



Report on the Inaugural Asia-Pacific Conference November 2015

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ABSTRACT

“Locating Lives”: The Inaugural Conference for the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) Asia-Pacific Chapter took place at the Flinders University City Campus, Adelaide, South Australia, 1–3 December, 2015.

The IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter stems from the central disciplinary association for auto-biography scholars, the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA World), which is a multidisciplinary network that aims to foster the cross-cultural understanding of self and identity and location, and promote global dialogues about life writing/narrative. The IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter conference follows on from the successful IABA Americas and IABA European Chapters’ conferences, and aims to stimulate and promote new region-specific conversations and encourage regional participation in the IABA World conference. The goal of IABA Asia-Pacific is to develop scholarly networks between life narrative scholars and writers in the Asia-Pacific region to assist and support the practices of high-quality life narrative theory, practice, and pedagogy in the region (see IABA Asia-Pacific|International Auto/Biography ... <https://iabaasiapacific.wordpress.com>).

The Asia-Pacific Inaugural Conference theme was “Locating Lives in the Asia-Pacific-Australian Region.” The focus was on ways in which people in the region represent, translate, mediate, interpret, and record or research lives, their own and that of others, including that of the writer her- or his-self, for an intimate or wider public audience. The questions asked were: Are there distinct features of the life narrative in Australia and the Asia-Pacific, and what are the common forms and preoccupations in the Asia-Pacific region? What are the research interests of life narrative scholars in this region?

REPORT ON THE INAUGURAL IABA ASIA-PACIFIC CHAPTER CONFERENCE “LOCATING LIVES” SNS ROUNDTABLE

The Inaugural IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter Conference kicked off with a very fruitful pre-conference Postgraduate and ECR workshop on the afternoon of 30 November, 2015, at Flinders University, Bedford Park Campus. This roundtable session, with Dr Kylie Cardell, Associate Professor Kate Douglas, Professor Craig Howes, Dr Sonia Vivienne, and Professor Gillian Whitlock, was “intended as a dedicated space in which to foster and support postgraduate students and early career researchers working in Auto/Biography Studies” (p. 10, Conference programme booklet, Nov/Dec 2015).

Sponsored by the IABA SNS (Student and New Scholar) Network, this roundtable session was part of the SNS roundtable series hosted at the 2015 IABA regional chapter conferences—the IABA Americas, IABA Europe, and now the IABA Asia-Pacific—and culminated with a final roundtable at “Excavating Lives,” the 2016 IABA World Conference was held in Cyprus, 26–29 May, 2016. The topic for the IABA SNS roundtable is “Unsettle,” and is drawn from the postcolonial scholars’ use of the concept, and chosen because of its origins in indigenous studies and the connections to coloniality, and its ramifications for pedagogical, communal, and academic spaces, and with an aim to producing conversations focused on life writing as a field, and as a strategy for approaching and voicing difficult ideas and experiences, and social change and justice. Taken as a theme for a series of discussions held across the IABA chapters, the concept of “Unsettle” is used in a broader sense, and is intended as “a productive departure point” for discussion on problematic notions of location and identity “as well as expanding for building new professional and personal relations within the field of life writing” (see pp. 10, 30. IABA Asia-Pacific Conference programme booklet, Nov/Dec 2015).

THE CONFERENCE WELCOME EVENT

The conference welcome event, which took place at the at the South Australian Writers’ Centre, in Adelaide, on the evening of 30 November, 2015, was an outstanding success. This event drew many interested people from the public sector, as well as practioners of life writing and members of the South Australian Writers’ centre, and academics, scholars, creative writing students, and conference participants. At this event, the guests were treated to readings from creative nonfiction works of life writing by the authors themselves: Nicole Crow, Ian Dixon, Heather Taylor Johnson, Sharyn Kaesehagan, Victor Marsh, Threasa Meads, Jo Parnell, and Melanie Pryor.

Several new publications, including Sonja Vivienne's *Digital Identity and Everyday Activism*, Kylie Cardell's *Dear World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary*, Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas's (eds) *Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and Youth*, and special issues of *Biography* and *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, were also launched at this event.

THE CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE AND PAPERS PRESENTED

Day one of the conference opened with a traditional "Welcome to Country" by indigenous leader, the Kurna Elder Uncle Frank Wanganeen, and welcome speeches by Professor Diana Glenn (Dean of the School of Humanities and Creative Arts, Flinders University), and Associate Professor Craig Taylor (Director of the Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities), and the conference convenors Associate Professor Kate Douglas and Dr Kylie Cardell.

There were eighty registered attendees. Delegates came from various places across Australia, and from other regions in the Asia-Pacific region and also from further away, including places such as Pilani in the region of Rajasthan, and Delhi, New Delhi, and Kharagpur in India, Vienna, Mānoa in Hawaii, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, Tokyo, and Copenhagen. Over sixty conference papers were presented in parallel sessions that ran across the 3 days. These papers were interesting, well-presented, and of quality, and covered a wide range of topics: digital lives—storytelling programmes, and life writing; relocating lives, regional legacies, diaspora poetics, identities, and locating national identities abroad; processes and issues in researching, interpreting, and recording the lives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hawaiians; creative methodologies, and creative practices in life writing; genre crossings within life writing; life writing and identity; dislocation and disruption in Australian life writing; the antipodes of self-identity, belonging and estrangement; memory/post-memory; postmemory and a sense of place and identity; space, place, narrative; experimental methodologies; biographical subjects; Australian lives; Australian stories; relational lives; narratives and aftereffects of war; trauma, testimony; visual representations; death and memory memoir; recovering lives.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

During the conference, the three keynote speakers, Professor Gillian Whitlock, Benjamin Law, and Professor Craig Howes, focused on different aspects of the conference theme.

In her keynote presentation, “Salvage,” Professor Gillian Whitlock opened the conference proper with an interesting discussion on the power of the Humanities in Australia now. In her talk, Professor Whitlock quoted the historian Tom Griffith who, at the recent launch of a book commissioned by the Academy of the Humanities, remarked that “Humanities scholarship so seamlessly underpins everything we do,” and that even those who have some sway in the community can “underestimate the effectiveness of storytelling and life stories in changing” the ways in which we think and behave; and she asked, “What happens when this infrastructure begins to think regionally? What new energies and ways of critical thinking emerge?” Professor Whitlock noted the unique oceanic position of the islands (including Australia) that make up the Asia-Pacific region, and the regions’ history and power for incubating and producing life narratives “that migrate on unpredictable routes, to mobilise new ways of thinking and feeling about the integration of public and personal lives that Griffith describes.”

The second keynote speaker, Benjamin Law, gave a most enjoyable and humorous talk entitled “*The Family Law*: From Big Family to Small Screen.” Ben Law spoke about the various issues commonly faced by writers of creative nonfiction (life writing), and the intricacies and problems of getting published. As a practical illustration, Ben Law referred to his own memoir which was written as a collection of personal essays that explore his personal experiences of growing up on Australia’s Sunshine Coast, and the dynamics of his family. Ben Law’s book has been recently adapted to the small screen as *The Family Law*, and which aired once a week on SBS, beginning on Thursday, 14 January, 2015.

In his talk, “Pacifying Asia, Orientating the Pacific: What work can a life writing region do?” the third keynote speaker, Professor Craig Howes, referred to Philippe Lejeune’s question “Is the I international?” to ask: “What effect thinking about regions can have on our understanding of what links life writing practices, and what may necessarily keep them apart?” Professor Howes pointed out that IABA Asia-Pacific, being “the third designated area for the International Auto/Biography Association,” and preceded by that of Europe and the Americas, might face “some especially difficult challenges in engaging productively” with the “largest, most populated, and most geographically, culturally, and historically diverse region so inscribed.” Professor Howes then offered a few suggestions about focus, possible directions, and responsibilities for the IABA Asia Pacific Chapter to consider.

PANEL PLENARY SESSIONS—PANEL SPEAKERS, THEMES, AND
WHAT EMERGED: DISCUSSIONS WITH THE FLOOR

During the conference, all the conference attendees came together to take part in a Plenary Roundtable “Unsettle” session in which the four panellists—Kate Douglas, Pamela Graham, Anna Poletti, and Daniella Trimboli—gave brief papers to identify, and present for consideration, four comparatively new areas (the personal blog, the life narrative zine, the biographical obituary, and personal time capsules) as forms that are, or contain, within themselves life narratives, and, as such, clearly deserve to be included in the life writing genre.

In her paper, entitled “The Unsettling Case of Malala Yousafzai,” Kate Douglas pointed out that media publicity surrounding Malala Yousafzai—the young Pakistani schoolgirl who was singled out and shot in the head by the Taliban because she upheld and promoted girls’ rights to education—and her achievements in the face of adversity, and her continuing fight for justice and women’s/girls’ rights to education, provided prompts for considering “the complex and contested terrain that Malala has and continues to tread.” Kate Douglas also noted that because many people are now aware of Malala’s now very public persona “it is fair to say that Malala lives and breathes life narrative now,” and suggested that it was Malala’s “original blog that set the path.” In her talk, Kate Douglas cited Malala’s blog as an illustration to pose questions about a blog “as a radical life narrative text”—in Malala’s case, as one “of girlhood/youth that came to unsettle ideas about education and genre”—and invited thought on the issues and problems of authenticating the blog, by identifying Malala as the sole (unassisted) writer.

In her paper, “‘Plain of Feature, and Certainly Overweight...’ #MyOzObituary: Tweeting Back to the Memorial Politics of the Obituary in the Digital Age,” Pamela Graham offered the obituary of the well-known Australian writer Colleen McCullough as an example of the “significant and enduring form of biographical representation” in obituary, to ask, “How are English-language obituaries evolving in the digital era, and how do online spaces challenge the traditionally exclusive nature of the form?” In her talk Pamela Graham raised the issue of “how the online sphere provides unique opportunities for individuals to ‘write back’ to the memorial politics of this pervasive commemorative genre.”

Anna Poletti, in her talk, “Unsettling the Story,” noted that Maria Tumarkin, in her 2014 essay “This Narrated Life,” for the *Griffith Review*, “questions the cultural hegemony of ‘storytelling,’ asserting that it ‘does

not in itself or by itself take us any closer to the truths of our lives with anything like the inevitability that gets ascribed to it these days.” Anna Poletti then asked, “How might Tumarkin’s questioning of the importance of narrative to the understandings of being human encourage new thinking in the study of autobiography?” Anna Poletti demonstrated by naming American artist Andy Warhol’s largest collecting work, *Time Capsules*—a series of cardboard boxes filled with bits and pieces and hoarded rubbish Warhol had collected in his life, and which were housed in the Andy Warhol Museum after his death—as “a case study that poses a unique challenge to the hegemonic status of narrative to conceptualizations of autobiography,” and asked, How do we interpret Warhol’s boxes?

In her talk, “Toxic Bodies and Muslims Zombies: (Re) storying Refugees in Australia-Based Comic Art Zines,” Daniella Trimboli pointed out that there has been much research into “the discursive dehumanisation of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia,” and that this discourse has an affective dimension that ‘sticks,’ “impressing upon refugees and asylum seekers at a corporeal level.” Daniella Trimboli then referred to various written and visual representations of the self and Other in comic zines produced by the refugees and asylum seekers in detention centres, as well as the zines in The Refugee Art Project’s zine collection, to point out that these types of zines “clearly demonstrate the ways in which the body becomes implicated in narratives about asylum.” To this, Daniella added, “but the comic art zine medium also allows for ‘something else,’” something more, “to be revealed in these autobiographical accounts”: “in particular, the medium allows the toxicity of refugee discourse to be redeployed elsewhere, sometimes to its extreme ends, but always to an unsettled space where the refugee body can resist and reassemble.”

The questions that arose from these four papers—questions such as: How does one read these forms? How and where do these works fit into the area of life writing? How do we define and explain and categorise these new areas? Within the genre, what do we name these forms as, what specific tags do we use? How, and in what ways, can these new forms and ways of writing lives enhance and enrich the life writing genre?—provide much food for thought and discussion, and spark ongoing enquiry.

The general consensus at this roundtable session was that by their introduction and acceptance as new, named, forms and categories within the genre, these new and unusual ways of writing lives could serve to pave the way for broadening and enhancing the life writing genre to take it into the future, and so prevent a possible stagnation of the genre.

The final plenary session, the Conclusion and Respondent Session, which was run by Professor Craig Howes, Professor Donna Lee Brien, Dr Anna Poletti, and Professor Gillian Whitlock, and in which the audience

were invited to fully participate, gave rise to more questions. These were questions such as: Where do we go from here, what is the future of life writing, how can we promote and enhance the genre to take it to the next level, and where to next? Where does the IABA Asia Pacific Chapter go to from here to better promote the region, and foster its unique potential to explore and develop notions of location and identity, and encourage possibilities for building new professional and personal relations within the field of life writing in order to meet “the difficult challenges in engaging productively with the largest, most populated, and most geographically, culturally, and historically diverse region” of Europe and the Americas.

THE AUSSLIT TRAUMA INDEX PROGRAMME: AN AUSTRALIAN INNOVATION

The innovative new online programme, the AustLit Trauma Index—which can be found on www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/7160016—was launched and demonstrated, and introduced to the conference attendees, in a special session at the Inaugural IABA Asia-Pacific Chapter Conference, on Wednesday, December 2, 2015.

Created and coordinated by the AustLit Flinders Team—Kate Douglas, Carolyn Lake, Tully Barnett, Pamela Graham, and Emma Macguire—this programme is a specialist AustLit Research Project investigating trauma in Australian contemporary life narratives. At the conference, in her talk at the launch, one of the AustLit Flinders Team members, Carolyn Lake, advised that the Index “explores literary representations of individual, family or communal trauma in Australian auto/biographical writing from 1900 to 2015.” This Index catalogues “the types of trauma represented, as well as the geographic and temporal settings of the trauma narrative,” and traverses a wide range of experiences, events and geographies, and “can be used by students and researchers to examine what role trauma has played in Australian literary culture and practices of self-representation”: “Included in this collection are autobiographies, biographies, diaries, life stories and oral histories. These narratives and stories exist in a range of forms, including book-length narratives”—short stories, memoirs, and interviews. As well, traumatic events and situations experienced both in Australia and overseas are common in the dataset—for instance, events and situations experienced by Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and others (e.g. survivors of atrocities, and refugees), who migrated to Australia; depictions of traumatic childhoods, particularly child-abuse; life narratives, letters, diaries, of servicemen and ex-servicemen who served overseas; narratives and oral projects concerning the Australian Indigenous

Aboriginal people and the Stolen Generation and Torres Strait islanders; and the life narratives of, and other depictions by, asylum seekers (see also, *Trauma Texts-Introduction-AustLit* ... www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/7160016).

CONFERENCE OUTINGS

In the evening of the first day of the conference, Tuesday, December 1, 2015, as a follow-on from Professor Gillian Whitlock's opening keynote presentation that morning, and as an intrinsic part of the conference theme, "Locating Lives," all conference participants were warmly invited to a special after-hours session at Adelaide's Migration Museum. The session began with a welcome and an introduction to the Museum by Senior Curator, Exhibitions, Collections and Research, Mandy Paul. After the talk the conference attendees were then welcome to explore the Museum at their own leisure.

The conference dinner took place on the evening of Wednesday, December 2, 2015, in the old part of Adelaide at the award-winning Chinese restaurant *Concubine*, and which is situated nearby to Adelaide's historic and colourful China Town and Markets. Everyone enjoyed themselves hugely.

At the close of the conference, all conference participants were invited to take part in the post-conference beach walk from Brighton Beach to Glenelg, and which took place that afternoon on December 3, 2015.

Overall, the Inaugural IABA Asia-Pacific Conference, "Locating Lives," was an outstanding success. During the conference and at the various social events, a great deal of networking was done, new friends were made, and the conference participants engaged productively in expanding possibilities for building new professional and personal relations within the field of life writing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Parnell holds a PhD in English and Writing, from the University of Newcastle, Australia, where she is a Conjoint Fellow to the Faculty of Education and the Arts, School of Humanities and Social Science. As well, Jo is a reviewer on the editorial board of the journal *Auto/Fiction*.

She has a particular interest in new and unusual ways of writing and presenting lives, and, in especial, literary docu-memoir, a form of immersion research and creative non-fiction writing that involves the creative nonfiction writer interviewing and audio-taping ordinary people for their unusual life experience and their thoughts and feeling as the resource material for a literary production.