

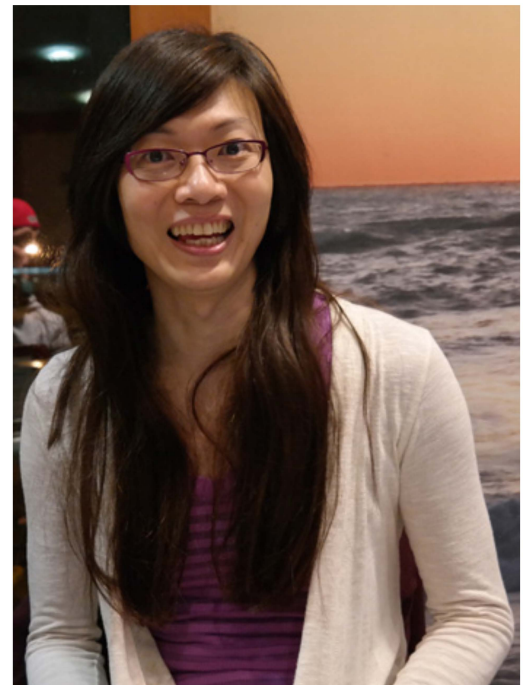


# THE SHAKESPEARE *Standard*

The Blotted Line ||

An Interview with Alexa Alice Joubin

Jeffrey Kahan  
(<http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/author/jeffrey/>)



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By Jeffrey Kahan

*This is part of a series of interviews with working Shakespearians, how they got started in the field, and their ongoing interests. This month, I spoke with Alexa Alice Joubin, Professor of English, Theatre, East Asian Languages and Literatures, and International Affairs at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Alexa is the co-founder and co-director of that university's Digital Humanities Institute. Her books include Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange (2009; 2011); Weltliteratur und Welttheater: Ästhetischer Humanismus in der kulturellen Globalisierung (2012); Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation (co-edited, forthcoming); Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia and Cyberspace (co-edited, 2009); and Class, Boundary and Social Discourse in the Renaissance (co-edited, 2007). She is a general editor of The Shakespearean International Yearbook.*

*1. How would you explain what you do to strangers who are not academics?*

It is a privilege and a unique responsibility to teach Shakespeare and globalization in downtown Washington, D.C., three blocks from the White House. I am proud to have answered my calling to tell stories and to show others how to listen for silenced voices. Story-telling makes us human because it helps us understand the human condition in different contexts.

More specifically, I am a scholar of Shakespearean performance criticism, comparative and Asian literary studies, and theories and practice of digital humanities (the study of the interactions between digital media and the society). My teaching and research are unified by a commitment to understanding the diversity of early modern and postmodern cultures.

*2. How did you get into Shakespeare Studies? What does "Shakespeare" mean to you?*

I was shipwrecked on a foreign shore when I was born. Shakespeare showed me a path to embodiment and how to turn the foreign shore into my native habitat.

Shakespeare is dramatic. Shakespeare is philosophical. Shakespeare is also personal for me. Shakespeare is therapeutic. Shakespeare did not invent the human, but the works and rewritings that fall under the name "Shakespeare" speak to every situation and give me the metaphor and vocabulary to deal with the strange and rewarding journey that is life. Life is raw, unscripted, and full of surprises.

I was born and raised in Taiwan, and grew up speaking Taiwanese and Mandarin. I have always longed to travel, and Shakespeare, especially [global Shakespeare](http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/?s=global+shakespeare) (<http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/?s=global+shakespeare>), was a ticket to take me to the wider world. In

fact, I discovered Shakespeare and the global itineraries of the canon while studying in Germany.

*3. You have nearly 90 pieces of publications and given over 100 talks and interviews on four continents, but have only very recently inserted your personal identity more confidently into your scholarly work and in your public lectures, as you did in "Global Shakespeares as Methodology." Could you tell us about your journey?*

For all my life, I have been looking for a place to call home, which is why I became interested in how narratives are transformed when they move across boundaries of all kinds.

As a foreign-born scholar, I have always felt like an imposter. I am anxious I would not be taken seriously. I am worried that I would not look legitimate because of my young age, race, and gender. I was very self-conscious of being a minority. I have tried to stay aloof. Even though I am passionate about what I do and research is my life's work, I have tried to be emotionally and personally detached from academic inquiries. I did not even want to talk about my Taiwanese origin to friends.

I have since learned to "speak what we feel, not what we ought to say," because the personal is political, and the personal defines the critical imperative and the critical enterprise. So here is my story.

I was born to Taiwanese parents in a farming village in southern Taiwan. I was a nerdy kid who loved reading and creating stories, which I later learned are called narratives. In school I was a most unwelcome daydreamer. I was told repeatedly that "kiddo, if you don't focus on the exams, you will not have a future." I was being suffocated. There was no breathing room. In that stifling environment, stories gave me breathing room. Stories gave me hope. Stories offered me a way out.

As a college student at Tsinghua, I majored in the practically impractical major known as English literature, because I dreamed about the in-

finitely expanding world beyond the small island where I grew up. I developed an appetite for traveling: traveling through stories, traveling through time, and traveling across borders of all kinds.

My curiosity set me on a path of studying cultural globalization that took me to Strasbourg, Munich, Oxford, and several other countries. When I visited London as a freshman, work was under way to reconstruct Shakespeare's renowned Globe Theatre near its original site on the South Bank along River Thames. I gleefully donated a brick to the project. In the mind of a student from a small island nation that has not been recognized by the United Nations and most countries since 1971, that brick was a material connection to the West beyond international politics, to a fascinating historical space, and to the intangible cultural heritage of a "brave new world," as Miranda would say in *The Tempest*.

I wanted to find a brave new world of my own. I was either passionate enough to be blind or foolish enough to be passionate about the academia that I decided to not only study abroad but to pursue a career in the U.S. I had no family connections in the country.

*4. Thanks, Alexa, for sharing your journey to the brave new world. Could you tell us about your time in graduate school.*

Shakespeare's stories and the stories different cultures tell [about Shakespeare](http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/) (<http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/>) eventually led me to California in the twenty-first century. I skipped the MA and went straight for the PhD.

As a wide-eyed graduate student at Stanford, I learned how to ask probing questions and take history to task and how to find a path through a dark forest of conflicting ideas. I learned how to build sustainable communities through effective written and oral communication. Above all else, I learned to manage personal relationships in a competitive environment. Competi-

tion was keen among students, and the three qualifying exams (one at the end of each year) were unforgiving. My cohort consisted of only four students. Only two graduated.

When it came time to choose a topic for my doctoral dissertation, I initially wanted to stay with a conservative, "safe" topic in a more established field within early modern studies. I am thankful that instead I discovered and participated in the creation of global Shakespeare as a new field of study. I am indebted to Professor Patricia Parker, whose relentless pursuit of perfection pushed me to take the road less traveled and answer my calling to tell stories.

*5. Could you share your thoughts on the state of the profession?*

Shakespeare studies has become an umbrella term that names so many fields that go beyond textual analysis of a body of canonical poems, plays, and sonnets. Shakespeare studies in the twenty-first century is a tent that seems to be large enough to help transform the humanities, and a great deal of outreach work including digital humanities has come out of the field. There is a lot of positive vibe and intellectual energy. The field is more and more innovative even though it has the baggage of being one of the most canonical fields of study.

*6. Any advice for graduate students?*

I learned a few things as a graduate student and now a director of graduate studies. Other than academic training, the most important lesson from graduate school is managerial skills: time management, emotional management, and stress management. A lot of people know a lot of things. It is not enough to just "know a lot of things" in your field.

First, find a voice of your own. Our job is to carve out a corner for ourselves in a noisy room of the lively dinner party that is known as the academia. The graduate school experience can sometimes seem daunting, because we are being rebooted and inducted. Let the façade down. It is helpful to let any sense of entitle-

ment go as well. Be not afraid to start from scratch. If you give it everything you've got, the foreign shore will eventually become home turf.

The second thing I learned is to go all in. Jump right in. Start swimming. The water may be cold, but standing by the pool will only earn us regret later in life. During my second semester at Stanford, I was scared to death when I was assigned to TA for a Shakespeare class taught by a renowned professor. I thought I should turn down the opportunity and wait until my English was impeccable. I am glad I did not wait on it. I learned new and useful tricks on the job.

The next thing I learned is to look fear in its eyes and part ways with my old habits, old mode of existence, old comfort zone. This is the only way to move forward. Fear and social imposition have unfortunately dulled many lives and dissertations.

Last, but not least, a finished dissertation is a great dissertation. It is a ticket to the club. Get it done, and write your magnum opus after you have landed a job. Don't let anything stop you from finishing your degree.

We are on borrowed time, and we don't have the luxury of living someone else's dream. When my time is up, I want to be able to say that I have pursued a full life, a life that is raw, passionate, and not scripted. What are your dreams?

*As always, if you have something interesting, odd or unfamiliar to share or promote, drop me, Jeffrey Kahan, a line at [Vortiger@hotmail.com](mailto:Vortiger@hotmail.com) (mailto:Vortiger@hotmail.com), subject line: The Blotted Line.*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### **Jeffrey Kahan**

**(<http://www.theshakespearestandard.com/author/jeffrey/>)**

is a Professor of English at the University of La Verne in southern California, where he teaches Shakespeare, Shakespeare and Film, Shakespeare's Contemporaries, Graphic Novels, and serves as dramaturge to the Department of Theater. In 2012, he established the La Verne Shakespeare Center. His tasks as Director include the creation of a High School Shakespeare Program, planning and coordinating on-campus Shakespearean events, an annual Shakespeare conference, community outreach, fundraising, and grant writing.

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