The UWS Writing and Society Research Group presents an interdisciplinary symposium

Trauma: Writing, Art & Affect

www.uws.edu.au/writing_society
UWS Writing & Society Research Group

The Writing and Society Research Group brings together scholars, writers, critics and editors with a common interest in exploring the social power of writing. The Group promotes research in literary publishing, literary history, the new technologies of writing, and changing patterns of readership, in addition to its commitment to the publication of contemporary literature through HEAT magazine and the Giramondo book imprint. Its members are specialists in Australian literature, scholars engaged with classic works and authors, literary theorists, poets and novelists, and practitioners in the new genres of non-fiction. Our overall interest is in literature as an instrument of thought and emotion, as a form of knowledge, and as an agent for the examination of social and cultural values.

Trauma: Writing, Art & Affect

Trauma: Writing, Art & Affect widens the lens for examining the generation, transmission and representation of trauma beyond that of clinical analysis and traditional trauma theory. This symposium has been created to explore and embrace both critical and creative perspectives. Papers, roundtable presentations and discussion and literary readings encompass a multi-faceted approach to trauma, from the familial to the political, from textual analysis to theories of affect. It is our intention that this event establishes and strengthens connections and start conversations about the nature of trauma and its representations in literature, art and film, and the relationship between trauma and creative practice. Our program offers diverse viewpoints and focuses to facilitate engaging and dynamic dialogue.
Program

9:00am  Coffee & Welcome

9:30am  Session 1: Deborah Staines, Anna Gibbs, Michael Richardson

11:00am Morning Tea

11:30am Session 2: Magdalena Zolkos, Meera Atkinson, Tessa Lunney

1:00pm  Lunch

2:00pm Roundtable 1: Presentations and Q&A with Jennifer Biddle, Robert Sinnerbrink, Elizabeth Day, Robyn Ferrell and Joanne Faulkner

3:30pm  Afternoon Tea

3:45pm Roundtable 2: Roundtable question time.

5:00pm Literary readings & drinks at Sugarcane: Belinda Castles, Meera Atkinson, Tessa Lunney, Michael Richardson and Kay Rozynski

6:00pm Dinner at Sugarcane (optional, $30 per person)

Note: Sugarcane is located across the road from the NSW Teachers Federation on Reservoir St, Surry Hills.
Deborah Staines  
deborah.staines@arts.monash.edu.au  
Monash University  

“Writing the Holocaust: the Auschwitz Sonderkommando and the Scene of Writing”

This paper explores Auschwitz as a scene of writing and remembering. Within the Auschwitz crematoria, at the very core of the industrialised genocide, writing took place and these handwritten testimonies of the Sonderkommando have been recovered and published. Both as material statements and as written documents, these texts perform a scene of writing amongst the ashes. I have drawn the term ‘scene of writing’ from Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the intrapsychic writing of memories imagined by Freud. Derrida suggests that this scene can be perceived topographically as imagining and constituting an horizon of the world. My focus on this act of writing by the Sonderkommando, attends to the fact that on the horizon of their certain death these people chose to write. That act stages multiple possibilities – the voice of the subjugated, horizons of memory beyond Auschwitz, the promise of a future, as well as textual gaps and human silences – that this paper aims to think through. Sonderkommando were predominantly Jewish victims, selected from incoming transports, and acted as prisoner-functionaries in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. The Sonderkommando’s proximity to the machinery of genocide, and their experience of forced labour, made them both witnesses and actors in the genocidal process. Their ambiguous position was memorably interpreted by Primo Levi as locating them within a “grey zone”. Today, exploring the complex ambiguities of such grey zones is a key part of Holocaust research. I re-consider the individual and group agency of the Sonderkommando as revealed in their buried manuscripts, by their own words and their associative meanings. My reading works towards a refiguration of the Sonderkommando experience and subject position, and a deepening of our historical understanding of the Holocaust.

Deborah Staines completed her PhD Auschwitz as Public Culture in 2001, and has lectured in Holocaust and genocide studies at the University of Melbourne, and Monash University. She held a research fellowship at Cambridge University in 2007. Staines has also established a record in conflict research, editing and contributing to Interrogating the War on Terror: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2007); and is currently working issues of gender and genocide. Relevant publications include ‘Knowledge, memory and justice: some grey areas in contemporary Holocaust research’, Journal of Contemporary History. 42:4, 2007.

Anna Gibbs  
a.gibbs@uws.edu.au  
Writing & Society Research Group, UWS  

“Cut: trauma and the aesthetic of shock”

Shock is a foundational trope in trauma theory, deriving in part from medicine and in part from discourses that, from the late-nineteenth century on, held shock and its impact on the nerves to be characteristic of modernity. In a social climate in which crisis has become – paradoxically – routine, and trauma is no longer an extraordinary rupture but an ongoing series of after-shocks without origin and seemingly without end, we are compelled to move beyond an aesthetics of shock and paralysing awe. Using examples drawn from film, art and writing, this paper considers how aesthetic engagement might work as an interruption to the everyday, a redirection of attention elsewhere, and a form of apprehension by another means.

Anna Gibbs has published across the genres of fiction, poetry, and fictocriticism, as well as
critical and theoretical writing in textual, cultural and feminist studies. A member of the editorial boards of Australian Cultural Studies, The UTS Review, Cultural Studies, and Social Semiotics, at various times, Anna has also been a member of the Board of Directors of various arts organisations. She has co-edited two collections of Australian writing, and her current research interests include affect theory, public emotion, embodiment and corporeality, psychoanalysis, and media (including writing for new media). She is working on an ARC-funded research project, 'The Power of the Image', with Virginia Nightingale.

Michael Richardson
m.richardson@uws.edu.au
Writing & Society Research Group, UWS

“Torturous Affect: Writing and the Problem of Pain”

“It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me,” wrote Jean Améry of his torture by the Nazis. “The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say” (1980: 33). This idea that pain of torture is somehow unrepresentable contains a certain truth, but does it tell the whole story? In the torture chamber more is at work than pain alone: fear, disgust and shame all operate in different ways on and between tortured and torturing bodies. This paper unpacks the affective dynamics of the torture chamber to suggest, drawing on the work of Silvan Tomkins and Sara Ahmed, a vocabulary for the encounter of bodies within it. Setting my analysis within the specific context of the war on terror and drawing on the writing of my own novel-in-progress, I argue that while the pain of torture might be in some sense beyond language in the instance of its occurrence, the possibility of its writing emerges most powerfully in the passage of time and the way in which the trauma of torture, the sedimentation of pain, shame, fear and disgust, meets with unexpected possibility the interest of literature in what Cathy Caruth calls “the complex relations between knowing and not knowing” (1996: 2).

Michael Richardson is completing a Doctorate of Creative Arts with the Writing & Society Research Group the University of Western Sydney. His research into narrative, bodies and torture during the war on terror is comprised of both a novel and an academic thesis. He received an MSc International Relations from the London School of Economics and was the only Australian speechwriter in Canadian federal politics.

Magdalena Zolkos
m.zolkos@uws.edu.au
Centre for Citizenship & Public Policy, UWS

“Figures of Mute Testimony, Silence of the Unrepresentable and Ruptured Speech in the Literature and Theory of the Holocaust Trauma”

A recurrent image informing many literary, cinematic and philosophical narratives of the Holocaust is that of a subsiding or interrupted voice of a witness. The evocative and haunting images of witnesses going mute in the face of the task of narrating genocidal and atrocious events include prisoners of Auschwitz, Abraham Bomba in Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah, and K-Zetnik, described by Hannah Arendt in Eichmann in Jerusalem, who faints in the Israeli courtroom in the moment when his testimony is interrupted by the judge. The theorists of trauma and genocidal affects suggested that the figure of “mute witness” points towards a paradigmatic crisis of socio-linguistic articulation and of the identity of the subject vis-à-vis (as Lyotard argued) the unrepresentable and unimaginable event of the Holocaust. Here, the traumatic foreclosure of speech becomes a sign of the concurrent foreclosure of meaning and interpretation. This paper explores the diverse figurations of muteness, silence and the breakdown of speech in the Holocaust literature, including, perhaps controversially
Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* and Wilkomirski’s *Fragments*, and uncovers in them a complex narrative matrix of silence, enunciation and interruption; embodied testimony and embodied memory; trauma and transmission, etc. The paper concludes by exploring possibilities and limitations of the figures of interrupted or foreclosed speech in analysing the provocative public effects of texts such as *The Painted Bird* or *Fragments*, and for exploring ethical dilemmas in the productions of (‘inauthentic’, ‘fictionalized’, ‘falsified’) Holocaust memory.

*Magdalena Zolkos* is Research Fellow in Political Theory in the Centre for Citizenship and Public Policy at the University of Western Sydney. She is the author of *Reconciling Community and Subjective Life. Trauma Testimony as Political Theorizing in the Work of Jean Améry and Imre Kertész* (New York: Continuum, 2010), and co-editor of *Action and Appearance: Ethics and the Politics of Writing in Hannah Arendt* (New York: Continuum, 2011). She is currently working on a book project about the figure of pariah in political thought, where she investigates the relationship between marginality, sacrality, and liminal conditions of the body in the formation of political community.

*Meera Atkinson*  
meeraatkinson@yahoo.com  
Writing & Society Research Group, UWS  
“Channelling the spectre and translating phantoms: Hauntology and the spooked text”

This paper explores the poetics of transgenerational trauma and its affective operations via Colin Davis’s 2005 essay, ‘Hauntology, spectres and phantoms.’ The contrasting of Jacques Derrida’s notion of the ‘spectre’ and Abraham and Torok’s psychoanalytic concept of the ‘phantom’ offers a distinguishing frame-work for thinking about traumatic writing and radical texts. I will propose that traumatic writing is a witnessing to the multi-generational ghost story and a translation of the phantom’s secret.

*Meera Atkinson* is a PhD candidate in the Writing and Society Research Group at the University of Western Sydney. Her project involves a creative and theoretical exploration of the transgenerational transmission and poetics of trauma. Having graduated from the University of Technology, Sydney, with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication (majoring in Writing and Philosophy) in 1994, she later earned a Master of Arts in Creative Writing (Research) from the University of Queensland. Meera is a poet and writer whose work has appeared in many publications, including *Salon.com*, *Griffith REVIEW*, *Best Australian Stories 2007* and *Best Australian Poems 2010*.

*Tessa Lunney*  
tessa.lunney@gmail.com  
Writing & Society Research Group, UWS  
“Trauma, memory and identity in Australian war fiction: a practitioner’s viewpoint”

This paper reports a novel-in-progress, as part of a thesis examining silence within Australian war fiction. War trauma is a potent source of silence, either from the battlefront or the homefront. How can fiction – which is nothing but words – express silence? If trauma and silence are the foundations of characterization, this problematizes the issues of memory and identity within a character. Each memory then becomes an action, pushing the character’s sense of identity in unusual directions. How do you work with this creatively, within a plot worthy of war fiction?

Silence, war and trauma are intimately connected, both on an individual and national level. Literal silences, where characters do not speak to each other, are one way of expressing silence, but they quickly become repetitive. This has forced me to explore other ways of embodying silence, such as indirect telling,
deception, acting out, clues and mysteries, half-told narratives, and unusual behaviour. War trauma is most often experienced individually; a thousand examples of personal trauma build into a collective understanding of war, both war as a literal event and as a metaphorical framework. When individual trauma contradicts the national story of war, this creates cracks and silences within memory, and within identity. Identity can be formed by silences, reshaped into skewed patterns within families. My emerging novel explores the relationship between trauma, silent memory and identity through a modern war setting.

**Tessa Lunney** is in the final year of a Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Western Sydney. She is examining silences in contemporary Australian war fiction, and the bulk of her dissertation will be comprised of a novel, about the silences around one family’s involvement in war. She has just returned from a conference in Prague titled Trauma: Theory and Practice, run by Inter-Disciplinary.Net, and one at the Australian National University titled Embattled Men: Masculinity and War.
Jennifer Biddle
j.biddle@unsw.edu.au
Centre for Contemporary Art & Politics, COFA

“Humanitarian Imperialism.” This contribution will open up discussion on the affectively charged terrain of human rights violations (trauma without an event) in current interventions into remote Indigenous communities in Australia.

Dr. Jennifer Biddle is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics (CCAP), CoFA, UNSW. She is the recipient of a 2011 ARC Future Fellowship Remote Avant-garde: experimental Indigenous arts.

Robert Sinnerbrink
robert.sinnerbrink@mq.edu.au
Macquarie University

“Trauma, Affect, and Film.” What is the relationship between violence and the image? In my talk I shall explore how some contemporary filmmakers (like Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier) challenge Hollywood representations of violence as ‘entertainment’, and seek instead to restore the traumatic dimension to images of violence. Such ‘trauma’ films aim to provoke thought via intensive affect rather than intellectual reflection.

Robert Sinnerbrink is Lecturer in Philosophy at Macquarie University. He is the author of New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images (Continuum: 2011), Understanding Hegelianism (Acumen: 2007), and is co-editor of Critique Today (Brill: 2006).

Robyn Ferrell
robynferrell20@gmail.com

Writing & Society Research Group, UWS

“Dream Reality and Visceral Photography.” I will raise the deployment of trauma in the realism of photography, using in particular Kristeva’s discussion of ‘The Soul and the Image’ in New Maladies of the Soul.’

Dr Robyn Ferrell is an adjunct fellow in the Writing and Society Research Group. The author of several academic and creative titles, she currently has a book in press with Columbia University Press on the case of Aboriginal acrylic painting, Untitled: art culture gender law. Her present project, Sacred Exchanges, follows up the questions raised in Untitled about globalisation, the commodity of art and the action of the image.

Elizabeth Day
lizday@ozemail.com.au
Writing & Society Research Group, UWS

“Migration and Hidden Memories.” Australia’s hidden memories on the other side of the world and their influence — the trauma we didn’t know.

Elizabeth Day is a visual artist who has produced several installations during the course of her DCA addressing what Nikos Papastergiadis called ‘discontinued narratives of migration’. These works incorporate texts of grass roots printed from plaster casts. Image and text are thus brought together, as they are in several ficto-critical writings, which accompany her exegesis. The Black is an example of writing where she includes references to art history, an interest in colonial architecture, autobiography and an account of a garden project in a women’s prison.
“Trauma, Affect, and ‘The Child’.” Childhood is, in our culture, the site of a privileged ‘innocence,’ the maintenance of which requires a substantial investment of material, affective and cultural resources. Images of the ‘innocent child,’ however, are shadowed by counter-images of the (less fortunate) ‘traumatised child,’ whose desire for vengeance threatens the dominance of middle-class subjectivity. This double-face of childhood will be discussed with reference to the role innocent childhood plays in the contemporary social imaginary.

Joanne Faulkner is an ARC Postdoctoral in the School of History and Philosophy, University of NSW, and author of The Importance of Being Innocent (Cambridge UP, 2011) and Dead Letters to Nietzsche (Ohio UP, 2010). Her current research investigates the social and political significances of innocence, particularly as regards mobilisation of the figure of ‘the child.’

LITERARY READINGS

Belinda Castles will read from her novel-in-progress, currently titled The Travellers. Belinda is a writer and postgraduate with Writing and Society. She is currently working on a novel based on the lives of her grandparents and an exegesis on the ethics and aesthetics of ‘fictive memory’.

Meera Atkinson will read from her novel-in-progress Luna Alaska.

Tessa Lunney will read from her novel-in-progress, currently titled War Stories.

Michael Richardson will read from his novel-in-progress If This is the World.

Kay Rozynski will read from her prose poem “Blackbird”. Kay was raised in the Blue Mountains and now resides in Melbourne, where she works teaching creative writing. She has a BA (Hons) from the University of Melbourne, and is currently working on an experimental novel as a DCA student with the Writing and Society Research Group at UWS.
WRITING & SOCIETY SEMINAR PROGRAM

The UWS Writing & Society Research Group runs a regular program of seminars open to the public at our Bankstown campus. Special events, including symposiums, conferences, and launches and readings for new Giramondo works, also feature on our program.

To subscribe to our events mailing list or for more detailed information, please contact writing@uws.edu.au.