**Call for papers**

**From Letters to E-mails: Epistolarity and Materiality (1500-2025)**

**International conference organized by IMAGER**

**(Institut des Mondes Anglophone, Germanique et Roman)**

**Université Paris-Est Créteil, France**

**26-27 November 2026**

E-mails and instant messaging have gradually made letter writing marginal, if not obsolete. This shift in epistolary modes invites scholars to consider letters and their electronic counterparts from the viewpoint of materiality. The interdisciplinary conference organized by IMAGER (Institut des Mondes Anglophone, Germanique et Roman), at Université Paris-Est Créteil, France, will examine the intersection of letter-writing and materiality in English-, French-, German-, Italian-, and Spanish-speaking linguistic and cultural contexts.

**From Paper and Ink to Keyboard and Screen: Tools and Uses**

What mediums and tools are used for correspondence? That is one of the first questions to consider when studying epistolarity from the viewpoint of materiality. The material devices used to send and deliver a letter (table, paper, pen, ink, folding, stamping, posting, etc.) vary considerably depending on the time period and the correspondents. Analyzing how these devices reflect the function of epistolary exchanges, the social position of sender and addressee, or their relationship would allow for a material history of epistolarity.

From this perspective, the transition from paper-based to electronic devices signals a very profound change, whose consequences this conference also seeks to examine. The reduction of the multiple material devices used for paper-based correspondence to a mere screen and keyboard (Souchier 238), the immediacy generated by the electronic medium, and the copresence in a single conversational space—or “diatext” (Fournout 29-48)—of sender and addressee radically change the very nature of epistolary relations, the sociability between correspondents and even the form of their discourses. Linguistic approaches considering the evolution of phraseology and discursive indicators in a writing context where the alternation of presence and non-presence is less salient are thus welcome.

The exact nature of new epistolary devices also needs investigating. The transition to digital tools is generally considered a form of dematerialization. Yet, this may not be as clear as it seems and conference participants are invited to consider whether this digital transition does not actually involve a complex, subtle form of “digital (re)materialization” (De Angelis 2023, 54-55).

**Materiality, Publication, and Archiving**

Studying correspondence from the viewpoint of materiality also raises issues of edition and archiving. For a long time, editors selected items for publication, which led to partial, truncated, if not adulterated representations of the exchanges between correspondents. Letters were then primarily valued for their historical or biographical documentary interest. By contrast, editors today seek to offer a more faithful image of these exchanges. Preserving the materiality of a letter, however, remains a major challenge as publication is bound to reduce the body of the letter to its textual content. Attempting to convey it through notes, however, might result in informational saturation. Can digital publication provide answers in that context?

The change in medium raises another significant issue: can electronic correspondence be published and if so, how and under what conditions? To what extent can digital humanities help achieve this goal?

Finally, how is electronic correspondence to be archived and made available, while guaranteeing its preservation? How to access and use it efficiently? How does the overabundance of digital epistolary material invite us to rethink research methods? What specific ethical questions does the use of such material raise?

**Materiality: Affects, Power, Secrecy, and Knowledge**

Considering letters from the viewpoint of materiality also sheds light on issues of affects, power, secrecy, and transmission. Hand-written letters that have been handled, sometimes even perfumed, can often be regarded as extensions of their authors’ bodies—especially in romantic correspondence (Decker 38-40; Stanley 2004, 208-209). What happens to such corporeity in digital exchanges? Can they be somehow rematerialized so as to convey affects? For example, can vocal or video messages, or even smileys, enable new forms of embodiment in digital epistolarity?

Owning letters can also be a form of power, as the disclosure of one or several specific items may compromise their sender or addressee. The transition to digital correspondence has only amplified the dangers of—intentionally or unintentionally—sending a message to the wrong person, which in turn calls attention to the blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres.

Many types of correspondence—from minorities or imprisoned activists, but also those related to diplomacy, intelligence, or resistance—require secrecy. How does this need for confidentiality translate from a material point of view? How do correspondents circumvent censorship? As Jana Dambrogio and Daniel Starza Smith have shown in *Letterlocking: The Hidden History of the Letter*, the need for confidentiality has given rise throughout history to multiple techniques meant to guarantee the security of exchanges.

The materiality of letters finally raises issues related to knowledge: letters can serve as a tool for the acquisition of knowledge, whether it be in informal exchanges or distance learning; thanks to the affects they imply and the way they engage the body of learners, they can also be used for the transmission of knowledge in multiple teaching contexts.

**Letters and Digital Exchanges in Literature and the Arts**

Due to their materiality and the affects that are attached to them, letters occupy a prominent place in literature and the arts. While many studies have focused on the epistolary novel, a genre that emerged in the seventeenth century and had its heyday in the eighteenth century, scholars are invited here to focus on the materiality of letters as a narrative device in these texts.

Recent avatars of the genre also deserve attention. As shown by Maria Lösching and Rebekka Schuh’s 2018 collection of essays, the twenty-first century has witnessed a genuine “epistolary renaissance” reflected in the resurgence of letters in contemporary literature, as well as the now frequent inclusion of e-mails, text messages, and other types of digital messaging in multimodal fiction. Does this type of fiction help restore the material density of exchanges that are customarily perceived as “dematerialized”?

Letters are also works of art in another sense. While they have long been represented in visual arts, some contemporary works of art also incorporate them in their raw materiality to the substance of the work itself. Digital exchanges have also been used, for example as material for installations. Submissions for this conference may also address hybrid works, such as letters adorned with drawings or works of postal art, including its digital versions.

**How to Submit**

The conference will take place at the Université Paris-Est Créteil, France, on 26 and 27 November 2026. Paper submissions of no more than 300 words may deal with English-, French-, German-, Italian-, and Spanish-speaking linguistic and cultural contexts, and concern historical periods ranging from the early modern to the contemporary. Submissions with a comparative approach of correspondence in various languages and cultures are welcome. Paper submissions with a short bio-bibliographical note should be uploaded to the <https://epistolarite.sciencesconf.org/> platform by 6 January 2026. Submissions will be reviewed by the scientific committee. Notification of acceptance or rejection will be sent by 25 February 2026.

The conference will be held in English, French, and Spanish.

**Organizing Committee**

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**Location, Dates, and Contact**

Location: Université Paris-Est Créteil – Campus centre, 61 avenue du Général de Gaulle, 94000 Créteil, France

Dates: 26-27 November 2026

Contact: [epistolarite@sciencesconf.org](mailto:epistolarite@sciencesconf.org)

**Scientific Committee**

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* **Laurence Cossu-Beaumont**, professor of American history and culture (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, CREW)
* **Marie-Hélène Cuin**, associate professor of French language and literature (Université de Limoges)
* **Rossana De Angelis**, associate professor of linguistics (Université Paris-Est Créteil, CEDITEC)
* **Michel Feith**, professor of American literature (Université de Nantes, CRINI)
* **Nathalie Freidel**, professor of French literature (Université Wilfrid Laurier)
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* **Michel Marcoccia**, associate professor of information and communication studies (Université de technologie de Troyes, Tech-CICO)
* **Daniel Meyer**, professor of Germanic studies (Université de Strasbourg, MGNE)
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