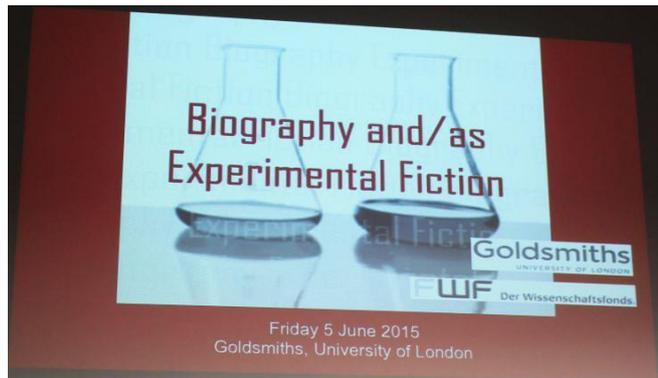


“Biography and/as Experimental Fiction”: Conference Report

On 5 June some 40 biography enthusiasts convened at Goldsmiths University of London for a one-day conference on “Biography and/as Experimental Fiction”, which was organised by Julia Lajta-Novak and Lucia Boldrini. The idea for the conference had sprung from the organisers’ shared interest in intersections of biography and fiction. Two wonderful keynote speakers were quickly agreed on – Max Saunders and Janice Galloway – and Goldsmiths was designated the perfect place for such an endeavour, as the college not only runs a widely successful MA in “Creative and Life-Writing” but is also home to several notable auto/biography critics and practicing biographers (Bart Moore-Gilbert, Alan Downie, Tim Parnell, Helen Carr, among others).



Julia Lajta-Novak and Lucia Boldrini opened the conference by pointing out that while experimentation has been a staple diet of fiction writers for centuries, it is still considered problematic in the domain of life-writing, where positivist Victorian values prevail to this day. The declared aim of the conference was thus to examine formal innovations in auto/biographical texts from the 20th and 21st centuries that were commonly associated with the fictional mode.

International in scope, the programme featured speakers from Italy, Iceland, Spain, Austria, and the UK. The first panel focused on family history and also on intermediality in experimental life-writing. **Pietra Palazzolo** opened the session with an examination of Jackie Kay’s structural experiments in her adoption memoir *Red Dust Road* (2010). She pointed out how Kay’s search for her identity as an adopted mixed-race daughter of white Scottish parents is reflected in her search for a suitable form to both contain her and her families’ stories and accommodate her fractured sense of self, which gave rise to a vivid discussion in which Kay’s novel *Trumpet* and her poetry collection *The Adoption Papers* were compared to *Red Dust Road* as part of the same quest for form.

Expanding on the theme of the biographical quest, **Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir**’s analysis of Mexican-Catalan author Jordi Soler’s trilogy *La Guerra perdida* (2004-2009) cast a spotlight on the author’s play with narrative modes especially in the last part of the trilogy, *La Fiesta de oso*. Tracing his family’s past, Soler’s inclusion of fantastical elements and folklore in his multigeneric narrative invokes the function of folklore to transmit the memories and values of a people





and help them come to terms with experiences such as exile, war, and loss, Gudmundsdottir argued.

The two papers that followed considered auto/biographical experiments which, visibly or covertly, draw on other media in the telling of lives. **Antonio Lunardi's** intriguing reflections on Italian author and journalist Lalla Romano's *Romanzo di figure*

(1986) posited Romano's annotated family album-cum-novel as an interesting example of intermedial refiguration. Pointing out how the mingling of photographs and verbal commentary prescribed a cyclical reading pattern, Lunardi concluded that responsibility is left with the reader to construct a "story" from Romano's auto/biographical fragments. In a less obvious manner, Spanish novelist Javier Marías also draws on a second medium in his 'false novel' *Dark Back of Time* (*Negra espalda del tiempo*, 1998): that of animation film. **María Alhambra Díaz's** perceptive reading of the author's ludic and metaleptic text revealed its parallels with Disney animation extravaganza *The Three Caballeros* (1944). Like Donald Duck, José "Zé" Carioca and Panchito, Marías's biographical subjects John Gawsworth, Wilfred Ewart and Hugh Oloff de Wet move between narrative and generic realms in a spirit of anarchic play that was shown to have its own heuristic potential.

Introduced by Chris Baldick, the first plenary lecture "[A] novel should be the biography of a man or of an affair, and a biography, whether of a man or an affair, should be a novel': *Ford Madox Ford and Modernist Experiments in Biography*" was delivered by **Max Saunders**, Director of the Arts & Humanities Research Institute (AHRI) and the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College London. Providing fascinating insights into the impressionist method and factual inaccuracies of Ford's *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (1924), Saunders made a claim for Ford's book as a precursor to such modernist experiments in life-writing as *Orlando*, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *The Quest for Corvo*, while at the same time reading it as an example of a peculiarly Fordian "postmodernism-within-modernism".



Presentations continued after a generous sandwich lunch and sun-bathing on the nearby college lawn. A common theme in the second panel was war/national history. **Polly Jones's** fascinating account of the 'Fiery Revolutionaries' biography series issued by the Soviet state publishing house from 1968 to 1991 outlined the Soviet regime's efforts to personalise ideology in narratives about party heroes. This led to the creation of novelistic and even experimental works which, as Jones demonstrated, ultimately challenged the didactic aims of the series.

Vanessa Hanneschläger shed light on controversial Austrian author Peter Handke's complex integration of non-fictional storylines in his play *Storm Still* (*Immer noch Sturm*, 2010), written in the form of a classical five-act drama but set as running text. Ostensibly telling the story of his Corinthian Slovene family members, Handke added to their actual experiences an imagined contribution to the Corinthian Slovene resistance to the Nazis,



for which, in turn, he drew on actual partisan memoirs. A dynamic discussion ensued about the function of Handke's auto/biographical experiment in *Storm Still* in the context of what was termed his ongoing "love affair" with Serbia.

In his analysis of B. S. Johnson's non-fiction novel *Trawl* (1964), **Andy Wimbush** ("Christ this is getting tedious!": Beckettian Tone versus Narrated Memory in

B.S. Johnson's *Trawl*") explored Johnson's indebtedness to Beckettian reflexive epanorthosis. Illuminating stylistic similarities between Johnson's quasi-autobiographical "interior monologue" and Beckett's 'trilogy' *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, Wimbush also pointed out how they differ in purpose, the radical austerity of Beckett's tone being contrasted by the more compassionate register of Johnson's more personal narrative.

The day's third and final panel, chaired by biographer and critic Robert Fraser, featured three practicing experimental biographers who gave an insight into their recent works or works-in-progress. **Mark Thompson** opened the session with some provocative remarks on the purpose of literary biography (such as that it *must* offer a fresh critical understanding of the writer's work, if it is to have any value at all), to then outline the challenges he faced in the making of *Birth Certificate* (2013), his biography of Yugoslav experimental writer Danilo Kiš, which was shortlisted for a National Book Critics Circle Award.



His paper was followed by **Ursula Hurley's** account of writing two versions of the life of English poet and dramatist Elizabeth Cary (1585–1639) – one 'straight', shortlisted for the Tony Lothian Prize, one experimental, which won the Unbound Press First Chapter Prize and was shortlisted for the MMU Novella Award – both as yet unpublished. Hurley outlined how she settled on a narrative with three layers which centred on the biographer

(Hurley), Elizabeth Cary, and Mariam, the subject of Cary's progressive play about 'the Fair Queen of Jewry'. Like Mark Thompson's, Hurley's overriding concern in her experimental text was with finding a form that would do justice to her subject as a writer.

Immediately following these two practice-based accounts was Scottish author **Janice Galloway's** plenary lecture "Choosing between Fictions of Clara Schumann", about her award-winning biographical novel *Clara*. While Galloway's



initial remarks on the self-crippling practices and anxieties of academic life-writers ruffled some feathers, the audience was spell-bound by her animated and humorous explanation (which included much waving of the arms and deploying of 'strong', decidedly non-academic language) of her novel's typographical anomalies that serve to evoke the music pervading her subject's life and to self-reflexively question the claim to historical truth of any biographical narrative. After a long, intensive day, her lecture provided a fitting conclusion to the conference, highlighting once more the heuristic (rather than merely ornamental) value of formal experiments in biographical texts, and the audience's questions and discussion were continued into the wine reception.

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<http://www.uni-salzburg.at/ang/lajta-novak>

Conference Website:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/ecl/events/biography-and-as-experimental-fiction/>



