

You hail—all 290 of you—from 25 countries around the globe and numerous disciplines, a veritable international summit meeting, the mirror of AUP’s own demographic diversity. It is my pleasure and a great honor to formally open these days of reflection, exchange and debate organized by my colleague Brian Schiff here at AUP, as well as by the co-organizing institutions, Université de Paris Diderot and the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative at St. Thomas University---the three academic bodies that have coordinated your convergence on Paris during these first promising days of summer 2012.

The diversity of the participants in your meeting and the variety of disciplines represented in your papers mirrors the complex makeup of AUP itself. We at The American University of Paris inhabit an exceptional space in the heart of Paris where no national majority reigns, where no one is precisely “at home,” where everyone is a language learner, and where stories of difference and belonging abound. This “third space” although perhaps all-too-comfortably located in the 7th arrondissement, permits us to stage, often, the kind of international, broadly cultural and historical, yet persistently local disciplinary conversation such as the one you are undertaking today.

I take the title of your conference—Narrative Matters!—as a forceful imperative, for, indeed, issues of narrative and storytelling as they relate to life itself and to our experiences of our own identities are of great concern to all of us who live and work in AUP’s profoundly international community. Last week at Commencement we offered an honorary degree to Mr. David McCullough, historian storyteller extraordinaire, who, having first changed how Americans felt about their own history in 10 books centered upon individuals, historic events, places, and years, has, in The Greater Journey, chronicled the lives of generations of Americans came to Paris with what he calls “the ambition to excel.” They left knowing better who they were as Americans. In contrast to that canonical, eastward transatlantic initiatory journey, the greater journey of AUP’s community today might be envisioned as a continual flow of students (and faculty and staff) holding over a hundred nationalities, speaking over 100 languages and dialects, flowing into a very different Paris—still the hopelessly and marvelously French capital of monuments and museums and culture, but also and

increasingly the busy, clanging, multilingual, multicultural, ethnically and politically diverse metropolis it has become. Our students also flow forth from Paris as graduates, slipping over cultural borders with comfort and ease, and are now living in 126 countries around the globe, most not in the country of their birth. We have begun chronicling this 21st century greater journey of students of multiple nationalities in and out of Paris—fueled by ease of air transport, the rise of Skype, social media, and satellite TV, instantaneous news, a globalized economy, the falling of cultural and political borders, and our own increasingly supple and permeable identities, citizenships, and belongings. Writing, sharing, and archiving these stories will be the work of our fiftieth year.

I am delighted to welcome scholars and intellectuals from such a range of different institutions, from such a spectrum of fields, to the Salle Adyar, a historical monument and home of the French Theosophical Society, and the sometime theater of The American University of Paris. As you consider this week the complex, sometimes dialectical relationship between narrative and life, you will be invoking a startling range of formats (and this list is not even exhaustive, so forgive me for leaving anything out)—autobiographies, testimonials, interviews, refugee narratives, migrant narratives, indigenous narratives, prison narratives, ethnographic narratives, historical narratives, many different forms of political narratives, cross-cultural and culture-bridging narratives, medical narratives//narrative memories, narrative performances, narrative fictions, narrative pedagogies, narrative ethics, narratives of language acquisition, of professional development and of women's lives, narratives of care, narratives of trauma, and narratives of rehabilitation and healing, personal narratives with community import and resonance, transformative narratives, therapeutic narratives, collective narratives, film narratives, digital storytelling, and even schoolyard storytelling. There is no aspect of life that is not mediated by, influenced by, or inspired by narrative as your gathering here in Paris attests.

May your deliberations be fruitful; may they be disruptive of traditional practice, may they lead you to reflect anew upon an impulse as old as humanity itself. We look forward, as you do, to the book that will issue from this conference, a trace of the vibrant discussions that have and are and will be taking place on our campus all through this week.

