

### *Constellations: NewMac 2016*

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Constellations was the theme of *NewMac*, the 2016 Post-graduate Humanities and Social Science research conference of The University of Newcastle and Macquarie University, hosted by UON. This edition of *Humanity* showcases three of the important papers presented at that conference and represents both the diversity of presentations and the interdisciplinary and networked nature of the research being undertaken at those two sites.

When the Conference Organising Committee first sat down to organise *NewMac*—a conference spanning two universities and drawing from the myriad of disciplines that comprise Humanities and Social Science—we soon settled on the theme, *Constellations*. At first glance, constellations—nonlinear, unbound, and with great swaths of space between them—may appear disparate, much like the two collaborating universities and the theoretically diverse scholars who would attend the conference. However, constellations may intersect or diverge and, ultimately, stars will become brighter or burn their last. In view of this, we see *NewMac* as a constellation: groups of people and ideas connecting and collaborating within and between the boundaries of Humanities and Social Science.<sup>1</sup> Constellations are formed through the construction of and maintenance of relationships between people, ideas, structures, technologies and methods. They facilitate and enable the dissemination of information, can be beautiful and awe-inspiring, and empower us with the capacity to find new ways of critical analysis and problem-solving.

*Constellations* implied a range of meanings for us. Apart from imagining ourselves as future stars of research in the galaxy of scholarship, as conference organisers, we were keen to explore networks between scholars, disciplines, and the two participating universities. In this, we were gratified that the opportunity that the *NewMac* conference provided for networking was taken up by the researchers who participated in presenting papers and short-form tabletop workshops, and in attending the presentations by fellow post-graduate researchers. The tabletops were designed to be interactive sessions where preliminary ideas and creative approaches could be exposed to an interdisciplinary audience for feedback. From tea ceremonies to disaster relief centres, poetry readings to gender and victim representation in Hong Kong crime films, the tabletops were a stellar innovation that were well received. The presenters were appreciative of the responses and participants had a chance to interact around the table with other researchers they would normally not necessarily meet. In some cases, researchers working on a similar topic but from different fields were able to cross-fertilise by exchanging insights reflecting different paradigms, or simply the awareness of different research papers.

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<sup>1</sup> Carole L. Palmer and Laura J. Neumann, "The Information Work of Interdisciplinary Humanities Scholars: Exploration and Translation," *The Library* 72, no. 1 (2002): 85-6.

The final performance of *Constellations: NewMac 2016* was a living essay created and performed by UON PhD, Helen Hopcroft, with support by two actors and a graphic designer. This performance was part literary, part social criticism, part poetry, part narrative, and brought to life in a beautiful and moving way the key concern fundamental to the conference. That question hinges on the place of the humanities in the twenty-first century. There is much to gain from a return to the tradition of interdisciplinary inquiry and debate, a notion increasingly recognised in the academic and professional realms. Interdisciplinary research is valued because of its ability to address complex questions and situations, the key factor here being a leveraging of the differences among disciplines to create a diverse and multifaceted understanding of the research landscape and, most critically, the real world applications.<sup>2</sup> As Brian Robinson and others note, “to interact successfully with other disciplines, researchers must appreciate their differences, and this requires recognising how the research landscape looks from the perspective of other disciplines.”<sup>3</sup> *NewMac* explicitly spoke to this practice. The interdisciplinary nature of the sessions meant that everyone was exposed to papers *outside* their own area of research. The conversations emerging from this practice served to reinforce the significance of interdisciplinary inquiry, whilst reminding us that ‘no one is an island’.

The keynote address, presented by Emeritus Professor Bernard Curran, spoke to the future of humanities. In the twenty-first century, the role of humanities in the university has, for the first time, to be defined and defended. Humanities, Curran informed the *NewMac* attendees, derives from the Latin word *humanitas* encompassing the concepts of *philanthrôpía* (love of humankind and what makes us human) and *paideia* (education). It is, therefore, through humanities that we learn to become more human, to be more appreciative of what it means to be human. When an engineer or medical practitioner has the capacity to make decisions with implications for the environment, for life and death, we want to know that they have some idea of the values and ethics involved in making that decision. This will come through the humanities, but where are they being taught in the modern university? If the humanities are to survive the final throes of neo-conservative economic rationalism apparently still driving decision making in the tertiary sector, is the answer at least in part in the interdisciplinary approach that *Constellations* attempted to showcase? If that is not impetus enough, what is the theoretical framework justifying desiloing and positioning contemporary research beyond the constraints of academic paradigms that has characterised the bulk of research of the twentieth century? Curran provided *NewMac* with a possible architecture and in doing so brought together the variety of thoughts and approaches and directed them towards a united objective. We are familiar with the notion of STEM education, and perhaps STEMM (the recent addition of Medicine), but what of Arts, what of STEMMA? *Stemma* is the Greek word for stem: the connection between the root and the branch that will bear fruit. “Now isn’t that,” Curran concluded, “a great role for us to play?”

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Robinson et. al. “Human Values and the Value of Humanities in Interdisciplinary Research,” *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2015.1123080>.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson et. al. “Human Values.”

These questions—of humanity, relevance, and interdisciplinarity—are answered by each of us in different ways depending on our own research and biases, and favourite theorists from Aristotle to Lacan. Jürgen Habermas offers an overarching view of knowledge and process of creating and curating it. Habermas’s theories of knowing and communicative action,<sup>4</sup> whilst not explicitly designed around educational research, have important relevance to the interdisciplinarity which we imagine to be best suited for successfully moving into the unstable world of the twenty-first century. Habermas described progressive ways of knowing moving beyond the *techne* of learning facts, to the more authentic critical reflection and engagement of *praxis*. As the learner builds on critical reflection, they ideally “come to see his or her lifeworld relative to the lifeworlds of others”.<sup>5</sup> Through this process, the knower develops ‘communicative capacity’ and ‘communicative action’ enabling learning and knowing to be employed for service, justice, and citizenship, for example.

Where does this leave humanities research in the twenty-first century? It has become increasingly evident that the ‘wicked problems’ of the Anthropocene demand interdisciplinary thinking. Wicked problems are those for which there is no single answer, and might not even be able to be resolved using multifaceted approaches.<sup>6</sup> Problems such as climate change, mass migration, religious radicalisation, and the re-emergence of nationalism, are the types of wicked problems requiring the resources of science and the arts, including all of the disciplines of the humanities. Constellations between us is a necessary prerequisite for fully engaging with the sciences in such discourse.

The papers we have selected for this conference edition of *Humanity* embody the conference theme in a variety of ways. Cameron Edmond’s article on using machine writing to analyse and create literary texts is a perfect example of constellation and network-building. His use of computer algorithms to find new ways of interrogating literary texts to explore authorial meaning is an example of interdisciplinarity within the humanities. It also builds interconnectedness between humanities and the sciences: the relatively new sphere of computer science in this instance. Ironically, in this paper, computer science intersects with one of the humanities’ oldest subjects: literature.

The Great Southland stream, in which three papers, connected only by their shared focus on Australian history, inadvertently converged in their tracing of the markers of Australian identity, from race, to femininity, to spiritual practice in the memorialisation of Anzac. Of these papers, Robert Elliot’s has been included in this volume of *Humanity*. This paper traces Australia’s various pre-federation immigration restriction policies, excluding all non-white and Asian races, and their culmination of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, known unofficially as the White Australia policy. Elliot argues that these policies, the result of an isolated, white outpost of the British Empire situated in the Asia, severely impeded

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<sup>4</sup> J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1972); *Theory and Practice*, trans. J. Viertel (London: Heinemann, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Terence J. Lovat, "Jurgen Habermas: Education's Reluctant Hero", in *Social Theory and Educational Research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Derrida and Bourdieu*, ed. M. Murphy (London: Routledge, 2013), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Frank P. Incopera, *Climate Change, a Wicked Problem: Complexity and Uncertainty at the Intersection of Science, Economics, Politics, and Human Behaviour* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Australia's economic relations with Asia. This paper is most pertinent in regards to Australia's perpetually delicate relationship with its Asian neighbours, our dangerous neighbourhood. As in the Federation era, there remains a tension between Australia's racial and ethnic identity and its geographic reality. If Australia does not resolve these tension, Curran remarked in his keynote address, the nation will never form meaningful regional relationships.

Dael Allison's paper explores a network of literary genres, spanning three distinct and diverse eras that pertain to the literature of and about the city of Newcastle. In her search for the literary voice of Newcastle, Allison demonstrates how the literature of Newcastle contributes to the portrayal its image, which, in turn, creates a sense of place both for those that live there and to the wider world. Emerging from her research is "a strong voice of independence and empathy for the underdog", a voice "born of oppression". Allison's paper highlights the notion of human resilience and humanity's ability to rise above the 'wicked problems' of their own lived experience, in this case, through literature. It also illustrates the power of imaginative literature; it can unite the past and the present through shared imaginative experiences. Literature has the ability to vitalise the past, bringing it into the reader's present moment experience, thus enabling the reader to view the world from the perspectives of those who came before us. Of course, this is not limited to the historical; literature allows the reader to empathise with the 'other', whoever that may be. Through literature we see Habermas's theory in action; we really can see our lifeworld relative to the lifeworld of others. And this underpins interdisciplinarity in the humanities.

We thank all those who contributed to the success of *Constellations: NewMac 2016* and to the authors whose work appears here. We look forward to the development of the constellation of ideas that this event initiated. Our thanks to the University of Newcastle and especially the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Education and Arts for financial, administrative, and practical support of such an important event.

*Honae Cuffe, Kerry Plunkett, Dianne Rayson, Michele Seah—Editors*  
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#### Endnotes

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