Interview with Michaela Bronstein

Morgan Cortina
Stanford University

Michaela Bronstein is an Assistant Professor in the English Department of Stanford University. Professor Bronstein researches the historical context of the novel, focusing on connections to Anglo-American modernism. In inspecting literature from 19th-century Russian and British authors to later 20th-century African and African-American authors, Professor Bronstein seeks to understand the transhistorical afterlives of literary works and examine how narratives that had a particular effect during their own times have become a part of more recent histories. In her most recent work, Professor Bronstein has delved into the modern television realm in order to connect the intimate temporalities of reading with the broad temporalities of reception.

Her publications include her book, *Out of Context*, as well as her manuscript-in-progress, *Crimes for All Humanity: Revolution and the Modern Novel*. She teaches a variety of English classes at Stanford such as *Narrative and Narrative Theory*, *Serial Storytelling*, and *Literature and the Future*.

Professor Bronstein attended the University of Oxford for her undergraduate education followed by graduate work in Yale University's English Department. Prior to joining Stanford in 2016, she also worked as a Junior Fellow at the Harvard Society of Fellows and a Visiting Lecturer at MIT.

MC: Can you tell me a little bit about how you became interested in literature and analyzing narrative?

MB: Well, I've always loved reading. I think a lot of English professors would say things like that, although maybe interestingly not all of us would identify that way. But when I was an undergrad, I realized that I was committed to the novel as a subject. I really care about the genre and about paying attention to how plots unfold and characters develop. But I was also in an environment at Oxford where poetry reigned supreme and, in particular, studying older things, things before even the novel was that prominent as a genre, were more standard.

One of the things that I realized as I was coming to grips with how I wanted to become the scholarly version of myself I imagined was that I was going to bring to the novel the tools and customs that were formed from the history of the people studying very old things. And I ended up focusing on this area of the novel, modernism, which is about, at this point, one hundred years old. It is in this weird border zone between things that feel contemporary and things that feel like they're of the past. I think relatively recently, modernist studies have started consciously imagining that modernism was no longer happening around us, and so one of the things that I like about teaching in this moment and being a scholar in this moment is feeling as though we're still deciding, as we encounter these texts, is this mine? Is it for me, or is it something that belongs to another era?

MC: In your research surrounding the transhistorical nature of literature, how would you describe the relationship that we have between history and modern narrative?

MB: There are a lot of different relationships, and lots of different scholars will describe that relationship in vastly different ways. But for me, I think the area of this question that really animates almost everything I work on is about the relationship between literature and the future. I am interested in the fact that many literary forms have been written consciously with the idea that they might have an audience beyond their own time. You can go back through literary history and find so many examples of this. You have Shakespeare talking about how his sonnets will be a paper monument that will outlast stone. You have James Joyce discussing how he'll have so many allusions in the novel *Ulysses* that it will keep the professors busy for centuries. So I focus on this kind of aspiration, the idea that you might write something that will be useful to people you can't imagine, because they're beyond your own time, often by a large chronological gap, and how that aspiration shapes the production of literature.

I'm interested in both how that makes novelists imagine history and how they might try to theorize what might be persistent about human experience so that they can appeal to that versus what is merely ephemeral. Or, whether it makes novelists imagine radical historical change, thoughts like, "If it feels like something is changing in the world I'm inhabiting, what will the world look like on the other side and how can I write for that?" I'm interested in how that makes the novel as a form, which unspools over long periods of time, into this weird little model of how history unfolds. The question of what happens next in the novel is one that a lot of these novelists will map onto the question of what is happening next in history. That can get very local; as you are reading a long and complicated sentence and trying to put it together, many novelists use that as a way of reflecting on the confusions of living in an unsettled, historical moment and trying to make sense of the story, of the historical narrative that you are inhabiting.

In the Tony Kushner play, *A Bright Room Called Day*, which is not a novel, it engages with a lot of these themes. The tension between what we as audience members know about the characters who are inhabiting Germany during Hitler's rise to power and what the characters know gets kind of unbearable. You can't help but see the historical narrative they're in more clearly than they can. But the play also tries to unsettle you about your own historical moment and makes you think you may not know its turns as well as you think.

MC: Do you think there is a superior way in the methods that authors use to imagine future readers?

MB: I think there are a lot of good methods, but there are a couple that make me suspicious. When I first started doing this research, one of the objections I often encountered was some version of "Isn't the idea of literature as written for the future just a form of selfishness where authors desire personal immortality?" There's ample evidence of some authors thinking like that; there's a lot of poetry that takes the vein of discoursing on "just how great I am as a poet." But there's also counter threads. The writer, Henry James, has endless short stories about novelists where the whole point is to disconnect the work from the writer, to attend to the art and to leave behind the author. In a lot of these short stories, the author is dying, so it's about coming to grips with mortality and saying that the work can offer something to the future that isn't about self-aggrandizement.

Another version of this that I find a little suspicious is analyses that are complacent about history. One of the reasons that I work on the period I do is that if you look at novels from older periods, not all of them, and certainly not all periods and not all novelists, you get a sense that people weren't thinking in terms

of the possibility of radical historical change. Especially in 18th century novels, pre-French Revolution, the idea that the world could change dramatically and that things would not always be the way they are today just didn't seem as active in how novelists thought about their art. The two examples that I mapped out imagine radical historical change but they focus on different elements; one focuses on imagining what will change and the other focuses on imagining what might stay the same. I think those are both potentially quite interesting.
A phrase that I think captures another relationship is a 19th century critic talking about Charles Dickens, describing Dickens as "our special correspondent to posterity." They're speaking to this idea that Dickens is a journalist reporting on the events of his day for the audience of the future, and it creates distance between the present and the future yet imagines that the future is interested in the past. That is yet another configuration that I think is potentially valuable and interesting.

MC: Going into your publications, I would love to hear more about your book, *Out of Context*. Can you tell me a bit about the origins of the book and what the process of actually writing and publishing a book was like?

MB: *Out of Context* began when I was reading my modernist authors, and I am one of those people who ended up writing a book that is not entirely different from what I initially proposed when I applied to graduate school, so this has been with me since I was an undergrad. I was reading these authors, and then I started reading the criticism about them, and I felt that the criticism didn't quite get them right. They didn't see in them what I saw in them. What I wanted to do was write to make visible what I saw.

For example, something like the novels of Joseph Conrad where they're often really non-chronological and have lots of different perspectives. A lot of scholars celebrated those formal devices as ways of making you uncertain, of disrupting your complacency about the world and making you think, "Maybe I don't understand history or society as well as I think." When I read these novels, I found myself thinking that what sticks with me are the moments of insight and revelation where I put all of the pieces together. Yes, it's difficult, but for me, what seemed like the dominant experience of the novel was taking a difficult, confusing world, and coming to feel like you do understand it. My first thought was that these critics weren't getting these novels right, and I wanted to get them right. Then, and this is definitely a process that happens to almost every graduate student when they're working, I realized that just getting the novels right was not enough because there are so many good, potential interpretations of any given text. You have to explain why people should care, and what I realized was that the

critics I thought were wrong felt as though talking about how Conrad undid our knowledge of the world was a way of talking about how Conrad could be useful to certain kinds of anti imperialist causes and help you to see how Conrad isn't simply upholding the ugly aspects of his own time. It took me a long time, but I eventually realized that part of the reason I was invested in seeing Conrad differently is that the way I saw his novels as working wasn't actually about upholding the norms of his time and place. It wasn't doing the "bad" thing that the other critics wanted to rescue him from. Instead, what I saw his novels doing was finding ways of generating commitment and strong views of the world even in the face of complexity.

Part of what I realized as I was writing is that I needed to explain why the effects of these literary forms could do the things I thought they did, not just the things that were implied and unstated in a lot of the other scholars' works. That is how I arrived at what ended up being the structure of the book, which is pairing modernist novels with later authors who use their literary forms. I compare Conrad to Kenyan novelist, activist, thinker, multi-talent Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who self-consciously and explicitly uses Conrad's forms and plots and talks about using them in order to produce decisive judgment on history. *A Grain of Wheat*, which is based on a Conrad novel, is non chronological and has puzzles in it, but the whole point is that when you get to the end, you feel like you've seen all of the complexity and have the ability to make full judgment. Seeing uncertainty and complexity as producing political commitment rather than doubts and hesitations was where I ended up with that project.

MC: Ironically, these ideas that you are getting at are kind of in the scope of what I am writing about for my most recent English paper in your class.

MB: Absolutely, and to talk about our class, you can see that the Said reading we did was the foundation for a lot of the criticism I was disagreeing with. In Said, producing a decisive vision is always a sinister form of imperialism. The possibility that activist oppressed peoples might find the need to produce a kind of counter position isn't as strong in his account. A lot of the other scholars were kind of descending from that line of thinking, which has incredible explanatory power but it meant that we were often blind as a field to the ways in which you could produce revolutionary or politically left-wing consequences from a very different set of literary effects.

MC: In your future works or publications, do you see yourself remaining in this realm of examining the future and comparing the history of narrative, or are there other concepts that have been on your mind?

MB: There are lots of concepts on my mind, but many of them are related to the things we've already been talking about. For instance, we were talking a minute ago about two different forms of relation to the future. *Out of Context* focuses, for the most part, on novelists who are trying to theorize continuity between the present and the future and what you need to pair away from society in order to believe you have hit on something that will last. The next project that I am working on is with novels about left-wing political violence. These are novels where they're really trying to theorize, "What does the world look like on the other side of radical change and how can I appeal to readers on the other side of extreme changes in society?"

What I am working on right now is the ways in which novelists find these sinister figures, people who set bombs or people who assassinate government officials, as the secret sharers of themselves as authors, as people who like themselves as authors and are appealing to the judgment of the future against the present. These are novelists who feel like the public isn't ready for their work in their own time, but think that maybe it'll last and maybe the future will find something in it. For example, an assassin who commits a terrible act today for the sake of a future that they feel will justify and approve of it. The reason this is fascinating is because so many of the authors in question are actually somewhat skeptical of the radical violence. Not all of them are skeptics; some of them are defenders of it, like in the context of sub-African anti-apartheid fiction which is one of the areas that I worked on in this book. There's a lot more willingness to explore those kinds of tactics. But these novelists find themselves recognizing this uncomfortable kinship anyway, between what they're doing as writers and what these activists are doing.

MC: I have the privilege of being in your *Narrative and Narrative Theory* class this quarter, and one of the main questions in our class is about the consequences of storytelling. Nowadays, we seem to consume fiction in a very interesting way; we see so much violence and action within narratives. What do you think about the way in which we consume modern literature and fiction, either within film, novels, or any other form of storytelling?

MB: It's actually interesting that you bring up TV, because the other class I'm teaching right now is a class on serialization that uses the history of the serial novel and serial television drama in order to talk about the history of anxieties people have about how other people are consuming narrative. One of my favorite quotations on this subject is from the middle of the 20th century where the sociologist literature Q. D. Leavis says something like "The reading habit is now

a form of the drug habit." She's talking about people who are taking books out of libraries and exchanging the books really fast. They're, in her view, desperate for their next fix of plot. What is interesting about that example and a host of other examples that I talk about in this class is how often it is about the wrong kind of people reading. In the case of Leavis, she is talking about poor people reading because they're going to the library. She's not talking about rich people who can buy the books. And there's also a huge history of anxiety about women being bad readers of novels. I tend to read all of the worries we have about how or what we read from that lens of "What is behind our worry?" Are we really worried about people becoming too violent or are we worried about the wrong kind of people reading? There's not always some sinister reason behind it, but I think that the anxieties about reading are often indexed to broader cultural anxieties, many of which we wouldn't necessarily defend if we laid them bare.

In terms of your question about violence specifically, I think that is a really interesting question. I've occasionally thought about teaching a class called *21st Century Television Drama* because I do some research on it and I'm really interested in its narrative forms. But it would be a class with a lot of violence because so much of the most influential TV and other streaming dramas are really tough material. It has to do with a whole host of minor things about the history of HBO as the uncensored cable option as opposed to the more restrained networks and the kind of association of HBO with the rise of prestige drama. In this serialization class, we do shows like *The Wire* or *I May Destroy You* where they deal with really tough material. I think that one of the conversations that the culture is still struggling to have around these questions is "How do we talk about these kinds of representations in ways that acknowledge that some of them might be problematic?" But, some of them might also be valuable and necessary. *I May Destroy You* is a TV show about rape and consent and general sexual ethics that requires of its performers a lot of uncomfortable performances. But it's also by a writer and creator who herself is a survivor and it deals with really important topics.

At the same time, we might want to critique the constant recourse to sex and nudity in something like *Game of Thrones* that takes these subjects less seriously. We have to be able to have these conversations in a really nuanced way, and there's a tendency to collapse the question of "Is this particular narrative doing something bad with the material?" with the systemic question of "Are there just too many narratives that focus on this material?" You can make both of those critiques, but you have to keep them separate in a certain way and understand that those require different responses.

MC: I know that you teach other English classes at Stanford - is there a particular curriculum that you enjoy teaching the most?

MB: I absolutely love teaching *Narrative and Narrative Theory*. The only thing I don't love about teaching that class is that it is a lecture. I am not as much of a fan of lectures as I am of seminars. One of my general messages to Stanford undergrads is "Take more seminars and try to get into these smaller conversational environments."

The thing that unites a lot of the classes I teach that I really love doing are structures that compare literary works or contexts that are in really different times and places. The serialization class that I mentioned has fiction from the 19th and early 20th centuries alongside TV from the 21st century. In the class, I make the argument that a major transformation is happening in TV that resembles the transformation that happened in fiction during that earlier period. A class that I taught last year that I am going to teach again next year is called *Modernism Today*, which pairs modernist novelists with later authors who make use of them in some unexpected way. The reason I love doing this is because it encourages you to see the older authors as living, as still having something that is in common with us today, as part of our continuous literary tradition with our own moment. Teaching those later texts and not just relying on the responses that we bring to the table to make those authors alive today can unsettle our responses. With Conrad and Ngũgĩ, who I teach together in that class, it is often really startling to realize that Ngũgĩ doesn't seem to spend as much time reacting to what Conrad actually has to say about imperialism as he does to the kind of more abstract narrative structures that Conrad's novels offer. The point here is that we can use other authors as a way of enlarging our sense of what older texts can offer us and teaching us.

Zadie Smith came to Stanford a few years back and she gave a talk about a lot of brilliant things, and at one point during the Q&A, she was asked about how she had reacted to her own undergraduate education at Cambridge, a relatively conservative place, like my own undergraduate education at Oxford. She said something like, "Strip it for parts." I really liked that, and I think that's what I've often found myself doing as a scholar and what I often tell students to do. But what I think is an important corollary is that you need to come into this not knowing where the parts that you need will be or what they'll look like. You might find something unexpectedly useful or modern or helpful to you in a text that you don't expect. A text that you think might sing to you might feel unexpectedly alien, or it might connect to an aspect that isn't what you would anticipate you would like about it. This moment where you find something in a text but it is not necessarily what you thought you would.

MC: What is your favorite aspect about teaching?

MB: Repeating myself a little bit, those moments where I see students find things they don't expect in texts are really exciting for me. More generally, seeing students struggling with a difficult theoretical reading and then slowly realizing as they read or as they talk about it in class that this thing that seemed hard and alien is actually about something that is really intimately connected to their own lives. Those kinds of moments where texts suddenly become legible in unexpected ways are really exciting to see them happening.

Also, selfishly, I get to re-read all of these books. I teach *Narrative and Narrative Theory* most years, and I've read those novels a lot of times. It is really cool that every time I do it, I still see something new in them, which also makes me realize just how many different responses you and your classmates are having in that room. One of the things that I love the most is when students actually come out and disagree with each other. Students are very eager to agree with one another, which is better than being too eager to disagree. I'd rather that you all want to be on the same page as each other than otherwise, but sometimes you realize, "Oh no, we're having different experiences and we can't simply resolve them." I think it is really exciting when you see people in a totally cordial and friendly way come to grips with a real disagreement.

MC: From all of the novels and pieces of work you have encountered in your career, what is your favorite piece of literature and why?

MB: It is hard for some people, but that one is not hard for me. My partner is someone who hates being asked about favorite things, but for me, my favorite novel and work of literature, I can say without a doubt, is Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Partially, it is probably contingent. I read it at a very formative age when I was a teenager, but I love that novel and I don't know what my mind would look like if I hadn't read it. There's a certain intensity with which the characters are both vivid and complicated and the way in which they represent themselves as struggling with really complicated ethical dilemmas and the way those ethical dilemmas are connected with their own characters. I loved all of that and I still do. There is still a real intensity whenever I pick up my copy of that novel. It is the book that I pack last and unpack first when I move. It is the physical object that I feel is the most important of all the texts I have.

MC: I have a similar experience with *The Bluest Eye*, which I also read during my formative years. It made me truly fall in love with literature.

MB: Absolutely. The things that you read at certain points become aspects of your own identity. You might be a person who thinks they like one aspect of literature and not other aspects. Dostoevsky is overdetermined in this case because there is this classic tradition of people contrasting Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as the two great Russian novelists in the 19th century. There's a cottage industry of popular writings about what it means to like one rather than the other. A lot of that is kind of silly, but it's also not nothing, especially when you're a teenager reading these books. You realize that the reason you have this incredibly intense reaction to one book as opposed to another is because of a specific aspect, so what does that say about me that I like this aspect? I'm sure the same thing is probably true with you and *The Bluest Eye*. You've figured things out about yourself by your own love for that text.

MC: For my final question, what is one fun fact about yourself that you would like to share?

MB: That's a great question. At the moment, I feel like a lot of important facts about me are weirdly obvious because we're sitting in my office. You can see this little "Ask me about my cat" sign. That's my beloved 15-year old cat who has been with me since I was in graduate school. There's the bicycle I use to commute into the office which is another thing about me. I do a lot of biking for both recreation and to get around. I'll just leave it at the fact that I have successfully made a lot of myself quite legible in this space.