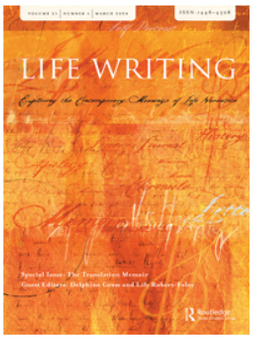

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CONFERENCE REPORT

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Field Culture in Unprecedented Times: Writing the Unexpected, Narrating the Future at a Virtual Conference

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ABSTRACT

We are colleagues and collaborators working in the field of English Literary Studies, broadly defined. This paper reflects on our collective encounters working as Life Writing scholars within the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA). Specifically, we muse autocritically on our experience of organising an online conference at a time when scholars are still experiencing the impact of the pandemic. We propose the term 'field culture' to describe and draw attention to the ways in which an academic field is shaped by socio-cultural practices that impact on the kind of knowledge and researcher identities produced within the field. We explore the 'field culture' of IABA and its conferences and posit that our research collective is an example of the ways in which academia might be made more accessible for early-career researchers, for those less able to travel to conferences. Reflecting on a series of aims and strategies for the conference, we also make a case for supporting creative practice and creative interventions in life writing as a discipline in which the politics of genre blurring and pushing boundaries has been foundational.

KEYWORDS

Conference; Field Culture; Life Narrative; Scholarly Community

Kate

I have been an academic for 20 years. I feel the legacies of the past, the dogged pressures of the present, and the fear of the future all at once now. In my work, I had expected imposter syndrome to be long gone. But it persists. The institution, the job, extends the stubborn sense of never having done enough work. The place to find meaning, for me, has always been in the reading and writing of lives.

In the most challenging of times, life narrative and the extended community of researchers I have connected with, have been a cherished constant. Life narrative scholars do personal, autocritical work and this has long been a feature of this discipline.[1] Underlying our work are shared philosophies of generous and ethical reading and thinking, research and practice. Our work, and our approach to community, aims to dismantle traditional hierarchies of membership and inclusion.

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The International Auto/Biography Association Asia-Pacific (IABA A-P)

> IABA Asia-Pacific emerges from the central disciplinary association for auto/biography scholars – The International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) was founded in 1999 as a multidisciplinary network that aims to deepen the cross-cultural understanding of self, identity and experience, and to carry on global dialogues about life writing.
> The ground-breaking, interdisciplinary scholarship of IABA has inspired a dynamic band of international scholars and two biennial, regional conferences to support and extend the reach of the association**:** IABA Europe and IABA Americas.
> Like these branches, IABA Asia-Pacific aims to foster new region-specific conversations about life writing and to encourage regional participation in the global IABA conference. Our goal is to develop scholarly networks between life writing scholars and practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region that support the circulation and publication of high-quality life writing theory, practice, and pedagogy. [2]

In 2022 we chose the theme for our 2023 conference: 'Life Narrative in Unprecedented Times: Writing the Unexpected, Narrating the Future'. There were three motivating forces for this theme. We wanted to align with the theme of the IABA Europe conference that would be held in Warsaw, Poland in the same year (this has been an approach of the IABA chapters to allow scholars to develop ideas over conferences held in the same year).[3] The second motivation was to overtly acknowledge the impact of COVID-19 on our scholarship and conference practices. The third was to provide impetus for the future: we wanted the scholars in our community to know we were here for them and wanted to provide a high-quality, inclusive conference.

Kylie

The 2023 International Auto/Biography Association Asia-Pacific (IABA A-P) conference was held completely online. From 2020 to the end of 2022, in Australia, international travel, domestic travel and gatherings had been highly restricted or completely prohibited as part of the governmental public health response to COVID-19. University-based researchers were subject to further institution specific restrictions. Effectively, almost all researchers at Australian-based universities found themselves unable to travel locally, nationally or internationally for a period of 18 months. Travel restrictions affected the capacity of local researchers to conduct meetings as well as hampering projects that depended on access to material archives and other site-based fieldwork. The impact to research was widely felt, but arguably was harder felt by graduate and early-career researchers, scholars whose research networks and collaborations were only beginning. At the Life Narrative Lab (LNL), we pivoted (as we had done in our teaching) to online: Zoom catch-ups, virtual writing lock-ins, mini-symposia on Teams. When restrictions were softened, our annual Christmas gathering was held in a large park, outdoors with plenty of room for social distancing (and dogs).

The LNL translated easily into online activities, but Kate and I and those who had attended large international meetings (primarily, IABA World) were conscious that the ambient connections, between session-conversations, and conference dinner communing that had been so crucial when we were finding our scholarly peers and friends in a global academic context had not been available to our graduate students during COVID. In 2022, we held a fully online 'IABA Futures' event designed to create opportunities for graduate students and ECR to connect online with international mentors and

experts, the kind of people once described to me (when I was attending my first conference – IABA, Hong Kong) as 'living footnotes'. The idea behind the Futures conference was to recreate some of the magic of meeting the footnotes, but online, at a time when travel had not been possible for Australian scholars at all.

When planning the 2023 IABA A-P, the success of the online Futures event was in our mind, but so too was the exciting prospect of meeting again, in-person and with all the distinct benefits of doing so. But while public health restrictions had eased considerably, the memory of sudden lockdowns had not yet faded. As well, air travel in particular had become increasingly expensive, inaccessible, or denied to academics and particularly those in precarious employment (casual or fixed term contracts) or who depend on scholarships (Collins and Mason-Wilkes n.d.). And there were other factors to consider too, including the need to consider and plan for sustainable conferencing that minimises environmental impact. As Paul Magee (2023, 3) has recently argued, making an event wholly online can substantially reduce the considerable carbon-emission costs caused by flying, but it also does not simply equate to 'zero emissions'. A conference is an ecosystem and requires nuanced planning and thinking on multiple fronts.[4]

So, in deciding to hold our conference virtually, we considered a range of factors. A fully virtual conference would allow us to plan (as our guiding COVID-era South Australian Chief Medical Officer Nicola Spurrier might have put it) with 'an abundance of caution'. But we felt the decision also recognised the increasing cost of living (now considered a crisis in Australia), the ongoing expensiveness of air travel (particularly significant in a large country like Australia and in the dispersed geographical area of Asia-Pacific) as well as the carbon-cost of flying itself, along with an ever-shrinking institutional funding.

While an online conference addressed ongoing uncertainty at the time we commenced planning (12 months prior) of the viability of large in-person meetings and recognised the ongoing difficulty and cost of travel in our region, we knew that a virtual meeting would disappoint some; many of us are tired of life so much behind a screen, of virtual connectivity. As well, Magee (2023, 4) has posited that 'the virtual conference is particularly prejudicial to the upcoming generation of academics, who lack the pre-existing face-to-face contacts that make the online medium a more or less serviceable means of generating ideas and maintaining networks for those with more established careers'. On the issue of inclusion at least, we knew from our success with Futures, however, that proactive and careful programming that actively included junior colleagues and researchers can also have positive results. Indeed, we built into the IABA A-P programme a series of opportunities and events targeted towards, chaired by, or that championed new and emerging researchers (as others discuss further on in this paper). Magee's central arguments on the importance of striving for carbon-neutral online events (though also a complex aim, for reasons Magee explores in exacting detail) we take on notice.

We were pleased that our event attracted many scholars who were discipline-curious. These were scholars who were interested in life narrative broadly defined – working in oral histories, or for specific communities, drawing on lived experience or seeking to understand the lives of others – but unsure if their particular work belonged within the field. In this context, a virtual conference can be usefully low-stakes, requiring less in the way of financial or personal investment. That such low-investment might also

deplete the conference experience, creating a less engaged audience is a risk. But this was not our experience. Like others, we have found that online conference spaces also have the potential to confer positive benefits and can be 'liberating' and supportive, despite other inherent 'barriers and challenges' (Black et al. 2020, 116).

Emma

The first IABA conference I attended was 2012 in Canberra at the Australian National University. I was six months into my PhD on girls' autobiography and was terrified and excited in equal measure. It's not an exaggeration to say that the conference was life changing for me. I had heard horror stories from other postgraduates about aggressive questions and academic cliques, but the community I met for the first time in Canberra was nothing like this. I remember feeling very out of place at first, looking around at scholars whose works I had been reading as if they were religious texts – Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Craig Howes, Miriam Hirsch, and Hillary Chute (who was a keynote that year). It was frightening, and imposter syndrome hit hard. I felt inexperienced, irrelevant and inexcusably green. But, the second morning as I sat alone at the hotel restaurant for breakfast, Craig took the chair next to me and proceeded to chat with me like I was any other scholar. Craig asked me about my research and we talked about the history of the organisation. Craig told me about the first conference in Beijing and how it came to be. After some time Sid and Julia came to join Craig and they added to his story. These were some of the most foundational scholars in our field, and their inclusiveness – which I would learn is a norm in this community – struck me as surprising and delightful. I came away from breakfast with a glow of belonging which has never left.

Reflecting on this experience now, I realise that in sharing the history of IABA Craig opened a door for me, a way into belonging. In sharing that history, it was no longer his history or a history belonging only to established scholars, but one that I was invited to share in. By sitting with me at breakfast and breaking the border I imagined between myself as a new PhD student and the established scholars, Craig, Julia and Sid fostered a sense of belonging and equality that was new to me.

That year IABA was all about the image/text nexus. The conference theme was 'Framing Lives' and I had been reading Hillary Chute's brilliant book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010) ahead of her keynote. That Chute was a keynote strikes me now as having an impact on my perception of IABA as well as my identity as a young scholar. Chute didn't look like the typical fusty academic of my inexperienced imagination at the time: she was a young woman with rockstar energy, she had long straight hair and wore striking black eyeliner. She asked intelligent, pointed questions of speakers, and had a quiet, grounded gravitas about her. Also, she studied comics. The broadening of scholarship to include a non-traditional form like graphic narrative – and the fact the conference was centring that form – gave me courage as I moved my own research in the direction of non-literary media.

Since then, I've seen this field change in exciting ways, and have always experienced IABA conferences – both world and chapters – to be a crucial site of development for relationship-building, project germination, and identity cultivation both for individual scholars but also for the field as a whole. Perhaps a useful term here is 'field culture'.

Along with other scholarly venues like key journals and institutionally based organisations, IABA conferences are sites that create and facilitate field culture. Borrowed from agricultural studies, field culture usually refers to the elements of crop-growing land which impact on the success of crops: soil, irrigation, fertiliser, minerals and organic compounds. Studies that attend to field culture examine how land might be managed to better nurture, feed, and harvest what is planted there. We are using this term as a suitable metaphor to describe the cultures of scholarly organisations and how their constituent elements might be examined and attended to in order to create better conditions for flourishing. Thus, we are thinking of field culture as the culture created within a discipline or field that, through social and language practices, shapes and produces knowledge, identities, relationships, subjectivities, shared meanings and norms. Because culture shapes knowledge production, and scholarly knowledge is a privileged kind of knowledge, it seems particularly important to think about the specific ways in which the culture of an academic field might shape the kind of knowledge it produces, and which socio-cultural practices arise from and, in turn, influence that culture.

Thinking about the role of academic conferences, Black et al. (2020, 117) assert that in addition to the other more obvious benefits like networking, building a CV, and sharing new ideas, 'the habitus of an academic conference offers a socialisation into a discipline or knowledge community'. And this socialisation is not always positive or inclusive. Conferences occupy a tricky place in academia and are sometimes written about in terms of the exclusionary practices they deploy (Burford and Henderson 2022, 150–151), the ways they uphold masculine norms (Bell and King 2010, 431–432) and how they alienate scholars (Baron et al. 2020, 5). These critiques are valid, and we do not wish to discount them here but rather, in contrast, to build on the research of scholars examining how such elements of conferences might be fought through what Chowdhury et al. (2016, 1800) refer to as 'relational practices of knowledge making, fieldwork, narrative, corporeality, and situated solidarities in, through, and despite the academy'. Reflecting on the boundary-breaking work of Richa Nagar (2014), Chowdhury et al. propose an academic sociality that creates space for 'radical vulnerability', collaboration across borders, and enlarging the scope for what counts as valued knowledge. Further, we are examining conferences as sites that facilitate and are shaped by 'social knowledge making' (Camic, Gross, and Lamont 2012, 4). We think that IABA conferences are sites at which the kind of academic sociality posited by Chowdhury et al. is enacted and fostered through practices of social knowledge-making in ways that contribute crucially to field culture.

Two specific elements of field culture that we're thinking about here are (a) the championing of early-career researchers, and (b) the championing of research that pushes against the established 'systems and structures of the academy' (to use Shannon's excellent phrase below), both of which extend the field into new territories. These elements constitute expansive practices that contribute to such a vibrant, boundary-breaking and growing interdisciplinary field. By sharing our experiences and reflections via the radically vulnerable method of autotheory/autocritography, we hope to illuminate some of the relational practices we have encountered at IABA conferences, and how we worked to integrate them in the spaces of a virtual conference.

Championing ECRs

Kate

Having an early-career researcher (ECRs) keynote was an idea I borrowed from another conference I attended (the Australian Literary Studies Convention, held online in 2021). ECRs have always been important to the tone and ethics of IABA. We have avoided the temptation to pigeonhole postgraduates or ECRs into particular sessions as other organisations sometimes do.

IABA was my first conference (IABA World in Melbourne, 2002). The theme 'Generations' seems particularly important, looking back. My PhD supervisor, who supported me at this conference, was Professor Gillian Whitlock. Kylie and I were both supervised by Gillian, and we have gone on to work together at Flinders University and, in turn, supervised the three co-authors of this paper.

One of these co-authors is Shannon Sandford whose work has always seemed to me so potently connected to that of Gillian's. Their strongest synergy is in their shared engagement with comics (what Gillian (2006) has referred to as 'autographics') and thinking about the political work these texts can do.[5] Gillian and Shannon are also both engaged in thinking about life narrative texts by and about asylum seeking and the refugee experience in Australia. In their respective discussions of varied life narrative texts ranging from letters, memoirs, social media texts, and comics, they each remind us of how Australia's shameful history of detention cannot be ignored.[6]

The synergies here seemed too perfect not to lean into. So, when I had the idea for the IABA ECR keynote, I spoke to Kylie about approaching Shannon to give the keynote and asking Gillian if she was supportive of us naming this 'The Whitlock IABA ECR Keynote'. Not only was Gillian thrilled with this, she attended the session and engaged in a lively and timely dialogue with Shannon that underlined the value of this session. If only I had remembered the theme of the Melbourne conference, it would have been powerful to mention it at this moment.

Shannon

My first IABA conference was also the inaugural conference for the IABA Asia-Pacific chapter, held in-person at Flinders University, South Australia, in December 2015. The theme was 'Locating Lives in the Asia-Pacific-Australian Region' and Gillian Whitlock was one of the keynotes, along with Craig Howes and Benjamin Law, an Australian writer and broadcaster. Kate was my honours supervisor at the time, and had asked a group of her students to volunteer at the event in exchange for a free ticket. Between handing out name-tags, setting up lunch and afternoon tea, and troubleshooting problems with AV, I would hover in the doorways of panels and plenary sessions, keen to observe but hesitant to enter and take a seat. I was uncertain I belonged in the same space (let alone the same room) as the writers and thinkers I had long studied and cited.

Conferences can be intimidating and exclusionary sites for early-career researchers, especially postgraduate students, with potential to reinforce power imbalances already broadly at work within more visible academic networks (Oliver and Morris 2020, 766). The ability to break into these networks requires careful navigation and performance, which is to say, becoming fluent in academic cultures means knowing how and

when to 'talk the talk' (Addison and Mountford 2015, 27). As others have noted, the rise in precarious work within the academy holds potential to further compound the isolation of early-career researchers, for whom research and networking as continuous activities is not always possible. I feel this especially as an academic currently on a fixed contract, working against a ticking clock to spend small pots of research funding, to make friends and peers, to find a place for myself in a global academy.

The first IABA Asia-Pacific was engaged in similar questions around how scholarly infrastructures, at a local and regional level, bear upon our ways of critically thinking and engaging with the interdiscipline of life writing (Cardell and Douglas 2017, 419). In the four conferences since, a strong focus on inviting new and emerging voices into this scholarly network has meant our conversations on the integration of the public and personal, the theoretical and practical, the experiential and representational, have held at their core a sense of the future. I saw The Whitlock ECR Keynote as a natural extension of what has always been the cultural mandate of the IABA at a regional and international level: to investigate what is emerging, urgent, or compelling in life narrative through research and creative scholarship that is inclusive, and that prioritises marginal and less visible writers, collaborators and communities.

Kate

This was how I introduced Shannon's keynote:

> It is my pleasure to introduce Dr Shannon Sandford from Griffith University, but, before I do, I would like to take this opportunity to note that this talk also launches the first 'IABA Gillian Whitlock Early-Career Researcher Keynote' which I hope is a tradition that we can continue at IABA Asia-Pacific and beyond. The presence of this keynote highlights the importance of recognising early-career researchers and their research, the impact this has on the IABA community, and the importance of early-career research to growing research in this field.
>
> We have named this ECR keynote the 'Whitlock ECR Keynote' in recognition of the pioneering work of Professor Gillian Whitlock and its ongoing impact in the IABA community. It's almost impossible to attend an IABA panel without hearing Gillian's research being cited. Her work, which is timely, politically focussed, generous, and accessible, has been truly defining of IABA researchers. Kylie Cardell and I are here today as proof of how effective Gillian and her work has been in launching early-career research. Gillian has never missed an opportunity to offer her generous support, belief, and encouragement to new researchers in the IABA community.
>
> And, so, it seems fitting that the inaugural presentation will be given by Dr Shannon Sandford. An academic generation after Dr Kylie Cardell and I were supervised by Gillian, Shannon was supervised by us.
>
> Shannon is a curious and generous scholar. Her research concerns innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of Life Narrative in graphic and digital forms, paying particular attention to the ways in which platforms, affordances, and audiences across both visual and digital cultures contribute to evolving perspectives on personal storytelling. Through this lens, she explores stories of illness, precarity, loss, and trauma that emerge powerfully through exploratory and experimental literary forms such as webcomics, which combine visual artistry with modern methods of production, consumption, and circulation. She also engages in the scholarship of learning and teaching in the areas of life narrative and literary studies. I have enjoyed the various opportunities we have had to work together and am excited to continue our collaborations. Shannon completed her PhD at

Flinders University in 2022, titled: 'Drawing Digital: Exploring the Subjects and Spaces of Autobiographical Webcomics'. She has since moved on to Griffith University where she works as a Lecturer in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science. Shannon has published in leading, interdisciplinary literary studies journals, including *Textual Practice*, *Journal of Australian Studies*, and *Image & Narrative* as well as in highly regarded open access journals such as *TEXT* and *On_Culture*. Her forthcoming book, which will be published in the Bloomsbury New Directions in Life Narrative Research is titled *Digital and In/Visible Lives in Autobiographical Webcomics*.

Shannon is a future leader in this IABA network, so it is exciting to have her speak to us today about her work. The title of her paper is: 'Weird Work: Reading and Thinking "In Between" As Early Career Research'. Please join me in welcoming Dr Shannon Sandford.

Shannon

Writing this keynote, I was deeply aware of the connective threads tying my development as an early-career researcher to my mentors, Kate and Kylie, to their mentor, Gillian, and to the other co-authors of this paper, who all confirm to me the ways life narrative brings us into relation with each other. The keynote presented an opportunity to interrogate life narrative as a discipline not only invested in understanding the production, mediation, or reception of personal stories, but a practice for thinking through our relationships to work, in particular, to the nebulous and opaque categories that define career progression in the academy. I thought about how the term early-career researcher, meant to capture the liminal period between PhD graduate and established academic, signals and operates as a specific identity position in addition to a career phase. Early-career research is 'weird work': characterised by institutional uncertainty and transition, where belonging necessitates juggling, balancing, challenging, and constructing various positionalities and identities. The study of life narrative, in its similar occupation with movements and transits, offers early-career researchers a language for our experiences and a way to make sense of the slippages and contradictions of our work. It enables us to know ourselves otherwise, beyond the intensely pressurised environment we enter as new academics.

At a time when funding for conferences is tightening, and international travel is less accessible to new scholars, the role of the academic conference is increasingly challenged as an essential method for shaping research and career trajectories (Falk and Hagsten 2021, 709). Like many of the moves made in organising this conference, creating opportunities for early-career researchers keeps in view the necessity and vitality of our academic networks for pushing the field of life narrative into its future iterations. Prioritising inclusion and interdisciplinarity is not only the broad aim of IABA conferences, it is central to the work we do as emerging and established generations of life narrative scholars. A desire to push boundaries – to think with/in or through sites of self, writing, theory and creativity – also informs our attention to the current 'auto' work of both critical and creative practitioners that make rich contributions to IABA A-P field culture.

Pushing boundaries: creative practice, autocrit and autofic

Kylie

For a long while, on a bookshelf in my office, was a subject of mirth for an academic colleague. Peter Elbow's *Everyone Can Write* (published in 2000) always drew an ironic

aside: *Sure*, *but* should *they*? 'Everyone has a book inside them', goes the cliche, usually attributed to the journalist Christopher Hitchens, and invariably completed by some version of this sardonic conclusion: 'which is exactly where it should, I think, in most cases, remain'.[7] Life narratives have been one of the key genres of literary democratisation, a form through which the historical canonical boundaries and borders of storytelling have been challenged, changed, and contested – and often with much ongoing complaint from guardians of the 'canon'. Key in this has been the concerted attention turned by life writing scholars (notably, feminist critics) to representing and accounting for ordinary lives and everyday voices. But life narrative has not only ushered in forms of representation and witnessing that have been instrumental in making way for more inclusive and diverse representations of individuals in relation to their own lives and histories as well as those of their communities, but has been transformative for scholars and scholarship. Lynn Z. Bloom (2008, 11), in her opening chapter to *Writers Without Borders: Writing and Teaching Writing in Troubled Times*, deploys a style she says has become a movement. 'Cathy and Jane and Marianna and Alice. Phyllis, Nancy, Sandra, Susan … Carolyn would've come but she was too busy being Amanda […] we had been labouring for long years in that stuffy house, trying to untangle miles of syntax, to define complex abstractions with other abstractions, tired of defending ourselves against interpellation, hegemony, erasure'. The personal-sounding academic essay or 'autocritography' as Helen M. Buss (2005) deliberately-tentatively calls it in her essay on 'genreing' is a form of writing that situates the subject in relation to their writing. It is a mode of refusing objectivity; it is the personal as/in research. For scholars like Bloom or Buss, creative academic writing is an ethical position and it is intrinsic to life narrative as a mode of knowledge production. In recent years, this movement has become enshrined in theoretical approaches such as that outlined by Lauren Fournier (2021). Indeed, as Donna Lee Brien and Quinn Eades (2018, 3) observe, life writing is so often characterised by an intersection of theory and practise that it is a field where 'both *doing* and *thinking*' has become a feature.

Increasingly, the visibility of writers-as-theorists and/or/both scholars-as-writers shapes our field. So too, making way for the creative and the personal in research is a mandate of our discussion here, and this is an approach that reflects the context of our work as scholars and teachers of life writing in the twenty-first century, in which theory and practice are intertwined in everyday and quotidian ways – in the classroom and in the curriculum, as well as in research. As researchers who supervise doctoral projects in life writing practice as well as theory, as life narrative scholars deeply interested in genre and the politics of borders and boundaries that also exist in literary forms, it was important to us that our conference make space for creative practitioners. We believe that this has been one of the key contributions that IABA Asia-Pacific has made to IABA, more generally. Life Writing that has primarily foreground creative practice has always been highly visible at our conferences, and we can see its rise across the chapters and IABA World.

For the conference, we worked with the Assemblage Centre for Creative Arts at our University to fund an in-conversation session with the author Andre Dao; while academic labour has its own economy, it is crucial that creative writers (many of whom also work precariously inside the academy) are paid fairly for their work. We are grateful to Assemblage for enabling and facilitating this plenary for fair exchange. Dao's work was

particularly interesting for our conference because it asks questions about form and genre. During our discussion, Dao acknowledged that his book, *Anam,* could usefully be categorised as autofiction, though this was a frame that emerged organically rather than one he had set about to achieve consciously. It was a result of an ongoing negotiation with the ethics of how to tell his story of his family, how to narrate a history of displaced Vietnamese people, and how to navigate the ethics of silence and the politics of testimony at the same time.

Life Writing blurs the boundaries between critical and 'creative' modes of thinking; it challenges the separation of theory and life, or a perceived gap between 'writer' and scholar. Because life writers are often driving forward experiment and play, engaging with the work of new and emerging life writers is part of how our field grows and responds and this has been formative for scholars as well as practitioners. Participating in the conversation with Dao enabled me to recognise and amplify the important ethical and cross-genre negotiations that Dao has made in generating his text as well as the labour emotional and otherwise of negotiations made with family and others and whose lives have informed his work. Here, conversation and discourse that too often is seen as 'adjacent' to literary study – which yet tends to dichotomise life as *versus* text – is given space in a scholarly context and for a predominantly academic audience. I see this kind of incorporation and inclusion in the space of an academic conference as a critical mode for attention (and reparation) to the costs of 'producing' an autobiographical text, and especially one that testifies, as Dao's does, to histories of trauma and ongoing pain. Such space and attention from within the academy to the work of creative writers is critical given the challenges of representation that life writers in particular negotiate and bear, and the inordinate costs they continue to face by doing so (Van Zweden 2020, 158; Cardell et al. n.d.)

Marina

As a practice-led Life Writing ECR, engaging creative practitioners, and integrating creative practice and output as a core part of this conference was also a goal of mine. As Kylie suggests, creation of and interaction with creative scholarship is a self-reflexive and expansive process. It allows us to acknowledge the challenges or strengths of either space and address them through play, creativity, and out of the box analysis. Speaking about creative process also opens doors to speak about academic process, something which emerged from this conference and stood out to me as a powerful and future-facing collaborative approach. When we talk not only about the work that we do, but the ways that work is formed, shared, obscured, revealed, we move into the heart of peer-supported knowledge. This was especially evident to me while listening to Shannon's keynote breaking down the ECR mystique, acknowledging the challenges alongside the joys. It was also present in the panel discussion around the edited collection, *In the Spaces Provided.* Authors from this collection (myself included) discussed gender and gendered inequities within and beyond the academy, the ways we use life narratives as tools of academic self-discovery or how life narratives are wielded and weaponised by institutions. The theme of telling trauma stories also felt like a space of peer-supported and collaborative meaning making; from Emma Maguire's (2023a) work around reception to sexual assault narratives and resistance memoirs to Julie Fletcher's (2023) work on

extreme war-time testimony and protest, including self-immolation. The discussions prompted and facilitated by these scholars and others were an impactful form of peer-supported meaning-making; drawing links between the kinds of work and scholarship underway but also deeper discussions around what it means to be human and to tell difficult stories.

These discussions were facilitated by question time at the end of each panel (which were shorter or longer depending on how long the presentations ran for) and, perhaps surprisingly for an online conference, in the hazy times between sessions. In the in-between moments some of us were answering student emails, making lunch. Others were hanging the washing on the line, wrangling children. It was a different 'chat around the water cooler' kind of space and allowed different kinds of conversations to emerge. We spoke about capitalism, class, how to enable and uplift life stories in tumultuous times. I felt, to some degree, that the online context allowed for these discussions to emerge more naturally than they might in person. At first I thought it was that we were emboldened by the distance between us, by speaking to each other from our own spaces – our living rooms and offices, but upon reflection I think it was precisely the distance which encouraged us to imbue our discussions with radical sincerity, honesty, and collegiality in an attempt to close the physical spaces between us. Having undertaken the majority of my PhD during the pandemic, and now as an ECR in a changed academic atmosphere, I sometimes lament the opportunities or details I may have missed by conducting learning, teaching, conferences, and meetings online. Experiences such as this IABA A-P conference remind me, however, that there are also unique things to be gained from these exact spaces and contexts. At this conference I felt engaged in a new kind of vulnerability and trust which seem to be key tenets of effective field culture.

When I speak to this idea of peer-supported knowledge I would be remiss if I didn't also echo Kylie's thoughts on the ways that IABA, and this conference in particular, enables 'discipline-curious' scholars working interdisciplinarily with life narratives to make contact and situate and inform their own work in new ways. We welcomed industry-based practitioners such as journalists and archivists who spoke to their field-specific contexts as well as linking to – potentially new to them – life narrative concepts we see as our bread and butter. This allowed for a knowledge exchange which was exciting, fruitful, and at times unexpected. Similarly, at this conference I saw, more so than ever before, the welcoming and inclusion of predominantly fiction-based writers who are experimenting with elements of autofiction, biography, imagination-based life writing. This last group were largely present in the creative event I organised and co-chaired with Dr Daniel Juckes and Dr Gemma Nisbet titled 'Life as Research and Researching Life'.

As well as forging integrated discussions of creativity and critical theory, I'm also passionate about carving *dedicated* time for creatives to connect and share work. Dan, Gemma, and I – along with the organising committee authoring this paper – wanted to create a reading event which was relaxed yet rigorous, and felt social even while restricted to our online setting. We therefore held it in the evening (Australian-time, it was daytime elsewhere for our participants but the Australian cohort was the largest). We invited a range of speakers working in different spaces, genres, and from different points in their career.[8] Considering this it was strange, and wonderful, that all of the speakers who ended up presenting spoke and read from projects which blur

the lines of fiction and non-fiction. For example: Claire Lynch spoke to the idea of 'conjectional life writing'; Lisa Bennett read from her recent speculative biography *Viking Women*. The audience discussion afterwards centred around embodied detail in historical writing and what can be known, what is unknown, and bridging these gaps with intentional, informed imagination. Holly Hershman spoke about the double-experimental use of second person in autofiction; Jessica White explored a fictio-biographical work in progress extrapolating feeling from landscape and nature writing, drawing upon bodily connections to plant life. Overarchingly, imagination emerged as a strong theme within this session and, I believe, across the conference more broadly. Creative methods and rationales are useful in the field, but imagination and *invention* also has a (hotly debated) place in the equation. I think this is summed up well by something Dao said during the question time after his keynote: 'everything remembered is also made up'. The work of the creative scholars in our Life as Research and Researching Life event, the rigorous discussions that emerged, and the boundary and genre-pushing work presented and created through discussion within this conference reinforced the essential multilayered and multidisciplinary space that life narratives inhabit. It reminded me that we cannot assess Life Writing in only one dimension or from one angle such as 'truth'. Although truth and fidelity are core elements of questions within the field, we need to push our questions further than ever. We need to have curiosity about new approaches and invite our imaginations to the table. This was ever-present at IABA Asia-Pacific 2023.

Shannon

Beyond the sessions themselves, what seemed to animate the conference was a broad acknowledgement of life narrative as a discipline and practice 'purport[ing] to speak a truth about lived experience' (Poletti 2020, 6) that is now intersecting with autocritical, autofictional, autotheoretical methods of representing a life. What we valued and sought to make visible – above the in-progress and ongoing work of those who participated – were the contradictions and slipperiness of life narrative that, paradoxically, enables life stories to become more materially present in the world. As Marina suggests, there are several connective threads emerging across the sessions that signal the ways 'life narrative thinking' is always-already engaged in understanding how the 'auto' becomes suspended in a range of practices of self-inscription and -representation. The complex intersections of 'truth' and 'fiction' that reflect some the field's key preoccupations also informed the decisions we made in organising the conference, captured:

- In the theme for the conference and the 'unprecedented times' that necessitated its online presentation via Zoom;
- In the purposeful spaces held for emerging scholarly (Whitlock ECR Keynote) and creative (Assemblage Keynote) voices that signalled life narrative's new energies and directions;
- In shifts in disciplinary thinking that locate creativity and testimonial 'truth' within a research/writing nexus (Life as Research Plenary) and identity bound by, or perhaps even liberated from, the systems and structures of the academy (In the Spaces Provided Plenary).

Emma

As Shannon, Marina and Kylie suggest, the various entanglements of fictive, autobiographical and scholarly modes of writing emerged as a key research interest at the conference. Shannon's keynote used her experiences as a jumping off point for her theorising of the ECR experience. The impassioned and urgent keynote given by Ayu Saraswati (2023b) illuminated insights gleaned from the writing of her book *Scarred: A Feminist Journey Through Pain* (2023a), which is a blend of memoir and scholarly criticism. Kylie's keynote on the contemporary essay showed how this form continues to be used in innovative ways to intellectualise the personal. And Kylie and Marina have spoken about the creative plenary and Andre Dao's keynote. I was fortunate to be asked to contribute to the In the Spaces Provided plenary session, where I was one of several speakers who gave papers based on our contributions to Lisa Ortiz-Villarelle's collection *Career Narratives and Academic Womanhood: In the Spaces Provided*. The chapter I wrote for this book (Maguire 2023b), in which I share some challenging professional experiences and apply my expertise as a life narrative scholar to analyse them, is my first foray into autotheory – a method I had to learn to love and now value greatly.

The term and method of autotheory emerges from the work of Lauren Fournier (2021, 4), who identifies it as a feminist method and 'means of critique' as well as a broader cultural turn, examining the 'ways theory is mobilised in artistic practices as a means of garnering social, political, cultural, and institutional capital and knowledge from lived experience' and 'the ways identity is performed in relation to theory'.

I found it a vulnerable way to work, and felt that it exposed parts of my identity as an academic that usually remained out of print and off the page. But it allowed me to explore new ways of professional being, and new ways of researching that have become indispensable now. Importantly for the conference, I read an excerpt from my chapter which relayed some painful professional experiences. Afterwards, I had several impactful email exchanges with others who got in touch to share their own experiences and to offer support and validation, which I reciprocated.

These meaningful exchanges happened in the private space of email rather than the more public forum of the conference session Q and A, and I was interested in how the sites of the virtual conference worked to facilitate social connection. I think that the vulnerability inherent in the autotheoretical mode, and the space the conference programme provided to share this vulnerable work, opened out a new space in the conference experience I would not have accessed otherwise, one that facilitated intimate connections and social bonding. This is one of the challenges of virtual conferences, and my experience suggests that one strategy to overcome the virtual barrier may be to create safe spaces for vulnerability and openness, as well as nooks or private spaces, that the traditional conference session of 3–4 papers and question time may not always provide.

Conclusion

Shannon, Kate, Emma, Marina, Kylie

The learnings that we have presented here draw on our individual and collective experiences of IABA's culture and conferences to offer some possible paths forward in an ever-

changing and increasingly in-crisis sector. These experiences, and the meaning we have made from them through autocritical reflection, are shared in a spirit of optimism as well as an acknowledgement of the structural difficulties inherent in academia.

We have also offered the term 'field culture' as a way to describe and draw attention to the ways in which sociality, collectivity and scholarship of academic organisations work to shape research and researchers. Field culture, to borrow the botanical metaphor, is something which must be watered, nurtured, gently guided. There is an acknowledgement between the writers of this paper, and perhaps the IABA cohort at large, that we cannot *hope* that people will feel included or that inventive or new areas of thought will emerge; we must sow those seeds intentionally. It is through active practices such as accessible and inviting conferences with dedicated space for new or emerging voices and forms that we allow growth and enable strength.

Holding space for new shifts and traditions, evolutions and directions, in life narrative is a central concern of the IABA conferences at both world and chapter levels. This is a practice borne out in a sense of belonging, inclusion, and reciprocity that perhaps distinguishes IABA as one of the few academic associations without a formal membership process and no annual fees. The payoff, going forwards, is a sustainable field culture. Because a diversity of scholars, including postgraduates and ECRs have always been central to our field culture, the future looks bright.

Notes

1. Consider the groundbreaking work of Nancy K. Miller (2002) or Lyn Z. Bloom (2003, 2008). The practice is so rich it has become a new norm, for instance, the new collection by Lisa Ortiz-Villarelle, *Career Narratives and Academic Womanhood: In the Spaces Provided* (2023) offers autoethnographic essays on academic careers.
2. This summary comes from the official website for the IABA Asia-Pacific chapter: https://iabaasiapacific.wordpress.com/.
3. https://iabawarsaw2023.eu/.
4. Magee (2023, 15), for instance, argues that other factors including how conferences contribute to institutional prestige or individual promotion (operate in an inherently extractive system) cannot be separated from any environmental strategies and commitments that might be deployed.
5. Sandford, Shannon (2021). "'You Can't Combat Nothing': Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* and Reframing Mental Illness Through Webcomics." Special issue, *On_Culture 11*. https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2021.1224; Sandford, Shannon (2022). "'Loading memories … ': Deteriorating Pasts and Distant Futures in Stuart Campbell's *These Memories Won't Last*." Special issue, *TEXT* 26 (69): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.57765;

   Whitlock, Gillian (2006). "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (4): 965–979. https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2007.0013; Whitlock, Gillian and Anna Poletti. 2008. "Self-regarding Art." *Biography* 31 (1): v–xxiii. https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.0.0004.
6. Sandford, Shannon (Forthcoming). *Digital and In/Visible Lives in Autobiographical Webcomics*. London: Bloomsbury; Whitlock, Gillian (2007). *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
7. The quote is apocryphal but perhaps most recently attributed to Hitchens by Violet Daniels (2021). "Should Everyone Write a Book? If You Have an Idea, Let it Out" Medium (blog). June 18, 2021.
8. It should be noted that academic careers are not linear, particularly for creative academics who create within and across divergent and coalescing work contexts. What I am aiming

to express here is that some of our participants were newer to the life writing space, others were more established, some were newer to sharing their writing in this field, others more practised.

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