



UNTITLED SIANNE NGAI

Sianne Ngai is Professor of English at Stanford University (2000–2007; 2011–present). She has also taught at the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University (2014/15) and at UCLA (2007–2011). She received her Ph.D. in English and American Literature from Harvard University in 2000 and her B.A. from Brown University in 1993. Her books are *Theory of the Gimmick* (in progress); *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, and Interesting* (2012); and *Ugly Feelings* (2005). *Our Aesthetic Categories* was awarded the James Russell Lowell Prize from the Modern Language Association. Selections from this book have been translated into Swedish and Italian, selections from *Ugly Feelings* into German and Slovenian. Other recent publications include: “Visceral Abstractions.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (January 2015); and “Network Aesthetics: Juliana Spahr’s *The Transformation* and Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social*.” In *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, eds. Christopher Looby and Cindy Weinstein (2012). Ngai received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Copenhagen in 2015. She has also received fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies (2007/08) and the Huntington Library (2005/06). – Address: Department of English, Stanford University, Building 460, Margaret Jacks Hall, Stanford, CA 94305, USA. E-mail: xngai@stanford.edu

1.

I’ll start with an observation I wish I could say I came up with myself, but which came from my partner, Mark McGurl, who was here for the entire year. We were talking with Stephen Greenblatt at the last Thursday dinner, and Mark remarked how unusual it was

that an institution as prestigious as Wiko could also be so loveable. Usually, the higher the stature of an institution, the more one tends to feel indifference toward it. Stephen said, yes, he was not sentimental about institutions, but for some reason he was about this one. Mark then wondered, what is it about the Wiko, exactly – what is its secret – that enables it to be loveable in a way similarly prestigious academic institutions are not.

2.

The staff, I said. The people here.

This answer, for all its truth, also struck me as somehow glib. It seems natural to contrast the impersonality and formality of institutions (“coldness”) to the personality and informality of persons (“warmth”). But what if something about this opposition is false?

Thinking more upon it, what is special about Wiko is not something personal/informal as opposed to institutional/formal, but rather its use of relatively enduring structures to produce a temporary and very specific kind of sociality. The putting together of a cohort with a highly particular kind of intellectual coherence and intellectual diversity; the design of their year, months, and weeks together; the spatial as well as temporal organization of daily life; the fitting together of all these different tempos of activity and interaction. The Wiko is a form, a careful organization of time and space used to create a particular kind of being-together or collectivity. A transitory, self-consciously fabricated collectivity, which strikes me as a project utopian to the core. And it is precisely through the medium of this artificial, highly structured sociality that personal relationships with individuals emerge that I for one will never forget.

3.

So then, after having gone through the detour above, back to my original answer. Precisely because one cannot separate institutional forms and structures from interactions of persons, what makes the Wiko curiously loveable for all of its prestige is its unique concatenation of Vera Schulze-Seeger, Eva von Kügelgen, Ursula Kohler, Katharina Wiedemann, Dunia Najjar, Stefan Gellner, and so many others. From the miraculous library to our German courses, there is not a single aspect of institutional life at Wiko that can be detached from those who enable it to function in relation to all the others.

4.

I thought and wrote a lot this year. I had new breakthroughs about what I really mean when I talk about the gimmick as a capitalist aesthetic category. I wrote about two-thirds of a long, difficult chapter on this question that I think will be finished this fall. It took me about a year to finish each chapter in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, so I'm more or less on track. I did a long interview with a British artist and curator (that is, he interviewed me) for a group exhibition inspired by my first book, *Ugly Feelings*, that he organized in London this year. I gave talks at the John F. Kennedy Institute of the Freie Universität and the Institute of Cultural Inquiry Berlin and got to know German Americanists living in Berlin: Ulla Hasselstein and Frank Kelleter. Some nice work-related things happened to me during the Wiko year as well. I learned that *Ugly Feelings* received a grant in Japan that will enable its translation into Japanese. And that I've been awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Copenhagen.

But I have to say, based on a diagnostic test I took, that the thing that happened during my sabbatical of which I am most proud is having gone from absolutely zero to B1 German this year. Because this is something that could never have happened, and would never have happened, anywhere but here.

5.

I am entirely not sure how it happened, but being here enabled me to achieve something I had been unsuccessfully trying to do since receiving tenure seven years ago, which is to have a less fraught, more lighthearted relation to my own work. My work is often on topics that have humor or playfulness as their content, but that is different from doing work in a playful spirit of mind. Part of it had to do with learning how to let myself get distracted by the work of Fellows I found interesting, many of whom seemed to have a *Parallelaktion* behind their *Parallelaktion* and often one behind that as well. This meant that I ended up going down paths that I hadn't planned on going down, for no reason other than pleasure and curiosity – something that also would have never happened if I had been anywhere else.