

Editorial

Introduction. The Author Is Dead, Long Live Co-Authors! Collaborative Work in the Humanities

Isabel Bredenbröker

The February Journal, Berlin; University of Bremen, Bremen

Katerina Suverina

The February Journal, Berlin; University of Konstanz, Konstanz

Andrei Zavadski

The February Journal, Berlin; TU Dortmund University, Dortmund

This item has been published in Issue 05 'The Author Is Dead, Long Live Co-Authors! Collaborative Work in the Humanities,' edited by *The February Journal*.

To cite this item: Bredenbröker I; Suverina K; Zavadski A (2025) Introduction. The author is dead, long live co-authors! Collaborative work in the humanities. *The February Journal*, 05: 5–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60633/tfj.i05.132>

To link to this item: <https://doi.org/10.60633/tfj.i05.132>

Published: 30 October 2025

ISSN-2940-5181

thefebuaryjournal.org

Berlin, Berlin Universities Publishing

Introduction. The Author Is Dead, Long Live Co-Authors! Collaborative Work in the Humanities

Isabel Bredenbröcker, Katerina Suverina & Andrei Zavadski

Proclaiming the death of the author, Roland Barthes (1967) certainly did not mean to imply that this would mark the birth of collaborative work in the humanities. His argument was that the meaning of a work of fiction cannot be derived from its author's intentions and biography. It is the reader who makes sense of the text, Barthes declared. Since then, the author has been resurrected—for example, with Donna Haraway's (1988) idea of situated knowledges, the feminist-decolonial aims of autotheory and autoethnography directed at incorporating the diversity of personal experience into knowledge creation, or the feminist struggle for having the possibility to be recognized as an author. The author's life stories and their authorial intent have been reclaimed for literary interpretation, often in order to make the knowledge transported in their work more inclusive. Nevertheless, Barthes's statement lives on and is regularly appropriated for various ends.

The French thinker also certainly did not talk of the death of the collective of authors: in his text, the author, who is poised to die, very much remains a solitary figure that gives meaning to the world through writing. Embarking from Barthes's emblematic title, this issue of *The February Journal* probes into the potential of the collective rather than the individual. How do we share authority, responsibility, and authorship in academic knowledge creation? Why do aggrandizing ideas and expectations relating to the author as a lonely hero (even if it is increasingly a 'heroine') remain part of academic expectations and evaluation criteria? What differences exist between artistic collaboration and co-creation in academia? What obstacles and convictions stand in the way of equal and well-recognized collaborative practices, be they of co-authoring, of doing research in a team, or of including interlocutors from outside academia as collaborators? Can collaboration and co-authorship be seen as a tool of resistance against neoliberalism in academia, as Agnieszka Piotrowska's (2020) volume argues with regard to researching creative practices? Indeed, could collaborative work be seen as a/the future of the humanities?

Incidentally, Barthes's own solitariness is being challenged in this issue: **Katie Grant** and **Maxwell Hyett** (both Western University, London, Ontario) explore his friendship with the poet Michel Deguy, delving into the depth of their nuanced collaboration. Grant and Hyett's whimsical collaborative contribution analyzes Barthes and Deguy's citational habits and associated back-and-forth exchanges, identifying what they call 'a collaborative practice that is drifting and active.' With their essay, Grant and Hyett illustrate that even in the circles of French male philosophers and theoreticians at the height of their societal popularity, the figure of a

lonely genius was more of a myth than anything else. In his contribution, the artist and scholar **Moses März** (University of Potsdam, Potsdam) makes a similar argument, albeit working with a different historical period and using different means for the purpose. In his research essay, März discusses his hand-drawn map *Collaborators Dance* (2025), also part of this issue, which traces intersectional collaborative constellations that are loosely associated with the surrealism of the first third of the 20th century. The essay focuses on the friendship between two poets, Léon-Gontran Damas and Robert Desnos, who are considered to be key figures in avant-garde and Négritude history respectively, addressing 'the question of who had to work with whom for their work to take up radically transformative potentials.'

Collaboration has been a feature of the natural sciences for a long time, partly due to the high intensity of laboratory work. The social sciences, driven by the necessity to cross disciplinary boundaries, have also increasingly embraced collaboration. Recent developments in citizen social science have further shifted the focus from strictly academic collaboration to interactions with non-academic participants who become involved in and empowered by research projects on the 'wicked' problems of agency and behavior (Tauginiené et al. 2020). Even the arts have been departing from the idea of a singular genius communing with nature, spirits, or gods and engaging in acts of higher creation as a result.

The article about the Hungarian-born media artist and educator Geörgy Kepes (1906–2001) by the art historian **Juhayna Hilles** (an independent researcher, Los Angeles), published in this issue, investigates how collaboration was both an innovative method in early media art and an ethically dubious practice in relation to state-sanctioned collaboration of institutions with the military-industrial complex. Since Kepes created the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1967 and MIT's subsequent Cold War involvement in military research, things have changed significantly. We now live in times of war again, and technology plays a much more significant role in it. That's not to mention the rapid rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and the associated concerns regarding its potential impact on the future.

Among other related concerns, the development of AI has caused anxieties regarding authorship: in 2023, Hollywood writers held 'the longest strike' in the film industry's history over the use of AI (Anguiano and Beckett 2023). How will this technology change the nature of collaboration? In her essay for this issue, **Elly Selby** (Bartlett School of Architecture, London) introduces the concept of 'Relational Authorship,' which involves reformulating human and non-human collaboration, and 'critically considers how responsibility might be reconfigured in the company of humans, machines, and the networks that bind them.'

Overall, despite increased acceptance in neighboring disciplines, the humanities are surprisingly resistant to the idea of collaboration. The author—of a monograph, a theory, a concept—is not only still alive and kicking but continues to claim the title of the highest form of academic

creation. We, *The February Journal's* editors, have each been pushed towards working individually. Numerous colleagues of ours have spoken of the same pressure. And yet, all of us have worked—researched, taught, discussed, written, and so on—with others, and we think we have done so with great success. Not only does co-creation increase the quality of academic work (and citation rates—see, for instance, Haddow, Xia and Willson 2017), but it also, in our experience, positively impacts scholars' mental health. In this issue, **Christina Bell** (Glendale Community College, Glendale, Arizona) and **Gina Levitan** (CUNY Hunter College, New York City) reflect on the role that peer mentorship and support networks among librarians as well as humanities scholars play in avoiding burnout and achieving sustainable, ongoing care and success. Yes, collaboration with peers not only makes us more successful—it also keeps us sane.

And yet, collaborative work in the humanities seems to be tolerated at most, rather than being welcomed with open arms. At *The February Journal*, we are a team of editors who collaborate on a regular basis. This has not only been a practical necessity as well as a chance to engage in collaboration in more ethical ways, but also a possibility to exchange on the topic of academic conventions. Because we come from different disciplines and work in different countries and from within different academic traditions, this conversation is often enlightening. It reveals preferences of individually achieved successes as opposed to collaborative ones—despite the differences mentioned above. In Germany, for example, where several editorial team members are based, the criteria for achieving the qualification to apply for a full professorship (a 'Habilitation,' also referred to as an equivalent to a 'second book') are often understood to mean that postdoctoral researchers have to have produced a demonstrable amount of published text as single authors, either in the form of a monograph or as single/first-authored papers.

Yet, the recognition of the fundamentally collaborative work that underpins any research and writing process has become an inherent part of the discourse of many disciplines—for instance, of social and cultural anthropology. **Jonas Tinius** (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin) rightly emphasizes this in his review of *Performanzen & Praktiken. Kollaborative Formate in Wissenschaft und Kunst* ('Performances & Practices. Collaborative Formats in Science and Art'), a 2024 volume edited by Katharina Schuchardt and Ira Spieker, noting the broad range of perspectives presented in the book as well as the nuance and ethnographic depth of its contributions. As **Elisabeth Luggauer** (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin) and her collaborator, a dog named **Ferdinand** (an independent researcher, Berlin), underline in their article for this issue, multispecies companionships and research collaborations have slowly started to be recognized in scholarship, too, but there still is a long way to go. Studying human—street dog relationships in the city of Podgorica, Luggauer and Ferdinand go beyond the dominance of human sensory and spatial frameworks. This shows how huge an impact new forms of collaboration—and attention to already existing forms—can have on creative ethnographic research.

This 'fundamentality' of collaboration is even more urgent in the teaching of critical disciplines that connect the humanities and social sciences, such as anthropology. Collaboration is a fundamental matter especially in situations when different cultural and academic contexts intersect. In their reflexive essay for this issue, *The February Journal's* Advisory Board member **Sela K. Adjei** (University of Media, Arts and Communication, Accra) and **Douglas J. Falen** (Agnes Scott College, Decatur) recount their miscommunication during the first attempts at cooperation as well as the pain associated with it, followed by reflections on the subsequent process of reconciliation as a model for the promises and challenges of decolonial collaboration. In their own words, 'this whole experience exposed Doug's and Sela's fallibility as scholars who both acknowledged their intellectual shortcomings and agreed to put their misunderstandings behind them to focus on more productive intellectual ventures.'

An example of anti-collaborative work is the enforced cooperation between early-career researchers and established scholars. While this kind of working relationships can be beneficial for both parties, strict academic hierarchies often lead to younger scholars being seen by their supervisors as a resource for doing fieldwork or increasing publication activity. And while the issue of the (un)ethically of similar practices has already been addressed, for instance in the field of collaborative life writing (Couser 2003), it seems that the topic is still waiting to be taken seriously in academia. In a dialogue between *The February Journal's* editor **Isabel Bredenbröker** (University of Bremen, Bremen) and **Tajinder Kaur** (University of Delhi, Delhi), featured in this issue as a reflexive essay and podcast, the two anthropologists discuss the asymmetries of co-writing across academic hierarchies, 'Global South / Global North' divides, and other intersectional markers.

Demanding a shift in perspective and practices, collaborative work is increasingly called for and also demanded as an ethical research practice. Why, then, do academic power structures in assessment and publishing still reproduce what we regard as outdated ideas: the single author with a self-authentic voice who produces novel ideas and thoughts out of the genius of their own mind?

The 'publish or perish' culture and the neoliberalization of academia in general have had and continue to have a detrimental effect on collaborative work and especially on the peer-review process. Originally meant to help researchers improve their writing courtesy of peers, it could—and should—be seen as an act of collaboration. But increasingly, this process has been used as an opportunity to voice harsh criticism or even destroy a competitor. As mostly unpaid work that is expected of researchers, peer review requests are often highly unwelcome and may be responded to with rejections or with reviews reflecting first and foremost annoyance rather than carefully weighed critique that may have grave influence on other people's careers.

At *The February Journal*, we are faced with the same challenges, for we also work in an often-unjust system of labor relations in academia that expects excellence but gives little to no security and support. In an

attempt to build a different kind of publishing space, our journal's editors, for example, advise reviewers very carefully on how to provide considerate and ethically informed review responses, inviting them to really think about the reviewed text could be improved (which every text always can be), rather than slamming it as 'hopeless.' We also provide extensive editorial commentaries on manuscripts—in addition to mediating reviewers' responses to authors. By implementing these practices, which of course demand extra time and effort from the editors, we hope to cultivate an atmosphere of care in our peer review system. Other journals in the humanities have embarked on similar journeys, as *Etnofoor's* discussion on peer-reviewing fiction (for their 'Fiction' issue) shows (Mulder and Van Roekel 2024). The editors of *Etnofoor* had to adapt processes geared to assess research papers to peer-reviewing fiction. This, of course, required a rethinking of review criteria and a careful guidance of reviewers, who were not used to evaluating other formats. As a journal that also publishes artistic research, *The February Journal* encounters similar challenges, which we have so far met by promoting 'friendly' peer reviews (in a process that explains from the start what an artistic contribution is, what it wants to achieve, and in what context), as well as sometimes not requiring anonymization and inviting reviewers and authors to engage in supportive exchange of feedback.

Yet, all of these relatively unconventional approaches to peer review might be met with severe criticism. Because peer review is a process that is often advertised to be 'rigorous'—meaning strict and unforgiving—as a way to control the quality of published work, new review practices may seem suspicious, as they might be seen to water down such quality control, instead inviting poor contributions for publication. This is what innovations and changes in peer review processes, namely their slow move towards more collaborative and supportive practices, are still up against. While this issue does not have a separate contribution dedicated to peer review as collaboration, we are planning a roundtable event on this topic in early 2026, both to celebrate the issue's launch and to continue the discussion it hopefully starts. Please check the Announcements page on the journal's website for details.

We are also including in this issue **Tatiana Smorodina's** (University of Konstanz, Konstanz) review of Victoria Donovan's 2025 book *Life in Spite of Everything: Tales from the Ukrainian East*. While the book is not directly related to this issue's topic, it certainly is related to our journal's aims in a broader sense, seeking, in Smorodina's words, 'to deconstruct the Soviet myth surrounding the region, engaging with the relatively recent Ukrainian tradition of grappling with Donbas's identity—a tradition that has emerged predominantly since the outbreak of the war in 2014.'

We hope you enjoy reading this issue at least as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. Our ultimate ambition, however, is to encourage you to imagine the academic everyday differently: not as struggles and endeavors of sole geniuses, but as a combination of explicit and subtle collaborative practices underpinning all attempts at knowledge creation.

References

1. Barthes R (1967) The death of the author. *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box* 5+6, URL: <https://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes> (28.08.2024).
2. Couser T (2003) *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing*. London and Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
3. Anguiano D; Beckett L (2023, October 1) How Hollywood writers triumphed over AI—and why it matters. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2023/oct/01/hollywood-writers-strike-artificial-intelligence> (27/10/2025).
4. Haddow G; Xia J(C); and Willson M (2017) Collaboration in the humanities, arts and social sciences in Australia. *Australian Universities Review* 59(1): 24–36.
5. Haraway D (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
6. Piotrowska A (ed) (2020) *Creative Practice Research in the Age of Neoliberal Hopelessness*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
7. Mulder, N., & van Roekel, E. (2024). Introduction: Fiction and Worlds Unknown. *Etnofoor*, 36(1), 7–12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27314424>
8. Tauginienė L, Butkevičienė E, Vohland K et al. (2020) Citizen science in the social sciences and humanities: the power of interdisciplinarity. *Palgrave Commun* 6, 89. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0471-y>.

Acknowledgements

This issue could not have been possible without the collaboration of *The February Journal's* team members: Maria Dębińska, Marie R. B. Odgaard, Bianca Ramírez Rivera, Pasha Tretyakova (pseudonym), Ana Panduri (pseudonym), and Adam Pultz, in addition to this introduction's authors. We are extremely grateful to our Advisory Board's members Sela K. Adjei, Magdalena Buchczyk, and Agnieszka Mrozik, who variously—but in invariably helpful ways—participated in its creation. We are grateful to Elias Seidel and Andrei Kondakov, to the authors and their acknowledged and unacknowledged collaborators, as well as to all the peer reviewers who have generously contributed their time and labor in order to make this issue better.

Authors' bios

Isabel Bredenbröker (they/them) is an anthropologist working between academia and art. They hold a postdoctoral faculty position at the Institute for Anthropology and Cultural Research, University of Bremen, Germany. Isabel's work focuses on material and visual culture, specifically the anthropology of death, plastics and synthetic materials, anthropology of art and museums,

queer theory and intersectionality, situatedness and autoethnography, colonialism, cleaning, and waste. They enjoy the collaborative production of works and collective exchange as a different way of engaging with knowledge, also in teaching. Isabel's first book, *Rest in Plastic: Death, Time and Synthetic Materials in a Ghanaian Ewe Community*, was published open access in 2024 with Berghahn. They are an editor of *The February Journal*.

Address: Institut für Ethnologie und Kulturwissenschaft, Universität Bremen,
Enrique-Schmidt-Straße 7, 28359 Bremen, Germany
E-mail: isabelb@posteo.de
ORCID: 0000-0002-9610-8918

Katerina Suverina (PhD, she/her) is a co-founding editor of *The February Journal*. She is a research associate at the Zukunftskolleg, University of Konstanz, Germany. In her research, teaching, and museum work, she is concerned with critical theory, queer studies, medical humanities, and gender studies. She has also written on trauma, contemporary Russophone cinema, and young adult literature. Since 2020, she has been leading a research project on the cultural history of HIV/AIDS and activism in the late USSR and contemporary Russia.

Address: Zukunftskolleg, University of Konstanz, Universitätsstraße 10, 78457
Konstanz, Germany
E-mail: ekaterina.suverina@uni-konstanz.de
ORCID: 0000-0002-2628-4975

Andrei Zavadski (PhD, he/they) is a co-founding editor of *The February Journal*. He is a research associate at the Institute of Art and Material Culture, TU Dortmund University, and an associate member of the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH), Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany. He works at intersections of memory studies, museum studies, public history, and media studies, with a focus on Eastern Europe. He has written on the 2020 protests in Belarus, Gulag memory, the remembrance of the 1990s in Russia, museum participation as labor, and other topics.

Address: TU Dortmund University, Institut für Kunst und Materielle Kultur,
Emil-Figge-Str. 50, 44221 Dortmund, Germany
E-mail: andrei.zavadski@tu-dortmund.de
ORCID: 0000-0002-8988-8805