

What was Contemporary Literature?

Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA)
September 26-28, 2024

Conveners: Laura Bieger (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)
Philipp Löffler (Universität Heidelberg)

30 years ago, David Foster Wallace declared the ends of postmodernist irony by announcing a turn to sincerity in American fiction that has shaped discussions about the nature of the contemporary ever since. “The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country,” Wallace speculated, “might well emerge as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels,’ born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childes gall actually to endorse single-entendre values.” “These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic.”

Whatever one may think of Wallace’s claim, in hindsight it does seem to capture a variety of literary movements ‘after’ postmodernism in the 1990s defining what we have come to call ‘the contemporary’: neo-realism, new sincerity, a high cultural turn to genre fiction, a return to authenticity and history proper, to name but a few. But while Wallace’s essay was prognostic in tenor, tentatively projecting the future of US literature, our sense of what we still understand as the contemporary has become historical by now. The period “formerly known as contemporary” (Hungerford) has come to a close, allowing scholars to historicize systematically what authors writing in the wake of the Cold War could only vaguely anticipate. This moment of historical self-reflexivity is the occasion for this conference.

Thursday, September 26

10:00-10:30 Conference Opening

10:30-13:00 Theories of Periodization and Literary-Historical Storytelling 1

Michael Clune (Case Western Reserve), “The Lovecraft Era: American Literature after 1980”

Adam Kelly (University College Dublin), “When American Literature Was Contemporary Literature”

Beth Blum (Harvard), “Chasing Epiphanies: The Search for a Better Moment in Contemporary Fiction”

13:00-14:30 Lunch

14:30-16:15 New Developments in Aesthetics and Literary Form 1

Timothy Bewes (Brown), “To Forgo the Benefit of the Hindsight That We Nevertheless Have”

Silvia Schultersmandl (Münster), "Everybody's Autobiography? The Cruel Optimistic Fantasies of Online Life Writing Studies"

16:15-16:45 *Coffee*

16:45-18:30 New Developments in Aesthetics and Literary Form 2

John Alba Cutler (Berkeley), "¿Contemporáneas?: Latinx Literature and the Denial of Coevalness"

Margaret Ronda (Davis), "Poems for Near Futures"

18:30 *Reception at Heidelberg Center for American Studies*

Friday, September 27

9:30-12:00 Theories of Periodization and Literary-Historical Storytelling 2

Philipp Schweighauser (Basel), "What Was Contemporary Native American Literature?"

Sarah Wasserman (Dartmouth), "Ghosts of the Present: The Forgotten Forms of Contemporary Fiction"

Tim Lanzendörfer (Frankfurt), "Where is Literature in the Contemporary?"

12:00-13:15 *Lunch*

13:15-15:45 The Institutions and (Infra)Structures of the Literary Field 1

Johannes Voelz (Frankfurt), "Autofiction and the Structural Transformation of the Private Sphere"

Stephanie Li (Duke), "Black Parental Epistles in the 21st Century"

Lee Konstantinou (Maryland), "Rise of the Creator-Owner: Comics, Neoliberalism, and Mass High Culture"

16:00-18:00 *Walk to the Castle*

19:30 *Conference Dinner*

Saturday, September 28

9:00-12:45 The Institutions and (Infra)Structures of the Literary Field 2

Aarthi Vadde (Duke), "Platformed Literature"

Kathryn Roberts (Groningen), "Where was Contemporary Literature?: Utopia and Precarity in the Residency Novel"

10:40-11:00 Coffee

Alexander Starre (FU Berlin), "The Novel in the Age of Reese's Book Club"

Günter Leypoldt (Heidelberg), "Curating the Novel Today"

12:45-13:00 Conference Closing