

## Creating Time in Narrative Nonfiction

One-day symposium, Auditorium Helikon, Arken, Åbo Akademi University

5 May 2023, 9.00–17.00

English Language and Literature, Åbo Akademi University with the support of the H.W. Donner Fund

Organising committee: Ann Tso, Jason Finch

9.00–9.15	Welcome and introduction	Ann Tso, Jason Finch
9.15–10.15	Keynote address	<b>Temporalities of Afro-European Mobility in Non-fictional and Fictionalized Narratives</b> Anna-Leena Toivanen (University of Eastern Finland)
10.15–10.30	Break	
10.30–12.00	Panel 1: “Time, Memoir, and the City”	<b>Trams, Time and Narrative: Peter Dürfeld’s <i>Linie 4 og andre historier</i> (1984) and <i>Mine sporvogne – alle 18 linier!</i> (2022)</b> Adam Borch (ÅA)  <b>Central Corridor, Marginal Housing: St Louis in Black Autobiography</b> Jason Finch (Åbo Akademi University)  <b>Commemorating the Time after the End: Karen Cheung’s <i>The Impossible City: A Hong Kong Memoir</i> (2022)</b> Ann Tso (ÅA)
12.00–13.00	Lunch	Reserved seating at Café Arken
13.00–14.00	Keynote address	<b>The Mundanity of Heartbreak: Time in Sophie Calle’s <i>Exquisite Pain</i> and Annie Ernaux’s <i>Simple Passion</i></b> Karen Cheung (Royal Holloway)
14.00–15.00		<b>Getting Brexit Done: Fabricating the Narrative of National Authenticity</b> Martin Gill (ÅA)
15.00–15.30	Coffee	
15.30–16.30	Keynote	<b>Temporalities of Advocacy Writing: Between Autobiography of the Past and Activism in the Present</b> Lena Englund (University of Eastern Finland)
16.30–17.00	Closing discussion	Ann Tso, Jason Finch

## Book of Abstracts

### 9. 15 Keynote Address

Anna-Leena Toivanen

#### **“Temporalities of Afro-European Mobility in Non-fictional and Fictionalized Narratives”**

In his discussion of the intertwinement of movement, time, and space, Tim Cresswell (2006, 4) states that “movement is the spatialization of time and temporalization of space”. Taking this idea as its starting point to explore constructions of time in Francophone African and Afrodiasporic non-fictional and fictionalized narratives, this paper adopts a mobility humanities perspective that “works towards a rigorous assessment of the social and spatial aspects of mobile practices within their cultural milieu” (Aguiar et al. 2019, 2). Discussing texts across literary genres characterized by their varying degrees of non-fictional elements – travelogues, historical novels, autofiction –, the paper explores the texts’ constructions of temporality in the context of different Afro-European mobilities such as migration, tourism, diasporic returns, and the journeys of historical characters. My reading of selected non-fictional/fictionalized narratives pays attention to how their constructions of temporality contribute not only to the production of place and mobility but also how they generate ‘the real’. Drawing on recent discussions on postcolonial narrative non-fiction (e.g., Dalley 2014; Ledent and Tunca 2020; Wimbush 2021; Hogarth 2023), the paper also considers the role of non-fiction in understanding Europe as a postcolonial continent with present and historical entanglements with Africa.

10.30 – 12.00 Panel 1: “Time, Memoir, and the City”

Adam Borch

#### **“Trams, Time and Narrative: Peter Dürrfeld’s *Linie 4 og andre historier* (1984) and *Mine sporvogne – alle 18 linier!* (2022)”**

This paper focuses on the work of Danish author Peter Dürrfeld. More specifically, two of his published works: a collection of short stories entitled *Linie 4 og andre noveller* (1984) and the recently issued essayistic memoir *Mine sporvogne – alle 18 linier!* (2022). Both have Copenhagen’s defunct tramway (closed in 1972) as the organising principle: each short story, each chapter is named after a specific line and evolve around memories of that line.

The paper looks to examine the relationship between time and narrative in the two works. The former is self-proclaimed fiction while the latter falls more squarely within a category of non-fiction. Yet, it quickly becomes clear that specific events and stories appear in both works and, when compared, the distinction between what is fiction and non-fiction become blurred. The paper concentrates on what role time is made to play in this blurred, overlapping area. In short, does Dürrfeld use time differently in his ‘non-fictional’ accounts as opposed to his ‘fictional’?

Jason Finch

#### **“Central Corridor, Marginal Housing: St Louis in Black Autobiography”**

Literary urban studies often highlights the ‘city novel’, a complex text presenting a single, often nationally or globally ‘alpha’ city as an aesthetic heterocosm. Comparing multiple discursive perspectives from and a secondary city works towards a more nuanced and bottom-up picture. This paper answers Sarah Wasserman’s call (2017) for ‘urban lifeworlds’ to be reread via juxtapositions of different text types, fiction and non-fiction. In my paper I ask whether writings describing a single city

form a composite picture of its unique individual personality. All cities, after all, are enmeshed in regional, national, supranational, global and planetary systems. St Louis is a city long riven by racialized and class-related inequalities and racked by exploitative capitalism, during a mid-twentieth century in which it often came to seem belated or left-behind.

Considered as part of urban literature, autobiographies often contain precise spatiotemporal detail. They may preserve impressions or perspectives otherwise elusive. Urban autobiographies in US contexts have a complex relationship to city novels, since the latter can also document the urban scene with precision, particularly in genres such as realist/naturalist fiction and crime. *Gloves, Glory and God* (1957) by the world champion boxer Henry Armstrong, and Vivian Gibson's *The Last Children of Mill Creek* (2020) both focus on a low-lying east-west slice of the city, part of its so-called central corridor. Here, in a time of housing segregation, African American Saint Louisans, including recent migrants from the rural South, occupied buildings near railway yards and smoky factories. Rather than on crime, despair or even redemption, Armstrong and Gibson focus on personal endeavour and ambition. Along the way, both chart varied unstable modes of living related to uses of the street and private dwelling spaces.

Ann Tso

**“Commemorating the Time After the End: Karen Cheung’s *The Impossible City: A Hong Kong Memoir* (2022)”**

Hong Kong appears in films and newspapers as a doomed city optically reducible to the color yellow. Yellow is a talisman easy for a geographically distant audience to recall out of context, though visual reductionisms of the sort elicit no more than noncommittal reactions. For Hong Kong, transience—the dreaded end—evokes an identity rooted in frustration with the little, if any, progress made in democratization. The city needs to liberate itself by rejecting familiar visual symbols and, in this way, stasis.

In *The Impossible City*, the memoirist opens herself up to post-time, time here referring to both the end of Hong Kong and the conclusion of her memoir, i.e., the physical text, with a last page and a back cover. Cheung prolongs her narrative by mixing personal memories with the impersonal cultural voices (those of Hong Kong’s indie musicians, for instance) on which she comments. The writer playing multiple roles—memoirist, cultural critic, etc.—herself embodies the elusiveness characteristic of the dying city: in urban writings otherwise attuned to spectacles, elusiveness is something to commemorate. Attention in one place is invariably redirected elsewhere, extra-textually, to times beyond the end.

13.00 Keynote Address

Karen Cheung

**“The Mundanity of Heartbreak: Time in Sophie Calle’s *Exquisite Pain* and Annie Ernaux’s *Simple Passion*”**

In literature, heartbreak has served as a topic for philosophical investigation, an inevitable ending for tragic romances, and even the impetus for the creation of the work itself. As a narrative device, heartbreak sustains tension, drives character development, and provides closure, but the real-time drudgery of heartbreak itself can be harder to depict. The experience of heartbreak is often profoundly boring: we sleep in, show up for work and count down the hours left in our day, measure our weeks in the form of laundry cycles and the bags of trash we dispose of outside the house. For those unable to move on, the moment of heartbreak is replayed in an endless, obsessive loop. We

fixate on the ground zero of the heartbreak, reliving the experience over and over. The images of our lost love are now frozen in time: there can be no subsequent events in our lives that will feature each other. With regards to this story, time has entirely come to a standstill, because no new memories can be made.

For writers Sophie Calle and Annie Ernaux, it is precisely this mundanity of heartbreak they centre in their works. In *Exquisite Pain*, Calle plays with the interaction between narrative time and extra-textual time: she repeats one story of heartbreak for a total of thirty-six times, depicting no subsequent events nor movement in narrative time, but marks the passage of extra-textual time that allows the heartbreak to be overcome. As for Annie Ernaux, *Simple Passion* is an exploration of the differences between the world of monumental time that her married lover, A., lives within, and the subjective female time her narrator experiences—a time of mourning that is marked by the “imprisoning boredom” of domestic and day-to-day chores, and a time that is eventually preserved in writing.

14.00 Keynote Address

Martin Gill

### **“Getting Brexit Done: Fabricating the Narrative of National Authenticity”**

A constant theme in the political discourse around Brexit since Britain’s 2016 vote to leave the European Union, one effectively weaponized by Boris Johnson in the 2019 election, has been the need to ‘get Brexit done’. Yet the agreement Johnson signed in January 2020 left Brexit demonstrably undone. Now, after seven years, optimists hope that the latest (Feb. 2023) deal to resolve the contradictions facing Northern Ireland will at last hasten that final, cathartic moment.

But the satisfaction of closure belongs to fiction, and the desire to achieve it imposes fictional logic on the real world; in the day-to-day succession of events Brexit is by nature open-ended, an evolving set of transactions, regulations, disputes, negotiations. Through critical reading of popular mainstream journalism, this paper will explore the consequences of the attempt to cast the messy facts of Brexit into the simplicity of a narrative frame. It will argue that the pro-Brexit position was primarily a work of fiction, deploying narrative structures and familiar tropes – of loss, betrayal, grievance, and revenge - rather than reasoned argument, to promote its cause. Above all, Brexit was a quest for authenticity: where EU membership trapped Britain, dependent and emasculated, in a state of helpless inauthenticity, getting Brexit done would at last fulfil its proper destiny.

It will be argued that the mismatch between the clear narrative arc constructed in this discourse and the real world of never-ending pragmatic compromise has paralyzed public debate and turned Brexit into a topic that almost literally cannot be talked about.

16.30 Keynote Address

Lena Englund

### **“Temporalities of Advocacy Writing: Between Autobiography of the Past and Activism in the Present”**

Time in autobiographical writing is central for the construction of self and a cohesive identity. It switches between past, present, and future, remaining geared toward the future despite its preoccupation with the past. When the autobiographical text addresses experiences of migration, it introduces another temporal dimension. Migration is movement in both place and time, relocating from one place to another and changing the course of narrated time. This talk examines two

autobiographical texts that complicate the relationship between self and time in various ways: Roberto Lovato's memoir *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas* (2020) and Jose Antonio Vargas's *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* (2018). Vargas's experience of being undocumented in the United States causes temporal limbo, whereas Lovato sets out to uncover personal family history as it intertwines with El Salvador's past. Both texts draw on experiences of migration for the story of self, and both authors advocate change through their memoirs. They work for the future through their writing, envisioning social transformation and connecting it to their pasts. The narrated selves build on the temporalities of remembering and reconstructing the past and of an activist present.

## Bios

**Adam Borch** is PhD student at the department of English Language and Literature, Åbo Akademi University, Finland. He is currently working on a thesis on anonymity in the poetry of Alexander Pope. He has recently worked as a Research Assistant in the HERA-funded project “Public Transport as Public Space in European Cities: Narrating, Experiencing, Contesting” (PUTSPACE).

**Karen Cheung** is a writer from Hong Kong. She is the author of [\*The Impossible City: A Hong Kong Memoir\*](#) (Random House), which was longlisted for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction, and named one of the best books of the year by the *Washington Post* and *The Economist*. Her essays, reported features, and cultural criticism have been published in the *New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, [\*This American Life\*](#), *New Statesman*, *The Rumpus*, *Evergreen Review*, *The Offing*, and elsewhere. She was formerly a senior reporter at Hong Kong Free Press, and Associate Editor at Asia Art Archive.

**Lena Englund** currently works as a senior researcher at the School of Humanities at the University of Eastern Finland. Her research interests include African literature, autobiographical writing, and migration narratives. Her book *South African Autobiography as Subjective History: Making Concessions to the Past* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2021.

**Jason Finch** is Associate Professor in the English department at Åbo Akademi University. A literary scholar with interests in space and place focused on a comparative view of cities, his most recent book is *Literary Urban Studies and How to Practice It* (Routledge, 2022). He is also a co-editor of special features forthcoming in *Urban Studies* and the *Journal of Urban History* (both 2023). From 2019 until 2022, Jason was one of four principal investigators on the European Research Council-funded project ‘Public Transport as Public Space in European Cities: Narrating, Experiencing, Contesting’.

**Martin Gill** has been Associate Professor / Akademilektor in the English Department at Åbo Akademi, specializing in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. His interests include authenticity, news media, and online interaction. His most recent publication is ‘Hypocrisy, authenticity, and the rhetorical dynamics of populism’, in Sandrine Sorlin and Tuija Virtanen (eds) *Hypocrisy: Towards a Pragmatic Model*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins (forthcoming, 2023). He retired in 2022.

**Dr Anna-Leena Toivanen** is an Academy Research Fellow at the University of Eastern Finland. She has published on mobility-related themes in African literatures, and her most recent articles feature in *Urban Studies*, *Transfers*, *Mobilities*, *Studies in Travel Writing*, and *Mobility Humanities*. She is the author of *Mobilities and Cosmopolitanisms in African and Afrodiasporic Literatures* (Brill 2021) and acts as the Literary Studies Subject Editor of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*.

**Ann Tso** is currently Postdoctoral Researcher at Åbo Akademi University. She was born in Hong Kong but has wandered off—first to Canada and then to Finland. Her scholarly attention was at first focussed on London, England, but it, too, has wandered off to Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and now all the way back to Hong Kong. She is preparing a book manuscript entitled *Narrative Afterlives of Doom*, but if you prefer something less gloomy, you could try *The Literary Psychogeography of London*, her 2020 contribution to Palgrave Macmillan’s *Literary Urban Studies* series.