# **Call for Papers—Special Issue of *American Literature*: After the Contemporary**

Thirty years ago, David Foster Wallace declared the ends of postmodernist irony by announcing a turn to sincerity in American fiction. “The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country,” he 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 … These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started.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” (Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and American Fiction,” 1993). Whatever one may think of this claim, in hindsight it does seem to capture a variety of literary movements “after” postmodernism, defining what we have come to call “the contemporary.” But while Wallace’s essay was prognostic in tenor, our sense of the future he envisaged has become historical by now. For the first time, it seems possible to historicize what authors and critics writing in the wake of the Cold War could only vaguely anticipate.

This moment of self-reflexivity is the occasion for this special issue. In suggesting an understanding of the contemporary as a period, it addresses the relationship between literary production and historical time. And while this focus is certainly not confined to the contemporary, it seems to have gained renewed traction, spurred by the end of the Cold War, the launching of the World Wide Web, the terrorist attacks of September 11, the bursting of the real-estate bubble, the Obama administration and the subsequent presidency of Donald Trump, and the emergence of new social movements. Despite their obvious differences, these developments and events have directed attention to a set of questions necessary to understand the contemporary present: How do changes in literary form help us to make sense of distinct time periods? How are literary historical periods mapped onto other forms of historical time? How can we think of the connection between the shape of literary texts and the particularity of a concrete historical context to which they respond and which they in turn affect? How and to what effect have specific historic events prompted events in the fields of cultural and literary production? We invite contributions that approach these questions through the following and intersecting fields of inquiry:

1. by exploring the development of new literary aesthetics and forms in conjunction with their competing uses and corresponding field positions, for instance in the fusion of modernist experimental prose with elements typical of genre fiction, the return of confessional literature and the memoir boom, or the formal features used by contemporary writers to channel the new cravings for authenticity, sincerity, and political engagement;
2. by asking in how far the post-contemporary results from foregoing moments of storytelling, if so, what role either literary or critical storytelling plays in the production of historical time, and how we can account for the most recent period transformation not on the basis of overarching grand narratives but by reference to small, seemingly insignificant artistic movements; or
3. by examining the institutional and (infra)structural changes within the literary field, for instance in asking how they redraw the border between the public and the private and what this transformation means for literature’s political functions and uses.

Submissions of 10,000 words or less (including endnotes and references) should be submitted electronically at <https://mc04.manuscriptcentral.com/dup-aml> by **September 8, 2025**. Please be sure to review submission guidelines in the “Instructions & Forms” tab on the site. When choosing a submission type, select “special issue article.” For assistance with the submission process, please contact the office of American Literature at am-lit@duke.edu or 919-684-3396. For inquiries about the content of the issue, please contact the coeditors: Laura Bieger (laura.bieger@ruhr-uni-bochum.de) and Philipp Löffler (philipp.loeffler@as.uni-heidelberg.de).