

CFP: “The Companies We Keep – Figurations, Narratives, and Practices of Co-Living in Common Spaces in 21st-Century British and Anglophone Literatures”

Workshop, 31. October – 1. November 2025, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main

Confirmed Keynote speaker: Ben Highmore (University of Sussex)

Many of the crises and cultural trends of the 21st century have proven to ambivalently reflect and inform the ways we experience figurations and practices of co-living. The cost-of-living crisis, economic instability and precariousness have forced people to move closer together and share their personal space, opening new terrains of care and kindness, but, simultaneously, also of vulnerability and violence. While during the Covid pandemic and lockdown the home was contoured as a safe space and place of retreat and refuge, the co-presence of family members or other roommates sometimes proved to be annoying, if not dangerous, what can be seen in novels like Sarah Hall’s *Burntcoat* and Sarah Moss’ *The Fell*.

The ubiquitous smart devices that we live and sometimes work with in our kitchens, living- and bedrooms make everyday life easier and more enjoyable, but at the same time they are also becoming uncanny agents eroding human and non-human hierarchies. Novels such as Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun* and Sarah Waters’s *The Little Stranger* illustrate how robots, androids and ghosts can populate the domestic sphere, complicating boundaries between presence and absence.

According to Marie Kondo, we are encouraged to ask each object in our home whether it sparks joy, highlighting the need to regulate our co-living with objects. This practice implicitly acknowledges their decisive role in our domestic lives, suggesting that objects possess a form of constitutive agency (Appadurai 1986, Bennett 2010). At the same time, popular booktoks, for example, illustrate that books are not merely passive, readable objects and veritable furnishings, but objects of para-social relationships. The book thus appears just as capable of friendship as a living creature.

What is more, pets – particularly cats and dogs – have played a crucial role in mitigating loneliness and social isolation, offering emotional support and companionship in times of crisis. This is addressed for instance in Laura Jean McKay’s novel *The Animals in that Country* that manages to circumvent the pitfalls of anthropomorphism. Moreover, the presence of non-human animals not only reconfigures domestic affective economies but also highlights the interdependence of human and non-human relations in contemporary home-making while at the same time pests and parasites - fungal, bacterial or metazoan – infest their hosts and dwellings.

This shows that forms of co-living are also often constituted involuntarily. Processes of urbanization and gentrification continue to transform the makeup of domestic co-living, often privileging certain relationalities while displacing others. Environmental issues and ecocriticism have risen to prominence as scholars interrogate the intricate relationships between human life, nature, and technology – an interplay that is central to the current scholarly and creative discourse. Saeidi, Anderson, and Davidová for instance, investigate how “new modes of architectural practice can foster multispecies co-living to reduce biodiversity loss and increase the quality of life for both human and nonhuman inhabitants of architecture.” (2023)

While earlier research has often focused on the home as a critical geographical site where questions of identity, ideology and power are negotiated (e.g. Blunt/Dowling 2006) this workshop focuses on the co-living relations between humans, animals, things and technologies within all kinds of dwellings in 21st-century British and Anglophone literature. It seeks to engage with the following questions: How do narratives portray the affective, ethical, and material entanglements of co-living? What new forms and figurations of intimacy, dependence, and agency emerge in contemporary depictions of domestic life? How does literature cope with these shifts in the dynamics of different living constellations in times of crisis?

Possible topics include, but are by no means limited to, the following:

- Affect, Care, and Conflict in Shared Spaces: The ethical and emotional dimensions of cohabitation – how literature represents kindness, dependency, irritation, and violence in shared dwellings.
- (Re-)Figurations of Gender, Class, and Race: The cultural politics of common spaces.
- Narratives of Precarious Co-Living: How do contemporary novels depict shared living arrangements shaped by economic instability, gentrification, and housing crises?
- Domestic Space and Smart Technologies: The impact of AI, smart home devices, and digital surveillance on the experience of cohabitation.
- Vulnerability and Exposure in Shared Living Spaces: How do contemporary narratives explore the precariousness of intimacy, privacy, and personal boundaries in domestic cohabitation? What forms of emotional, physical, or structural vulnerability emerge in shared dwellings?
- More-Than-Human Domesticities: Literary explorations of interspecies cohabitation, from pets to parasites, and their effects on human-nonhuman relationships.
- Co-Living Beyond the Nuclear Family: How do novels challenge traditional family structures and explore alternative kinships, communal living, and found families?

- Things as Companions and Objects of Para-Social Relationships: The role of objects in contemporary domestic life – emotional attachments, aesthetic functions, and digital fandoms.
- Architectural and Ecocritical Perspectives on Co-Living: How do contemporary narratives engage with sustainable, multispecies, or post-human living spaces?
- Queer and Trans Narratives of Co-Living: How does literature depict co-living as a site of chosen kinship, safety, or negotiation of identity?
- Postcolonial and Global Perspectives on Domesticity: How do contemporary Anglophone literatures address cohabitation in postcolonial, migrant, or diasporic contexts?
- AI, Robots, Androids and Ghosts in the Domestic Sphere: How do contemporary texts depict spectral presences and artificial intelligences as cohabitants? What does their presence reveal about memory, embodiment, and the porous boundaries between life, data, and afterlife?

Submission Guidelines:

Please submit abstracts of 250-300 words for a 20-minute paper along with a short bio (100 words) to bayerlipp@em.uni-frankfurt.de by May, 6th 2025. Notifications will be sent out by May 20th.

A volume of essays on the topic of the workshop is being planned for publication.

For further inquiries, please contact Susanne Bayerlipp (bayerlipp@em.uni-frankfurt.de).