CONFERENCES

(Un)Writing Futures: Reflections from the 17th International SIEF Congress, Aberdeen 2025

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The 17th International SIEF[1] Congress took place at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, 2–6 June 2025, hosted by the Elphinstone Institute for Ethnology, Folklore, and Ethnomusicology. It welcomed 1,128 delegates from around the globe, featured 118 panels, and presented 880 papers. During the Congress Scottish sun shone more than once, the convenors sang, keynote speakers recited, and delegates danced in what became a true celebration of folklore and ethnology.

The guiding theme of the congress, *Unwriting*, invited participants to revisit the longstanding relationship between ethnography, writing, and power. From the early days of anthropology, ethnology, and folklore studies, writing was seen as the medium through which oral and vernacular traditions were translated into the modern world, often carrying with it an implicit sense of authority over its subjects. The call for panels and papers urged scholars to engage in practices that dismantle hegemonic frameworks, to give centre stage to Indigenous and insider knowledge, and to experiment with formats that resist linearity and closure. Echoing decolonial, feminist, and more-than-human approaches, unwriting was discussed as a call to act and to reflect, and through that, create scholarship that is dialogic and relational, and to do so in ways that extend beyond the page into sound, movement, performance, and care. All contributors presented as many perspectives on unwriting as their expertise, fields and fieldwork and topics that excite them.

The plenary programme brought these commitments into sharp relief. Don Kulick from Uppsala University and Amy Shuman from Ohio State University opened the congress with a conversation chaired by Thomas McKean from Elphinstone Institute on "Unwriting Enquiries – Engagement, (Un)writing, Vulnerability", exploring vulnerability, stigma, and witnessing in ethnographic knowledge. Their dialogue invited reflection on what it means to write *with* rather than *about* communities often labelled vulnerable. What stayed with me the most was that Don Kulick tried to argue during the discussion that anthropologists should not label or talk about the groups they study with as vulnerable, because symbolically takes away their agency and is often not a word those groups would use to describe themselves. The tone of the conver-

1 The International Society for Ethnology and Folklore

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ETHNOLOGIA FENNICA Vol. 52 (2025, issue 2), 144–147. https://doi.org/10.23991/ef.164433

sation was whimsical and grounded in fieldwork and practical examples from the panellists' academic (and beyond) practice. This conversation defined the mood for my experience of the whole congress.

Shawn Wilson (University of British Columbia Okanagan), in "Unwriting Hegemonies – Recentring Authority", chaired by Frances Wilkins from Elphinstone Institute, drew from global Indigenous methodologies to argue for the recentring of authority in ethnographic practice. His reflections highlighted research as ceremony and relational accountability. Clíona O'Carroll (University College Cork), in "Unwriting History – Making Space and Throwing Shapes in Archives of Tradition", chaired by Nicolas Le Bigre, Elphinstone Institute, spoke from the vantage of archives and tradition. Her work with ethnographic storytelling and oral testimony illustrated how the past can be revisited, unsettled, and reanimated in public dialogue. Si Poole (University of Chester) concluded the Congress with "Performing Unwriting – Challenging Modal Habits", chaired by Sheila Young, which brought together poetry, music, and gardening as forms of embodied inquiry that challenge modal academic habits.

Multispecies and Artistic Inquiries

Among the sessions that resonated strongly with me were those that engaged creative and multispecies modes of inquiry. In the workshop "Unwriting through Creative Sonic Fieldnotes", conveyed by Sarah Thanner and Anne Dippel, with Alastair Mackie as discussant, participants were invited to reimagine audio recordings as compositional material. Using the concept of deep listening, following Pauline Oliveros (2005), and tools for sonic sampling on a mobile application called *Koala Sampler*, participants captured sounds across Aberdeen and returned to transform them into layered fieldnotes. After that, we shared and discussed the meanings of unwriting our understanding of fieldwork through the sonic scapes that we as ethnographers interpret and manipulate. The participatory format of the workshop turned the textual fixity and reattuned it to sound.

The multi-session panel "Unwriting Cycles, Circles, Circulations", conveyed by Roger Norum and Veera Kinnunen, with Tim Ingold as discussant, brought together papers and creative interventions on circularity in times of polycrisis. As a starting point for the discussion, we turned to Tim Ingold's reflections on whirls and circles in his chapter Life in a Whirl (Ingold 2021), where he reminds us that "[t]he perfect form of the circle, however, is not a form of life" (44). Contributors on the panel ranged from those studying funerary practices and mining messes to explorations of watercolour painting and Finnish witchcraft. Rather than equating circles, cycles, and circulations, the panel showed their distinct analytic and political capacities – revealing

how recursive forms can unsettle linear models of progress, sustainability, and accumulation.

Equally compelling was the panel "Ethnographies with Others in More-than-Human Worlds", convened by Anna Zadrożna and Reda Šatūnienė, who gathered in three sessions ethnographers working with animals, plants, fungi, and microbes. From whale listening and elephant socialisation to parasitism and fermentation, presenters explored what it means to do fieldwork with non-human others, and how such encounters might be written and unwritten with care.

In Between and After the Panels

The congress offered much more than the strictly academic panels and plenaries. From day one, during the social programme, delegates were treated to a rich programme of film screenings and local art exhibitions, including *Hame*, *Fair Trickit*!, and *Icons on Ammo Boxes*. Guided walks, such as the Ethnobotanical Introduction to the Cruickshank Gardens, allowed participants to engage with Aberdeen's landscape. A step-dance session and "NoJoke – the open-mic standup comedy event for People Studying with People" gave opportunities for networking and academic release.

The Congress also featured an "Academic Freedom Sanctuary," stemming from the recent developments in the United States where government measures have sought to restrict research and higher education funding, particularly in fields related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. SIEF also published a statement on ongoing assaults on academic freedom in the US (Sandberg et al. 2025). The programme also included mentorship initiatives: a "How to Get Published" panel discussion with journal editors, and a mentor–mentee programme that paired doctoral and early-career researchers with senior colleagues. The congress closed with a spirited cèilidh dinner and dance at the Beach Ballroom by the North Sea, with music from Aberdeen's all-female band Danse McCabre.

Conclusion

The 17th International SIEF Congress in Aberdeen demonstrated that unwriting can be used as a generative practice. The Congress was a vast academic event that offered something of interest for everyone, yet, as usual, it was impossible to attend everything. The reminders sent out through the mentoring programme, particularly for early-career researchers, about avoiding burnout by pacing their participation, were therefore especially valuable.

Through plenaries, panels, performances, and workshops, the congress unfolded, in my experience, how ethnology, folklore, and anthropology can be rethought in dialogic, stepping away from the eye-centric towards multisensory

and multispecies ways. Just as importantly, it reaffirmed the value of gatherings where scholars meet to dance as well as debate, listen as well as speak. In doing so, the congress marked a rewriting of futures for our disciplines – futures attentive to vulnerability, authority, creativity, and care. The Congress reminded that the vitality of fields lies in the capacity for humour, dance, song, and experiments that can become the lens for difficult histories and urgent currents and futures. In the end, what delegates carried away was perhaps less a set of answers than a renewed sense of possibility and questions, which is a frame of mind in which ethnology, folklore studies and anthropology thrive. What I took with me from Aberdeen is that I want to keep my unwriting in anthropology open to doubt, to ambiguity, open to relations that do not fit neatly onto a page.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my SIEF 2025 mentor, Professor Abdelaaziz El Bakkali, for engaging discussions, company and guiding me through the congress.

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