

CALL FOR PAPERS

AUTHOR FIGURATIONS IN NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURES AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

APRIL 8–9, 2027, FAU ERLANGEN-NÜRNBERG

In 1967, Roland Barthes urged his contemporaries to move their literary analyses beyond a practice that bases its claims on autobiographical knowledge about the real-life author of a literary text (50). Such an exegetic quest of uncovering authorial intent by the literary criticism of Barthes' colleagues (52-53) indeed fails to do justice to the ambiguity of literature. And yet, while the proclamation of "The Death of the Author" has turned into a foundational guideline for literary scholarship, "the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture" remains "tyrannically centered on the author" (50) in other ways until this day.

For one, increasing attention to the ways that certain identities are discriminated against in North America and its literary field has heightened the interest in authors and the sociopolitical situatedness/performance of their authorship personas (Biriotti 4; Stougaard-Nielsen 282). It governs discourses about who can be an author and who can write about which topics. Additionally, figurations of authors and authorship continue to fulfill aesthetic and poetological functions within literary texts themselves. The examples are manifold: From *Little Women* (1868) to more recent examples like *Yellowface* (2023), literary texts have a long history of employing authors as characters in order to discuss how authorship as an occupation moves on a spectrum between passion and profession, what personal and professional hardships authors face, and why they write in the first place. In such literary texts, the author figure often functions as a key element to comment on questions of literary value, literary practice, and the different institutions of the literary field. Two central questions we ask at this conference are therefore: What does it mean to be an author at different points in time? How are the roles and goals of authorship negotiated across different intersections of marginalization and privilege (i.e. race, gender, class, (dis)ability, etc.) within literature?

In combination with questions of literary sociology or *Literature's Social Lives* (see Leypoldt), a more pronounced focus on author figurations in literature provides a unique way to inspect the affordances of popular subgenres such as life writing and the significance of authenticity and celebrity therein. Author figurations continue to also influence the ways in which authors are perceived in the public sphere through the co- and reproduction of persistent myths such as that of the 'tortured artist' and the 'misunderstood genius.' These reproductions can manifest in plot points and character constellations such as the recovering alcoholic and poet Cyrus Shams' relationships to family, friends, and art in Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr!* (2024). The distinct affordances of paratextual elements are particularly significant when these myths and performances of authorship occur in interviews, op-eds, and social media because they address more than just the actual readers of a given text—they speak directly to the public sphere (Genette 345).

By critically examining author figurations in North American literatures of the past and present, our conference aims to provide a forum for discussions of the various ways that authorship has been modelled and reflected across fiction, poetry, drama, and film. Contributions can range from paper presentations to workshops or more creative/literary approaches of addressing the figure of the author in literature.

Possible presentations may include (but are not limited to) the following topics:

- Authorial interventions of literature in the (para-)text
- Authenticity and authorship
- Celebrity and authorship
- Authorship and power
- Authorship and the intersections of different modes of privilege and/or marginalization (race, gender, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc.)
- Author figurations in literature
- Author figurations in other media (film, TV shows, music, etc.)
- Reflections on literary value in literature
- Authorship and literary institutions
- Unique affordances and strategies of autofictionality & life writing
- (Non-)literary reflections of the literary field and its agents

Confirmed Keynote Speaker:

Prof. Dr. Günter Leypoldt (Heidelberg University)

The conference is organized by members of the research training group **“Literature and the Public Sphere” (GRK 2806)** and will take place at a location of the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg **in Nuremberg**. For further information about the research training group, you can visit our website <https://www.literaturundoeffentlichkeit.phil.fau.de/en/> or follow us on BlueSky @grk2806.bsky.social.

Submissions:

Please submit a **300-word abstract** along with a **short bio of 150 words** to the conference organizers Emma Barbieux (emma.barbieux@fau.de) and Shayan Rahmanian Koushkaki (shayan.rahmanian@fau.de) by **October 31, 2026**. Paper acceptance will be communicated by **November 15, 2026**. Recognizing the precarity of employment not uncommon within academia, we are trying to secure enough funding to cover the costs (travel, hotel, food) of all participants. Dependent on the final confirmation of our funding, more information about this will be communicated by December 15, 2026.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1986, pp. 49–55.

Biriotti, Maurice. "Introduction: Authorship, Authority, Authorisation." *What Is an Author?*, edited by Maurice Biriotti and Nicola Miller, Manchester University Press, 1993, pp. 1–18.

Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Leypoldt, Günter. *Literature's Social Lives. A Socio-Institutional History of Literary Value*. Oxford University Press, 2025.

Stougaard-Nielsen, Jakob. "The Author in Literary Theory and Theories of Literature." *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*, edited by Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, and Marysa Demoer. Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 270–287.