

Reading for Institutions: Literary Studies after the Institutional Turn

An edited volume of *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* (volume 41, eds. Florian Sedlmeier, Alexander Starre, and Johannes Voelz)

Abstract Deadline: 15 December 2025

Manuscript Deadline: 30 September 2026

In the twenty-first century, Anglophone literary institutions have come under pressure from many sides. Novel digital devices destabilize the cultural protocols of paper-based reading in favor of a screen-based visual culture attuned to ever-refreshing content. Even as elegies to the cultural technique of reading still sound from academic journals and newspaper opinion pages, political and economic threats abound: cultural journalism and literary reviewing are slowly dying in understaffed newsrooms; humanities departments are in existential crisis; right-wing agitators attempt to ban books and sabotage public opinion; all while public funding for the arts and humanities is kidnapped by the executors of authoritarian Trumpism. “We live in destructive times,” writes Anna Kornbluh, “on an incinerating planet, over institutional embers, around prodigious redundancy between the plunder of the commons and the compulsive echolalia ‘Burn it all down’” (Kornbluh 2019).

In this dire scenario, a new brand of literary criticism has recently started to reassess the posture of humanist thought vis-à-vis institutionality. Where leftist critique in the wake of thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault has long construed institutions as coercive, pervasive, and disciplinarian forces, the increasingly obvious fragility of cultural institutions has led to renewed interest in the generative, stabilizing, and benign aspects of institutional formations. In the wake of the canon debates of the 1980s and 90s and their attendant critical histories of the institution of literary studies (Graff 1987, Guillory 1993), a tranche of recent scholarship has re-examined the modes of literary production and reception in a field loosely termed the “new sociology of literature” (English 2010) or the “new institutionalism” (Murray 2025). A broad “institutional turn” in the field (Rosen 2019, Liming/Sedlmeier/Starre 2024) has generated multifaceted inquiries into institutional imaginations with specific structures and individual players.

Against this background, we invite contributions to the edited volume *Reading for Institutions* that reconsider the study of British and American literatures in relation to political, legal, and social institutions and/or the formation of institutional structures in the name of literature, from publishers and periodicals to writers’ groups and the networks of the digital literary sphere. On the one hand, this dual focus has historical and transhistorical relevance. While it prompts questions about the specific conditions of an institutional imagination at distinct historical moments, it also invites exploration of the shifting long durée of such an imagination in Anglophone literary history, from the centers of a “world republic of letters” (Casanova 2004) to its peripheries. On the other hand, the relays between literature and institutions spark a set of methodological and theoretical questions. By default, the study of these relays is an interdisciplinary project, involving fields such as cultural/literary sociology, social theory, book history, publishing studies, law and literature, as

well as multiple methods from archival research to statistical work, from ethnography to politically and socially inflected close reading. In fact, some of the most institutionally minded critics in this larger conversation - Sarah Brouillette, Anna Kornbluh, Mark McGurl, Kinohi Nishikawa, Dan Sinykin - are simultaneously invested in close reading as the core humanistic method of knowledge production.

In accordance with Simone Murray's vision of the "meso space" as a promising future for literary studies and with Kornbluh's call for a socially attuned reading practice that illuminates and potentially (re)creates new collectives, this edited volume will explore multiple pathways to "read for institutions."

We seek essays that address topics including, but not limited to the following:

- Theories of institutionalization at the intersection of literary studies and sociology (systems theory, field theory, reflexive sociology, discourse analysis, archaeology of knowledge, actor-network theory)
- Methodological concerns traversing the micro / meso / macro levels alongside close-reading systematics
- Institutionalizing class, race, region, and gender, e.g. along genre categories (chick-lit, romance, Black historical fiction, flyover fictions, etc.)
- Historical case studies encompassing both mainstream literary institutions as well as independent, sub-cultural, or radical counterinstitutions
- Relationships of literature to political, legal, and economic frameworks within and beyond national borders
- Literature and shifting conceptions of the public sphere
- Contemporary literature in the marketplace (neoliberalism, platform capitalism, gig economies, precarious authorship)
- Literary institutions and the threat of alt-right / authoritarian governance
- Practicing literary criticism in an institution-building form

We invite short proposals (250 words) for chapters in this volume to be submitted by December 15, 2025. The deadline for finished chapter drafts is September 30, 2026 (max. 10,000 words, incl. bibliography and footnotes).

Please send your abstracts and a short bio blurb to florian.sedlmeier@uni-hamburg.de and alexander.starre@fu-berlin.de.

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