Digital Kafka Resource on our Oxford Kafka

Research Centre website, it will connect people working on and with Kafka around the world, facilitating collaboration across disciplines, media and institutions.

Our ambitious public engagement programme puts the experience of general readers, and of different groups and communities, centre stage. Our Digital Kafka Resource will also host accessible podcasts, blogs, videos and interactive content aimed particularly at younger audiences. School workshops, study days and essay competitions delivered by the core team in collaboration with our partners will introduce Kafka to a new generation of readers.