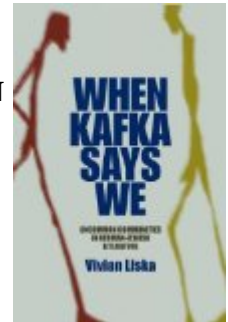


**Vivian Liska.** *When Kafka Says We: Uncommon Communities in German-Jewish Literature.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. vi + 239 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-35308-5.



**Reviewed by** June Hwang

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Vivian Liska's book explores the notion of "uncommon communities" in a wide range of German Jewish literature, including works by Franz Kafka, Else Lasker-Schüler, Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, Ilse Aichinger, and Hannah Arendt. According to Liska, uncommon communities question the idea of a community based on commonalities and the notion of an essential identity. Instead, the communities created in these texts are unstable ones that necessitate a constant and personal engagement with oneself and one's community. By carefully examining how these writers position their work in relationship to these questions of community and individual identity, Liska questions some of the traditional reception of these authors. In doing so she not only gives us new insights into the literature, but also into the relationship between community, individual and German Jewish identity.

Liska argues that the uncommon communities these writers create do not exist independent of their literary contexts and one must necessarily focus on these texts as literature if one is to un-

derstand the communities that are created. She criticizes the attempts of late twentieth-century theorists to conceive of a community that holds its members together in an interdependent relationship while still creating the possibility for individuality without restraints. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986) serves as an example of this totalizing and somewhat ahistorical approach that obliterates the nuances of these texts. Liska positions her book as a response to this ahistorical approach. Although I find that Liska's argument against theory concerning this particular topic has its merits, I would have liked to see a more explicit response throughout the book. In the beginning sections on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari are evoked a few times, once significantly as the opening quote of the book. It would have been interesting to have seen a bit more discussion on Deleuze and Guattari's impact on Kafka reception and the concept of a minor literature, in particular in the section about Kafka's attitudes toward Yiddish. I believe such an approach would lead to a better under-

standing of the theoretical works on the topics of community and outsiders and what is at stake in their search for universal definitions of community and the individual. Nevertheless, this is a small point and the book's focus allows Liska to root the texts in their historical and literary contexts so as to better understand the complicated communities they create.

The title of the book refers to Marthe Robert's statement that "Kafka rarely says 'we'" (p. 9). In the first chapter, Liska refutes this statement and focuses on instances in which Kafka uses the word "we" to speak as part of a group. Kafka uses the first-person plural to show that the recognition of belonging to a group is also a questioning of the very concepts of cohesion and unity. Liska challenges the reading that Kafka and his writings represent the ultimate alienated individual who is marked by his inability to be part of a community. Through insightful close readings of Kafka's work, Liska argues convincingly that Kafka does not settle on a fixed relationship between individual and community; instead, through the ambiguity of his language, his individual is constantly estranged in a way that unsettles the categories of individual and community. Kafka is still the outsider, but now he is one who is positioned at the intersections between loneliness and belonging.

The second chapter turns to Theodor Herzl and Else Lasker-Schüler. Liska focuses on Herzl's philosophical tales, fictional texts that have not received a lot of critical attention. Liska uses these stories to illustrate how Herzl's fictional works could convey doubt and hesitation about notions of community that are absent in his political writings. The contrast between Herzl's fictional and political writings supports Liska's claim that the language of literature is particularly suited for the creation of communities that are founded on ambiguities and unstable definitions. And thus, Herzl's fiction actually allows for a more nuanced portrayal of reality than his other writings. Liska also shows a new side to Else Lasker-Schüler's

work and life as she challenges readings that depict Lasker-Schüler as a naïve, apolitical poet whose poetry seeks to escape from reality to celebrate a mystical redemption. According to Liska, such an approach has made it difficult to recognize Lasker-Schüler's rebellious qualities, particularly in her biblical references. The focus of much Lasker-Schüler reception has been concerned with placing her in within the context of German Jewish literature. One example is her use of Oriental imagery, which critics such as Karl-Joseph Hölting read as connected to her Jewish identity. Liska pushes beyond this narrow reading of Lasker-Schüler's Orientalism to show that the imagery is used as an aesthetics of alienation. This move is not a means of escape, but rather a way to disturb categories of collective belonging; Lasker-Schüler's approach is a response to the political and historical reality around her and her resistance to the categories of identification available to her.

The third chapter also addresses what is lost when reception focuses too heavily on the "Jewishness" of a writer and his or her work, particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The danger of this approach in the reception of Paul Celan's works is that Celan becomes a representative for all Jews and Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, and, taken a step further, this suffering then becomes symbolic of an even more general suffering--the alienation and oppression of the misunderstood poet. Liska argues that rather than seeing in Celan's works symbols of a universal experience, it is more fruitful to see the poems as ciphers which can only be understood within an individual context. In Celan's works Liska sees a refusal to belong to a rootless community of Jews who are brought together by their lack of belonging elsewhere. Instead, in his constant deferment of reconciliation and forgetting, Celan abstains from a stable definition of Jewish identity in a way that speaks to a particular and personal experience with the past. This category of Jewish writer becomes even more complicated when it

comes to Nelly Sachs. Sachs stylized herself as the “voice of the Jewish people” (p. 121), in particular the Jewish dead and survivors. For many this voice in Sachs’s early poetry serves to heal the wounds between German Jews and other Germans as it is a voice of reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness. In the poststructural interpretations of Sachs, critics focus on her later poetry and the move away from voice and toward sign, with a particular focus on their textual nature and multiplicity of meanings. Rather than seeing Sachs’s poetry as a transition between voice and sign, Liska contends that the tension between voice and sign already existed in her early poetry. The “we” in Sachs’s early poetry is not a whole and healed community. Instead it speaks of the “loss of wholeness, presence, unity, and fullness, and not least of the loss of voice itself” (p. 124). If there is a restoration or reconciliation in these texts, it has not happened yet and there is doubt that it will.

The fourth chapter looks at Ilse Aichinger in the context of Gruppe 47 as well as a group of Austrian Jewish writers who write about the Holocaust. Liska reads Aichinger’s short prose text “Der Engel” (1965) as a resistance to the aesthetics and politics of the Gruppe 47. By choosing fascism as the enemy and not National Socialism, and by insisting that the past was not relevant, the political and aesthetic programs of Gruppe 47 effectively made the National Socialist past and the Holocaust taboo subjects. “Der Engel” takes this stance to task and the text insists that “[a]nything that creates connection and coherence and hides the tear ... participates in a false healing, a treacherous covering-up of a wound” (p. 149). The works of Robert Schindel, Doron Rabinovici, and Robert Menasse are also interested in making the tears visible. Rather than agreeing with the premise that the only way to represent the unspeakable is through a poetics of silence, these authors insist on trying to speak about the unspeakable. Silence is replaced by a “turbulent excess of words” in which language is not the way to redemption, nor an attempt to speak for the victims (p. 152). Like

Aichinger, these authors refuse to forget, to smooth over the past, and instead look at the fissures created by the past and the role they play in the present. In their works the personal and active interaction with the past in the present day is emphasized and thus these texts undermine the notion of an essential Jewish identity.

The final chapter explores the legacy of Kafka’s influence, drawing back on the themes touched upon in previous chapters with a focus on Celan and Aichinger and their relationship to Kafka’s works. The book ends with a reflection on what Liska refers to as the “gap” between Hannah Arendt and Kafka and their notions of the role of the outsider and history. Liska’s conclusion is that Arendt’s frustration with Kafka is her attempt to take Kafka outside the realm of literature and into the world of history. With this conclusion, Liska emphasizes her point that the literary context is the space in which ambiguity, questioning, and fissures are possible. Literature creates the possibility of making concepts of history, alienation, and community into something individual and active and it is only with this emphasis on the individual and on the unstable nature of language that the communities that are created can exist.

Liska refers in her last chapter to Borges’s description of Kafka’s impact on literature: “In each of these texts we find Kafka’s idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality, in other words, it would not exist” (quoted, p. 94). Although Liska finds Borges’s approach to Kafka somewhat lacking, what Liska has done in this final chapter, and throughout the book, is to show us that such an approach can be fruitful when the specific contexts of the texts involved are not forgotten. Through her careful attention to language, and her deep understanding of the historical contexts, Liska presents us with new ways of thinking about these authors and about the relationship between communities and estrangement. This book convincingly demonstrates a fruitful inter-

section between literary analysis and cultural studies to raise important questions about German Jewish identity and literature and would be a valuable read for those interested in German Jewish studies, Holocaust remembrance, and cultural studies as a whole.

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