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Walking with the past: Teaching life narrative through a wartime memory walk in Tartu

Abstract:

This article explores the pedagogical potential of memory walks in teaching life writing through an experiential module conducted in Tartu, Estonia. Drawing on my family archive and the city's layered urban landscape, I guided students along routes shaped by wartime destruction, Soviet occupation, and inherited familial memory. Building on Diana Taylor's distinction between archive and repertoire, Murray and Järviuoma's transgenerational walking methodology, and Karen Till's and Christina Moretti's work on place and walking, I examine how movement through historically marked spaces enables students to experience memory as embodied, relational and situated. The walk foregrounded tensions between official historiography and familial narratives, inviting students to encounter historical truth as negotiated rather than singular. Through sensory engagement, storytelling and reflective writing tasks, students explored how urban landscapes carry traces of loss, absence and political power. In my paper I want to show how memory walks can function as a pedagogy of emplacement, transforming life writing from textual self-representation into a performative, spatial and dialogical practice. In this approach, truth emerges not as fixed recollection but through embodied attention to the layered interplay of past and present, self and place.

Biographical note:

Leena Käosaar is Associate Professor of Cultural Theory at the Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu, Estonia. Her research focuses on life writing, memory studies and trauma, particularly in relation to Stalinist repressions, the Estonian Western diaspora and women's life narratives. She has published widely on the representation of traumatic experience, relationality, dynamics of address, traveling memory and gender. Her work also engages with creative non-fiction and life writing pedagogy, which she teaches at the University of Tartu. She has served as project leader and coordinator of the Nordplus Higher Education projects *New Approaches to Teaching Nordic and Baltic Lives* and *Teaching Nordic and Baltic Lives*, and this article has developed from her

teaching experience in international classroom-based life-writing courses organised within these projects.

Keywords:

Memory walk, embodied memory, cityspace, the Second World War, Estonia

In the foreword to *The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place* (2005), Karen Till, asserting that her research is about “revenants, ruins, and returns,” wishes to “acknowledge the ancestral phantoms that crowd [her] work” (p. ix). Till refers to her grandparents, whom she met only once, at the age of three. My childhood differs from hers in that I had the privilege of growing up with my maternal grandparents, who created an artistically and intellectually rich home atmosphere that quietly preserved the spirit of Estonian independence during the Soviet period. Yet, like Till, I grew up surrounded by traces of what was lost. The renowned Estonian author Viivi Luik, in her iconic autobiographical novel *The Seventh Spring of Peace*, which reflects on her childhood in post-World War II Estonia, writes that “the great war had changed the world into something else” (1985, p. 38). Though I belong to a later generation, my childhood was shaped by a similar “structure of feeling” – a concept that Raymond Williams describes as “the particular living result of all the elements that compose the general organization of a culture in a given period” (1961, p. 64) largely through what reached me – both directly and indirectly – via my grandparents. Through them, the reconstructed spaces of my hometown started carrying the weight of what had once been destroyed, filling the seemingly ordinary landscape with an invisible past.

I grew up in the district of Tähtvere in Tartu, a neighbourhood of functionalist four-apartment rendered buildings that emerged shortly before the Second World War and expanded in the 1960s with rows of nearly identical private houses – typical of the architectural landscape of the Soviet era. Reaching the town’s outskirts, the district bordered a fenced area that housed one of Tartu’s two Soviet Army quarters, with a military airfield occupying the site where the Estonian National Museum had once stood – and where it has now been rebuilt, its landscape design echoing the outline of the former runway. My life was largely contained within the boundaries of this district, and the adjacent park was a playground for both me and, decades earlier, my mother. One morning in late March 1949, she ran into the park and saw trucks parked between the trees. Frightened, she rushed home. The trucks were deportation vehicles used in the Stalinist mass deportations that swept through the Baltic States. The next day, some of her classmates were gone. As a child, I didn’t fully understand why she had always warned me to be careful there – but later I realised that for her, the park was forever marked by that traumatic encounter.

On weekends, my family would walk through downtown Tartu, especially Toome Hill – a large, hilly park in the city centre shaped over centuries by human activity: once an ancient stronghold, later the centre of the bishopric, and eventually the site of the first university library and gardens. I remember standing on the wooden Angel’s Bridge, first built in 1836, linking the two slopes of Toome Hill over Lossi Street. From there, one could see the town hall. To the left were older houses; to the right, a few buildings and another park – now called Pirogov Square. But when I stood on that bridge with my grandparents, I didn’t see the present-day view. I saw the street as it had been before the Second World War, with buildings that were later demolished in the bombings still intact in my imagination. Through the stories they told about Tartu, my grandparents taught me to see the city this way – to look at its present through the layers of its past. From there, we would walk to the Stone Bridge, built in 1784 and blown up by retreating

Soviet troops on 8 July 1941. Though no longer standing, it remained in the collective memory of Tartu's residents as a lost symbol of the city.

Even as a child, before I could grasp it conceptually, I encountered the past as an embodied presence in space, and this shaped how I experienced my hometown and my country. In Estonia under Soviet occupation, public narratives presented one “official truth,” while more personal and familial stories conveyed another – that I was growing up in an occupied country. Experiences like these illustrate how historical truth can be layered and mediated through storytelling, a dynamic that continues to shape life writing practices in the Nordic and Baltic region. In this region, life writing does not belong solely to the academy. There is a strong grassroots tradition of storying and collecting lives – practices embedded in cultural landscapes that sustain community memory, resilience and social continuity. It was in this context that, in 2023, and again in 2025, within the framework of the Nordplus Higher Education project that brought together Nordic and Baltic life writing scholars from Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, our team developed an intensive course in life writing studies [1].

As part of this course, I designed an experiential module on memory: a memory walk through Tartu that retraced the routes of my childhood walks with my grandparents. The memory walk was not only an exploration of place but a practice of life writing enacted in situ. Through storytelling in motion, autobiographical memory and inherited family narratives were articulated as situated life stories. Rather than presenting life writing as a textual artefact alone, the walk foregrounded life narrative as a performative, relational act unfolding in space. In this way, the module proposed an expanded understanding of life writing – not only as written self-representation, but as an embodied, spatial and dialogical practice of meaning-making.

The memories evoked during the walk do not exist in isolation. In Tartu's cityscape, traces of different political eras persist side by side, even when they are not immediately visible. As a child, I learned to navigate between the official Soviet historiography taught in school and the historical narrative of interwar Estonian independence transmitted within my family. These frameworks did not simply replace one another; they coexisted in tension, requiring constant interpretive negotiation. That tension remains part of how the past is encountered today. Students from the Baltic countries may approach these histories through inherited experiences of occupation, while students from Nordic contexts may encounter them as unfamiliar or distant. The walk did not aim to stabilise a singular narrative but to make perceptible how historically documented events and lived family memories intersect in space, and how one's position shapes their interpretation. By learning to perceive the city as layered with interlaced and competing narrative frameworks, students were encouraged to see landscapes not as neutral backdrops but as sites where memory, identity, and historical meaning are continually negotiated.

Prior to the walk, students were introduced to life writing as a practice through which memory becomes narratively shaped and identity takes form [2]. These perspectives helped frame the memory walk as a situated exploration of how narrative identity is shaped through movement, spatial encounter and embodied practice. The walk invited the students to consider how life

stories are shaped not only by chronology as the dominant organising principle that people associate with life stories but by spatial experience, inherited narratives and embodied repetition. In the preparatory session to the memory walk, we addressed questions such as: How do personal and family stories mediate historical understanding? How does place structure autobiographical memory? What is the relationship between lived experience and narrative reconstruction? Short creative writing tasks, completed before and after the walk, were intended to sharpen the students' awareness of how memory and space intersect through autobiographical reflection.

My understanding of this pedagogical experiment draws on theoretical perspectives that frame memory as embodied, performative and spatially situated, making visible the interplay between self, memory and place. Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire provides a valuable foundation for understanding memory as embodied practice. She defines the archive as the domain of "supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)" and contrasts it with "the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)" (Taylor, 2003, p. 19). While Taylor does not explicitly discuss walking, it can be seen as part of the repertoire, a performative act through which embodied memory is enacted and spatial histories are retraced and reimagined through movement. In the context of teaching memory as lived and embodied experience, her concept helps to situate walking, storytelling and sensory engagement as repertoire-based acts of remembering. These are not static recollections but performative reactivations of knowledge in space, practices that connect the body, place and memory in dynamic interplay. As Michel de Certeau (2002, p. 93) suggests, "the ordinary practitioners of the city ... walk ... an elementary form of this experience of the city ... whose bodies follow the thick and thin of an urban 'text'".

If Taylor's notion of the repertoire highlights walking as an embodied act of remembering, then Christina Moretti's perspective invites us to consider walking as a form of situated knowledge – a way of thinking and feeling with places and people. According to Moretti, "as a way of inhabiting, researching, and representing everyday realities, walking is an imaginative practice" (2017, p. 93) that can bring us into contact with the imagined and remembered geographies of others, offering glimpses into what they long for, miss, or connect through memory and narrative (Irving, 2010; Schielke, 2012, qtd in Moretti, 2017, p. 93). Understanding walking as an imaginative and relational mode of inquiry opens possibilities for teaching by inviting students to approach place not only as a physical environment but as a network of stories, memories and relationships continually shaped through movement and attention.

In a related approach, Lesley Murray and Helmi Järviluoma (2019) propose a "transgenerational walking methodology," drawing on ideas from human geography, particularly topobiography (Karjalainen, 2009), as well as sensory ethnography and sensory memory walking practices (Classen, 2012; Thibaud, 2013; Järviluoma & Vikman, 2013). They explore how walking together enables different generations to inscribe their experiences into space and to create shared understandings of place through movement. Their approach emphasises the multisensory nature of movement – how memories are not only told or written

but also felt, heard and enacted through bodily communication. The act of walking becomes a form of “transgenerational knowledge creation,” (Murray & Järviluoma, 2019, p. 233) where meanings of space emerge through dynamic engagement with the environment and through the walkers’ own physical and affective presence.

This framework resonates with how I have experienced and remembered place myself, and for how it now informs my pedagogical practice. My sensory and embodied memory of the Tartu city centre emerged through childhood walks with my grandparents that can be viewed as a form of transgenerational (counter)memory walk that enabled me to perceive the city beyond the official Soviet representations of space. These early walks shaped my perception of the city as a layered, haunted landscape – where absences, ruins and reconstructions coexisted in the same visual and emotional field. As Karen Till notes:

Although places are understood to be materially real and temporally stable ... their meanings are made and remade in the present. Places are not only continuously interpreted; they are haunted by past structures of meaning and material presences from other times and lives. (2005, p. 9)

My walks with my grandparents exemplify this dynamic. The city was materially present in its concrete 1970s form as part of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. Yet my perception of it was shaped by inherited layers of memory and affect – traces of the prewar city that reached me above all through my grandparents’ stories. In revisiting these routes as part of the Nordic Baltic life writing course memory walk and telling the students my stories of the ways I experienced the city in my childhood, those embodied traces became reactivated to transform inherited sensory memory into a shared pedagogical experience. In this sense, the walk became both a teaching method and a way of reconnecting with transgenerational memory – bringing the embodied past into a shared present.

For the walk, I also draw on my family archive: photographs, maps and stories passed down by my grandparents. I aim to bring these materials back to life through movement and shared reflection. They were part of my childhood, handled and talked about at home. Though the images of wartime destruction they contained were something that did not fit the official Soviet narrative, they quietly persisted in our family’s memory work. I chose several of these photographs showing Tartu before and after the wartime bombings, carefully annotated in my grandfather’s neat, almost calligraphic handwriting. They served both as mnemonic prompts and as tangible links to the embodied past I had inherited. With the students, I retraced the same routes my grandparents once took with me as a child. The walk became a form of embodied storytelling, a meeting point between archive and repertoire where static images and written traces were reactivated through the acts of walking, seeing and narrating in the present.

As we reached the site of the former Stone Bridge, on a cold, wet afternoon in early spring, I carefully passed around the photographs from my family archive of wartime and prewar Tartu, taking care not to let raindrops fall on them. In one photo from 1939, the bridge still appears intact, graceful in its plump symmetry. In the next photo, taken only a few years later, the bridge

is almost unrecognisable – one arch half-collapsed, the gateway shattered into fragments, the ruins starkly dominating the image. On the back of the photograph, my grandfather has noted: “Photographed on July 31, 1941”. This is the closing moment of our memory walk through Tartu, part of the Nordic Baltic life writing course. Together, we continue toward the Tartu University Botanical Gardens for the reception. I tell the students that during the bombings of the summer of 1941, fewer civilians were killed than in those of 1944, but among the victims was Teodor Lippmaa, the director of the Botanical Gardens. As we enter through the garden gates, the rain eases, and for a moment we are surrounded by the quiet charm of early spring flowers, crocuses, scillas, and a few snowdrops in bloom. The Second World War that swept twice through Tartu may seem distant now, but its traces remain inscribed in the city’s fabric. Green areas and open spaces mark sites of destruction, while the rhythm of new and reconstructed buildings silently testifies to both loss and renewal. By walking these streets with my family photographs in hand, the students encounter how personal and familial archives preserve dimensions of the past that were once hidden from official narratives. The photographs make visible what had been absent in public discourse, allowing students to experience how life storytelling can reveal truths that have existed beyond sanctioned historiography, allowing an understanding of the past to emerge in the interplay of memory, narrative and place. In this moment, the city itself becomes a pedagogical text, and walking it a tangible lesson in how truth can emerge through embodied, relational engagement with lived experience.

By engaging with layered narratives in situ, students experienced how historical truth is neither singular nor static. They saw that what is recorded in archives, commemorated in monuments, or absent from public discourse can coexist with personal and affective truths, and that these truths are made perceptible through attention, embodied experience and careful observation. Through the act of walking, observing, and reflecting, memory became a lens for encountering truth as relational, situated and emergent – a truth that is inseparable from place, experience and narrative. In this way, the memory walk demonstrated how life writing can teach students not only to witness and document but to apprehend truth through lived, sensory engagement with the world around them.

To further encourage the students to experience space and memory as multidimensional and embodied, during the next run of the course in September 2025, I ask them to take a short, independent walk in Tartu Central Park (Tartu Keskpark). Using Google Maps to locate the park, they are instructed to walk through the space mindfully, engaging all their senses and recording their first impressions. The students observe the large linden trees, their leaves turning yellow and falling to the ground, the casual atmosphere of the playground, and the network of intersecting footpaths. They note the wind rustling through the leaves, the changing season, and the rhythm of daily life as people walk and carry out their activities. Writing on-site in a public space may make the exercise feel a little unusual for them, but in this way, the exercise invites them to perceive the park not merely as a physical space, but as a living, sensory city environment shaped by human presence.

A few days later, I lead the students on the memory walk itself, showing them photographs of the old trading yard by the river that once occupied the site where Central Park now stands.

This area, along with several blocks of buildings and streets extending east toward the sites of today's shopping centres and a smaller park, had been completely destroyed during the Second World War. I show them one of my grandfather's photos taken right after the bombings, in which these blocks were entirely gone – the only building left standing was the market hall, the sole geographical marker by which this place could even be recognised. Seeing this photo always had a profound impact on me as a child, and I can see a similar reaction in the students. It makes clear, in a spatially tangible way, how the war reshaped the city and the lives of the people who lived there. For the students, it offers a direct encounter with the interwoven histories of memory and space, helping them to understand how urban landscapes carry the traces of past lives, traumas and transformations.

Then I add another layer to the story. On the edge of Central Park, there is a small area still paved with uneven concrete tiles typical of the 1970s and 1980s. During my childhood, a platform stood there where party leaders would watch parades held for Soviet commemorative occasions such as Victory Day on May 9. For schoolchildren, participation in these parades was compulsory, and I remember them as uncomfortable performances of loyalty rather than genuine celebration. Standing there with the students, I want them to sense how this space, now seemingly neutral and ordinary, once carried the weight of those rituals – how historical power and memory can overwrite and reshape the meanings of place.

The next day, I ask students to revisit the notes they had made about Tartu Central Park and to reflect on the layers of memory we had explored together during the walk. I do not ask them to rewrite their notes or to necessarily change their perspective, but to carry the experience into a place of personal significance – whether public or private. Several students, particularly those from other Baltic states, describe how the exercise refreshed their own layered understanding of place – how childhood memories, family stories and traces of history overlap in familiar spaces. One student approaches the task differently, writing a vivid account of her childhood home and describing both the traces left by families who had lived there before her and the marks her own family had made over time. All the students agree that the life writing tasks sharpened their perception of space, making the intertwining of memory and place more tangible in their own everyday surroundings.

With the sequence of exercises I used for the memory walk, which ranged from observing archival photographs to walking and writing in both public and personally significant spaces, I explored the pedagogical potential of engaging with memory as a lived and embodied practice. Moving through the city physically, visually and sensorially, the students were able to experience memory not as abstract knowledge but as something enacted in the body and in space. Static materials such as photographs and maps were brought to life through walking, storytelling and reflection, showing how personal, familial and collective memories coexist and overlap in urban landscapes. In a way, the walk functioned as a bridge between perception and understanding, sharpening the students' awareness of the stories and memory traces embedded in everyday surroundings. Writing reflectively and creatively became an essential part of this process, a means of translating sensory and emotional experience into understanding. Through writing, students could articulate how movement through space shapes perception and

knowledge, allowing memory to emerge as something lived and continually reinterpreted along temporal and spatial axes. By facilitating their engagement with the city's layered histories and encouraging them to make a connection to their own experiences, students encountered a form of truth – of history, memory and transgenerational experience – that is embodied and open-ended, emerging not from texts alone but through lived experience, movement and careful observation.

The memory walk made visible that truth in life writing does not reside in stable recollections or in the authority of personal experience, but in the ways people learn to attend, interpret and respond to the world around them. For the students, most of whom had never been to Tartu, the walk did not evoke personal memories of the city. Instead, it allowed them to encounter truth as something that emerges through noticing the layers of a place – its absences, traces, tensions and atmospheres – and through reflecting on how these layers shape their own position as observers and writers. The creative non-fiction tasks reinforced this. In the first assignment, they wrote from their sensory and affective responses during the walk, experimenting with how narrative meaning forms through embodied perception rather than remembered experience. In the second task, they carried the idea of layered space into a place of personal significance elsewhere, discovering how the same interpretive attention could reveal complexities within spaces they thought they already knew.

What the memory walk ultimately offered was a pedagogy of emplacement: an approach to teaching life writing that foregrounds truth as something sensed, negotiated and co-created. It is shaped through movement, relation and perspective; it depends on the stance a narrator takes toward a place, a story, or a history that may or may not be their own. In this way, the memory walk functioned both as method and metaphor – showing that truth in life writing is created not by retrieving what is already fixed in memory, but by engaging with the shifting interplay of past and present, self and other, and the layered landscapes through which we move.

Notes

[1] The aim of the course was to strengthen the visibility of life writing in higher education, highlighting it as a well-established and internationally relevant field within the Nordic and Baltic regions. Equally important was our intention to rethink how life writing can be taught. By integrating experimental self-reflective, creative, and community-building approaches, we wished to invite the students to engage with life writing not only as an academic subject but as a living practice, encouraging ethical awareness, empathy, and attentiveness toward the lived experiences of others.

[2] Drawing on Paul John Eakin's work on narrative identity, we discussed the idea that we do not simply tell stories about ourselves but come to know ourselves through them (Eakin, 2008, p. 1–4). Autobiographical memory, in this view, is not a fixed archive but is constituted in the moment of narration. In conversation with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's understanding of life narrative as interpretive rather than transparent, we examined how the autobiographical "I" positions itself relationally – in relation to others, to inherited stories, and to culturally available frameworks for telling a life (Smith & Watson, 2024, pp. 3–38, 103–152, 153–165). We also drew on Molly Andrews's notion of narrative imagination (2014) to reflect on how we apprehend lives – our own and others' – as stories. Tim Ingold's emphasis on imagination as

emerging through lived, sensory engagement with the world (2021) further supported our attention to movement and embodiment.

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