THE LIMITS OF LIFE WRITING

A Symposium

of the

Contemporary Histories Research Group

Deakin University

Waterfront Campus, Geelong

Room D2.331

9.30am-4.30pm

Friday 19th February 2016
ABOUT CONTEMPORARY HISTORIES

The Contemporary Histories Research Group, directed by Professor David Lowe, is comprised of Deakin University staff with an interest in what history means today. The phrase 'contemporary histories' refers to the history that is still 'with us,' or the unfinished business of the past. This means that we are focused primarily, but not exclusively, on twentieth-century history, and we are interested especially in historical episodes, life stories and interpretations that reverberate in the present, for public debate and policy. The three themes featuring in our research are:

- The colonial project and its aftermath; in Australia, Asia and the Pacific
- Conflict and memory
- Life stories

For further details on the Contemporary Histories Research Group please visit http://www.deakin.edu.au/alfred-deakin-research-institute/research/contemp-histories/index.php

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Professor David Lowe leads the Contemporary Histories Research Group at Deakin University. He is co-founder of the Australian Policy and History network linking historians with public debate and policy-makers. David is a historian of political language and of international relations and Australia in world affairs; and has published biographical and other works in this field. He is especially interested in how people-to-people connections between Australia and Asia have shaped, and can shape, the ways in which constructive relationships evolve; and he has collaborated with government departments in Australia and overseas in analyzing people-to-people connections.

Contemporary Histories
Deakin University

https://blogs.deakin.edu.au/contemporary-history-studies/contemporary-histories-group/
ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

Life Writing is key to understanding how ‘history’ is always ‘contemporary,’ a discourse in which the past continues to be played out in the present. Life Writing is also peculiarly attracted to limits: the limits of literature, of history, of social protocols, of personal experience and memory. By attending to limits, border cases, hybridity, generic complexities, formal ambiguities, and extra-literary expressions of Life Writing, we can gain new insights into the nature of ‘contemporary histories’ in Australia and elsewhere.

A special issue of Life Writing, guest-edited by Professor David McCooey and Associate Professor Maria Takolander, will be dedicated to the theme of today's symposium. For further details about the journal, please visit [http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=rlwr20#.VrFKl8ekfHg](http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=rlwr20#.VrFKl8ekfHg)

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

David McCooey is a Professor of Literature and Writing at Deakin University. His Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography (Cambridge University Press 1996/2009) won a NSW Premier’s Literary Award, and his essays on Australian life writing and poetry have appeared in numerous books and journals. He is the Deputy General Editor of the prize-winning Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature (Allen & Unwin, 2009), and the author of three collections of poetry. He is currently writing a monograph on poetry in extra-poetic contexts.

Maria Takolander is an Associate Professor in Literature and Writing at Deakin University. She is the author of a scholarly monograph and several scholarly articles on magical realist literature, theorised as a form of historiographic metafiction. The author of The Double (and Other Stories) (Text, 2013), she is an award-winning fiction writer. She has also published three books of poems, the most recent being The End of the World (Giramondo, 2014), which explores the post-confessional and post-memorial. She is currently working on a novel, Night, for Text Publishing.

With thanks to Dr Cassandra Atherton for her early organisational input and to Dr Alyson Miller for her early administrative assistance.
PROGRAM

9:30-9.45: Morning tea

9.45: Mr Terry Mason, Welcome to Country

9.50: Professor David Lowe, Welcome

9.55: Professor David McCooey, Introduction

10:00-11:00: Keynote

Professor Gillian Whitlock, ‘Joe Sacco’s Australian Story’

11:00-12:30: Panel 1 (Chaired by Mr Terry Mason)

Associate Professor Martin Thomas, ‘Life Writing and Transcultural Issues: The 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land’

Ms Robin Freeman, ‘The “Truth” About Indigenous Life Writing’

Dr Kate Hall, ‘“Eloquent voices raised”: The Limits of Speaking and Hearing in the Intervention Anthology’

12:30-1:30: Lunch

1:30-3:00: Panel 2 (Chaired by Professor David McCooey)

Associate Professor Anne Brewster, ‘The transgenerational memory of violence in Alice Pung’s Her Father’s Daughter’

Dr Jo Langdon, ‘“A Thing May Happen and be a Total Lie”: Artifice and Trauma in Tim O’Brien’s Life Writing’

Associate Professor Kate Douglas, ‘Reading Malala Yousafzai: Reception, Mediation and the Limits of Radical Life Writing’

3:00-3:30: Creative intervention

Mr Oliver Driscoll, ‘“I guess what you say is true”: Aleksandar Hemon, Semezdin Mehmedinović, and the problems and possibilities of representing trauma’

3:30: Associate Professor Maria Takolander, Closing remarks

3.35-4.30: Afternoon tea
ABOUT OUR SPEAKERS

KEYNOTE


‘Joe Sacco’s Australian Story’
The comics journalist Joe Sacco is a familiar figure to us – we have followed him into the streets of Goražde in the course of the Bosnian war in Safe Area Goražde (2000) and into the Occupied Territories in Palestine (2001). It is a little known biographical fact that Joe Sacco grew up in Melbourne. His family migrated from Malta when he was 1, and remained here until 1972, when they moved to Los Angeles. The more familiar ‘author bio’ begins there, in the United States, when Joe began his journalism career working on his High School newspaper in Beaverton, Oregon. This is, for example, the beginning of the story in the bio note provided by his publisher Fantagraphics (https://fantagraphics.com/flog/artist-bio-joe-sacco/). This is not a hidden story so much as an irrelevant one. But when does it become relevant? When does Joe Sacco himself draw this it into his graphics journalism, and why? These are the questions that are the focus of this keynote, which argues that Sacco’s ‘Australian Story’ has something to say after all about Australian lives and the limits of autobiography here and now.

PANEL 1

Terry Mason is from the land of the Awabakal language group and works writing curriculum for the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University. He previously worked in the Badanami Centre, University Western Sydney, in the area of access and learning support and was the Academic Co-ordinator of the BEd Aboriginal Rural Education Program. Terry is the current chair of NTEU A&TSI Policy Committee and former chair of the Board of the Welfare Rights Centre. Terry has contributed to Australian and overseas publications and has presented papers in the area of transition, starting school and student support.
'Life Writing and Transcultural Issues: The 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land'

In this presentation I draw on a longstanding interest in expeditions as socio-cultural formations by discussing an aspect of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition, a large-scale research venture through Arnhem Land in northern Australia. Conceived as an exercise in ‘collective biography’, my book-in-progress on the 1948 journey uses the lens of an expedition to examine relations between indigenous Arnhem Landers and outsiders. In addressing the ‘limits of biography’ theme, I describe an oral history interview that I recorded in 2007. The interviewee was by this time one of the very few surviving Aboriginal witnesses who could recall the expedition in any detail. A charismatic figure and a powerful storyteller, his recording is a highly critical account of the expedition. He ‘dished the dirt’ in a way that no one else had done. Since his death some months after the interview was recorded, I have made archival discoveries that cast a different, indeed sinister, light over this man who so enthralled me. How do I reconcile these criminal allegations – for which a strong case is made, although it was never legally proven – with my own responsibility as a historian to ‘bear witness’ to the evidence I uncover? The quagmire of political, legal and ethical complexities is the biographical ‘limit’ that I will open for discussion in this forum.

Robin Freeman teaches creative writing in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University in Melbourne. She has worked in the Australian publishing industry as both publisher and book editor of trade, educational and scholarly titles. She is currently undertaking a PhD on ethical approaches to the editing and publication of Indigenous writing in settler societies. She also researches and publishes on the theory and practice of creative nonfiction writing, in particular its memoir and personal essay forms.

‘The “truth” about Indigenous life writing’

Within the settler societies of Australia and Canada, life writing has become a vehicle for Indigenous writers seeking to engage the majority society with Indigenous perspectives, and to provide revisionist histories and contemporary
role models for disaffected youth. Life writing, argues Robert Dessaix, is a form of seduction in which writers engage readers artfully with the intimate presence of a narrator. His opinion exemplifies concerns about associating Indigenous writing with a Eurocentric individualized epistemological positioning. It seems unlikely, then, that contemporary definitions of life writing are relevant to Indigenous writers, who work under what Patricia Monture Angus has called the ‘oppression of identity’, and who appear compelled to confer authenticity on their texts via a recognizable traditional ‘oral’ style. In the works of Maria Campbell, Sally Morgan and Thomas King this paper finds surprising parallels between the authorial intentions of the Indigenous life writers, and the definitive elements of creative nonfiction. While sharing both differences and similarities with Indigenous forms of storytelling, the creative nonfiction form may provide useful conceptual modelling for the critique and editing of Indigenous writing that accommodates both aesthetic and epistemological differences, and recognises the intrinsic linkage between Indigenous pedagogies and textual expression.

Kate Hall has a PhD in magical realism from Deakin University. She has published on Aboriginal magical realist literature in New Community Quarterly (2013), Frontier Skirmishes (2010), and Sharing Spaces: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Responses to Story, Country and Rights (2006). She is also a creative writer, recently published in Overland (2013; 2014) and The Grapple Annual (2014). She has worked at Deakin’s Institute of Koorie Education and now teaches in Literary Studies at Deakin University in Geelong.

“Eloquent voices raised”: the limits of speaking and listening in The Intervention: An Anthology

Like the human rights abuses in our detention centres, the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention and the continuing interventions into the lives of Indigenous peoples under the Stronger Futures Act constitute significant and ongoing examples of a national reluctance to listen when voices are raised in protest. The various forms of life writing (as well as the works of fiction, poetry and essays) in The Intervention: An Anthology perform multiple, simultaneous functions; they are statements of protest and articulations of trauma, expressions of solidarity and narratives of personal experience that are linked, through their diverse forms and voices, by the imperative to speak out against injustice. The anthology’s publication raises significant questions about the broader context of this imperative. As Rosie Scott explains in her introduction, despite trying for six months to publish the anthology ‘not one publisher took the project on, though most said it was a great project with an excellent list’. Consequently, the book was published by the human rights group ‘concerned Australians’. This paper addresses the question of limits and limitations when an anthology comprised largely of life-writing, with contributions from writers such as Alexis Wright, Larissa Behrendt and Samuel Wagan Watson, must rely on goodwill from the partisan few in order to speak out to the many who have proved, historically, unable to listen in the first place.
'The transgenerational memory of violence in Alice Pung’s Her Father’s Daughter'

Alice Pung’s post-memoir of the after-effects of political violence maps a discursive trajectory from (1) her father’s survivor memory of the Cambodian genocide, to (2) her own postmemory as a second-generation Asian-Australian, to (3) the latter’s remediation as social memory within the Australian (trans)national imaginary. Hirsch describes the family as ‘the privileged site of the memorial transmission’ of trauma. In Her Father’s Daughter Pung parallels the heroic narrative of her father’s survival of ‘a real and bloody social revolution’ (HFD, 48) with the more modest narrative of her own embodied travails with ‘authentic feeling’ (21) regarding her affective connectivity with her extended family and the landscapes they inhabited. Her postmemorial journey is one into her own heart, variously described as ‘a deformed dumpling’ (28) and ‘rotting fruit’ (32). Literary texts such as Pung’s can bring about the timely reanimation of the post-settler state’s archives through investing them with familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. In Her Father’s Daughter, individuals’ intersections with transnational histories are mapped and, in the process (to paraphrase Brian Castro), Asia becomes part of Australia.

“‘A Thing May Happen and be a Total Lie”: Artifice and Trauma in Tim O’Brien’s Life Writing’

Depicting patently fantastic episodes alongside the traumatic events of the Vietnam War, Tim O’Brien’s autobiographical, magical realist writing
problematises pictures of the past. Despite the often outrageous occurrences that punctuate his otherwise realistic narratives, and indeed the provocative revisions and contradictions of his self-reflexive texts themselves, O’Brien insists on his work’s authenticity. The author defends himself as ‘a realist in the strictest sense’, stressing that ‘war is a surrealistic experience’ (qu. Herzog 1997, pp. 80 & 22). In line with critics such as Eugene L. Arva, O’Brien contends that his writing is true to the ‘felt’ experience of trauma—which trauma theorists largely characterise according to intensity, non-linearity and confusion. Nonetheless, rather than being pure outpourings of trauma, his works are clearly—and self-consciously—literary artefacts that often resonate with popular culture narratives. As Stefania Ciocia writes, ‘even when his intertextual connections are not as easily discernable’, O’Brien is ‘very much a writers’ writer and a committed craftsman, conscious of his literary and cultural influences’ (2012, p. 29). Through a case study of The Things They Carried (1991), a short story collection that suggestively and duplicitously functions as both fiction and autobiography, this paper will attend to the paradoxes of fantasy-filled ‘life writing’ and the generic complexities and ‘limits’ of O’Brien’s work, which reveals curious interplays between authenticity and artfulness when it comes to the representation of trauma.

Kate Douglas is an Associate Professor in the School of Humanities and Creative Arts at Flinders University. She is the author of Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory (Rutgers, 2010) and the co-author (with Anna Poletti) of the forthcoming Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation (Palgrave 2016). She is the co-editor (with Kylie Cardell) of Trauma Tales: Auto/biographies of Childhood and Youth (Routledge, 2014) and (with Gillian Whitlock) Trauma Texts (Routledge, 2009).

‘Reading Malala Yousafzai: Reception, Mediation and the Limits of Radical Life Writing’

There is much to say (and indeed has been said) about the extraordinary achievements of Malala Yousafzai. Assed Baig’s Huffington Post piece “Malala Yousafzai and the White Saviour Complex” provides a prompt for considering the complex and contested terrain Malala has and continues to tread. Her cultural displacement brings a plethora of question marks and also assumptions for those who ‘read’ her. It’s fair to say that Malala lives and breathes life narrative now: many people know about her life because of the significant threat to it, but also because of her now very public persona: as activist, public speaker, memoirist, and documentary subject. It was her original blog that set the path. In this paper I want to pose some questions about the blog as a radical life narrative text of girlhood/youth that came to unsettle ideas about education and gender. I explore how Yousafzai has crafted a speaking position that utilises the ideologies and cultural constructions of childhood and youth—particularly as citizens and representatives of a nation’s future—to become a voice of educational reform.
"I guess what you say is true": Aleksandar Hemon, Semezdin Mehmedinović, and the problems and possibilities of representing trauma

'I guess what you say is true' is a fragmented autobiographical narrative that explores the narrator’s relationship to travel, the city of Sarajevo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina more generally. It also considers creative production, the suffering of others, illness, and the works of Aleksandar Hemon, Semezdin Mehmedinovic and Janet Malcolm. The piece attempts to capture its subject—though it is never quite certain what its subject is precisely—by turning away or writing around that subject.