Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Shane Graham, Professor of English

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The 2020 English Department Researcher of the Year is Dr. Shane Graham, a specialist in postcolonial literatures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who has been at USU since 2005. To celebrate his July promotion to Professor, Dr. Graham recently gave an Inaugural Lecture via Zoom. With characteristic wit, he reflected thoughtfully on his career, from its intellectual origins in punk rock, exposure to literature as an undergraduate, and early encounters with African, African-American, and Caribbean literature and cultures that were to become his central scholarly and teaching passion.

Dr. Graham’s first book, South African Literature after the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss (2009), established him as an expert in contemporary South African literature, with reviewers praising his “intelligent and sensitive analysis.” Since then, Dr. Graham has branched out into new fields, especially the study of the Black diaspora. His new book, Cultural Entanglements: Langston Hughes and the Rise of African and Caribbean Literature (2020), bridges several distinct fields of literary and cultural studies and highlights previously unstudied connections among the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean. The book positions African American poet Langston Hughes as a transnational literary figure who connects various transatlantic networks. To support his research on this book, Dr. Graham won two prestigious fellowships: a Knopf Fellowship from the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, which allowed him to spend time in 2011 looking into their relevant holdings; and a Scholars-in-Residence award from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, which afforded him two months in Harlem in 2012. During the course of his research, he also traveled to the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University to investigate the massive Langston Hughes and Claude McKay Papers, along with other archives in South Africa, France, and California.

Before Cultural Entanglements was published, Dr. Graham had already established himself as an important scholar of Langston Hughes, with journal articles in Modern Drama and Twentieth-Century Literature. He produced an edited collection of correspondence between Langston Hughes and leading figures in South African literature and culture, Langston Hughes and the South African Drum Generation: The Correspondence (2010). Dr. Graham continues to consolidate his status as an expert on Black diasporic literature in general and the work and life of Langston Hughes in particular. In June, he gave an invited Zoom lecture at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, Langston Hughes’s alma mater. Dr. Graham is also currently editing a special issue of the Langston Hughes Review celebrating the centenary of the publication of Hughes’s first poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”

Dr. Graham has also returned recently to writing about contemporary South African literary studies, with an essay about the fiction writer Mohale Mashigo for the journal Memory Studies. When it is published, it will be Dr. Graham’s 17th journal article since 2001, many appearing in high profile and selective international venues such as Modern Fiction Studies, Research in African Literature, Journal of Commonwealth Literature, Studies in the Novel, and Theatre Research International. Additionally, he has authored a half-dozen book chapters.

Graham’s early work on South African literature and on Langston Hughes helped lead to his appointment as Reviews Editor of Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies in 2010, and then to his appointment as Co-Editor from 2015 to the present. At the beginning of 2021, Dr. Graham will step into the role of Lead Editor for Safundi, confirming his status as a major scholarly presence in South African and American comparative studies.