



## Art and Action: Literary Authorship, Politics, and Celebrity Culture

**20-21 March 2020**

*The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH)*  
*Radcliffe Humanities, Woodstock Road, Oxford*

When she was awarded the 2018 PEN Pinter Prize, the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie made a forceful statement about the writer's responsibility to step outside the artistic medium and engage in political activism: "Art can illuminate politics. Art can humanize politics. Art can shine the light towards truth. But sometimes that is not enough. Sometimes politics must be engaged with as politics" (qtd in *The Guardian*, 9 October 2018). Writers and writers' organisations indeed have a long history of using their public standing and cultural capital to promote causes that transcend the literary sphere, from abolition and gender equality to free expression, anti-war agitation, and environmental issues. This two-day conference explores the intersections of authorship, politics, activism, and literary celebrity across historical periods, literatures, and media. It examines the forms and impact of authorial field migrations between literature and politics and the ways in which they are situated within, and shaped by, structural frameworks that include academic institutions, prize-giving bodies, publishing industries, and literary celebrity culture.

Authors have at all times been fiercely outspoken campaigners for a wide range of socio-political causes. At the same time, debates have long revolved around literature as a form of political intervention in its own right, thus undermining the seemingly clear-cut distinction between politics and poetics. *Refugee Tales*, an outreach project launched by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, is a case in point: while taking advantage of the reputational capital of high-profile literary authors such as Ali Smith, Jackie Kay, and Monica Ali in the attempt to communicate migrant experience, it demonstrates how acts of collaborative story-telling themselves can be appropriated as powerful tools of political activism. This conference hopes to foster such debates and address a wide range of questions: What are the strategies employed by writers in the construction and performance of their public personae as political office-holders, activists, and cultural critics? How do they negotiate the tension between ethics and aesthetics in their public interventions, the potential conflict between authorial and activist selves? How have writers' literary/political border-crossings been perceived by their audiences and to what extent have they affected their (posthumous) reputations? What are the risks faced by the politically engaged and outspoken writer?

Interrogating the ideological dimension of literary celebrity and highlighting the fault-lines between public and private authorial selves, 'pure' art, political commitment, and marketplace imperatives, this conference joins current debates on authorship and literary value. It brings together writers, academics, literary activists, and industry stakeholders to explore the wider implications of authors' political responsibilities and cultural authority in today's heavily commodified literary marketplace and age of celebrity activism.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- **Authors as political office-holders / activists / public intellectuals:** forms, manifestations, agendas, challenges of, and responses to, literary/political 'double acts' across historical periods, literatures, and cultural contexts

- **Literary celebrity and identity politics:** how are the intersections of literary celebrity and politics inflected by categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity? To what extent do they map onto different national and cultural spaces?
- **Writers' organisations, cultural institutions, and their political agendas:** how do writers' organisations capitalise on the celebrity status of particular writers and what are the potential pitfalls of this practice? What is the relationship between individual and collective agency?
- **The politics of market activism:** what is the role of industry stakeholders (e.g. publishers, agents, translators, literary festivals, etc.) in enabling or inhibiting authorial migrations between literature and politics?
- **Literary prizes and politics:** literary prizes as cultural consecrating agencies; literary award ceremonies as platforms for political intervention; (celebrity) prize judges as gatekeepers; the impact of literary awards on the cultural capital of winning and shortlisted authors
- **Authors' political interventions and the media:** the impact of transformations in media cultures, industries, and technologies (e.g. digital media) on the articulation and dissemination of critical stances and ideas within the public sphere
- **Literary celebrity, politics, and life-writing:** How is the interplay of literary celebrity and politics negotiated and articulated across different life-writing genres? In which ways does the genre (e.g. memoirs, lectures, interviews, broadcasts, social media posts) shape these interrelations and the construction of authorial personae?
- **Authorship and political responsibility:** What is the author's political responsibility and cultural authority in today's celebrity-driven media society? Is there a need for writers to step outside the literary medium? How do they reconcile their activities with a view of literature as political intervention in its own right?

#### Keynote contributions:

- Benjamin Zephaniah (performance poet, activist, Professor of Poetry and Creative Writing, Brunel University London)
- Antjie Krog (writer and scholar activist, TORCH International Fellow)
- PEN roundtable discussion with Jennifer Clement (PEN International President), Carles Torner (PEN International Executive Director), Margie Orford (former South African PEN President), Rachel Potter (University of East Anglia), Peter McDonald (University of Oxford)

Please send your proposal (no more than 250 words) for 20-minute papers along with a short biographical note to [sandra.mayer@univie.ac.at](mailto:sandra.mayer@univie.ac.at) by **29 November 2019**; applicants will be notified by **20 December 2019**.

Selected contributions will be considered for inclusion in a peer-reviewed collection or special journal issue.

**Conference fee:** £30 / £10 for undergraduate and graduate students; register [here](#)

This conference is convened by [Sandra Mayer](#) (University of Vienna / Oxford Centre for Life-Writing) and [Ruth Scobie](#) (Mansfield College, Oxford) and supported by The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities and the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) in collaboration with the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing (OCLW).



Der Wissenschaftsfonds.

