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Editorial: What we do when we teach life narrative

We understand life narrative ... as a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds
and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written,
performed, visual, cinematic, or digital.
– Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, 2010, p. 8

Reading and writing life narrative has a particular power in engaging students in critical
thinking, exploring subjectivity, and promoting diverse experiences and perspectives.
– Laurie McNeill & Kate Douglas, 2017, p. 1

This collection of autoethnographic, pedagogical reflections seeks to explore and question what it is we do when we teach life narrative. What is particular or novel about teaching in this interdisciplinary space at this moment in the 21st century? How might we articulate and share our successes and challenges? Life Writing is a now very recognisable subgenre of English Literary Studies and Creative Writing. Many universities across the globe offer subjects that focus on non-fiction literatures and writing. Once the misunderstood cousin of 'proper' literature, subjects with titles such as "Life Writing", "Narrative Non-fiction", or "A History of the Essay" have emerged robustly over the past two decades, driven by scholars and practitioners of life narrative who showcase a wide range of non-fiction texts and employ diverse methods for reading, writing and interpreting non-fiction literature in the classroom. The collection of essays we present in this special issue reflects a strong belief in the value of teaching non-fiction, exploring the skills and knowledge students gain from learning in this space, both intellectually and personally.

The essays in this special issue developed from an online workshop symposium, "Teaching the Truth: Navigating Non-fiction in the Contemporary Classroom". We invited scholars from a diverse range of national and international contexts. From listening to their talks at conferences

and from reading their previous work, we were aware that these scholars shared similar preoccupations as us (the editors) about pedagogies of life narrative. For instance, these were scholars working at the nexus of literature and creative writing; writers who were considering the ethics of practice; researchers engaged in innovative pedagogies, diverse texts and genres; teachers asking big questions about truth, witnessing, positionality and the politics of representation. The symposium represented a valuable opportunity to share practice, questions and problems across miles and contexts. It concluded the 2025 International Auto/Biography Association, Asia-Pacific (IABA A-P) and the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) conference, “The Story and The Self: Navigating Truth Genres in Literature”. The conference was co-organised by Associate Professor Kylie Cardell, Professor Kate Douglas, Dr Shannon Sandford (the editors) alongside Dr Emma Maguire, and was held from 31 June to 4 July in Adelaide/Tarndanya on the unceded lands of the Kaurna people, as well as hosted synchronously online. With this exciting first colloquia collaboration between Life Narrative and Australian Literary Studies scholars, IABA A-P and ASAL aimed to foster a space for thinking about how all kinds of stories make claims to truth and reality as well as the ways in which ideas of selfhood and identity are shaped in and by literary practice and culture. At the symposium, and now with this special issue, we extended these ideas towards our shared spaces of learning and teaching, considering how questions about truth, stories and the self also translate into and underpin various pedagogical encounters and contexts.

In their introduction to a special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, Orly Lael Netzer and Amanda Spallaci (2022, p. 376) focus on teaching life writing in an age of social change. They emphasise how exploring and employing “methods to engage and teach life writing texts in ways that can open up conversations about historical contexts, identity, agency, resistance, and intersectionality” requires expertise in life narrative to move beyond using these texts as forms of historical evidence (p. 376). Instead, Lael Netzer and Spallaci (p. 376) urge the development of critical and nuanced pedagogical practices in ways that attend to how “agency, authenticity, memory and truth” shape life stories. In a contemporary era marked by intense political and social discourse, a deep attachment to the concept of a cohesive and stable self, and saturated by self-representational practices across a variety of media forms, teaching nuanced critical analysis of life narrative seems more urgent than ever.

Life Narrative is an interdisciplinary field in which subjectivity, positionality and ethics are critical concerns. For this special issue on teaching the truth, we encouraged shorter essays that mixed a scholarly approach with personal perspectives and reflection. All of these scholars are engaged in research-led teaching practice. The essays also acknowledge the role of positionality: ‘who’ the teacher is; how backgrounds, beliefs, and preoccupations play a crucial role in what and how they teach; how they make space for the lives of others in the classroom. These are urgent questions for teachers at this cultural moment within the varied political environments we work and teach within and so that take into account how our broader global contexts and world events impact our classrooms.

The diverse tertiary teaching and learning contexts from which these essays emerge represent some of the intersecting disciplinary and cross-cultural breadth that has characterised Life

Narrative as a field and practice. Though its disciplinary home may still be the department of Literary Studies, this issue confirms that Life Narrative concepts and methods, and in particular a signature concern with ethics, have much to offer and are actively contributing to teaching and learning across institutional contexts. Life Narrative as a discipline is flexibly incorporated and can move between a creative writing classroom or a leadership seminar, for instance. It fosters engagement that has benefits beyond the teaching of core methods such as critical reading by also enabling students to practise and consider the significance of empathy for ‘Others’ whose lives may be far removed from or contest their own lived experiences as well as to engage in empathetic and sympathetic self-reflection for themselves.

This symposium was held in June 2025 but none of the works collected for this issue reflect on the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in the context of Humanities tertiary teaching. This absence perhaps represents a distinct moment in time: we presented and wrote up this work at a point that now presents as a cusp that has well and truly tipped over. The methods discussed in this issue, however, present critical approaches to teaching that remain urgent in the ‘Age of AI’ and maybe more so than ever. Humanities scholars like historian Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2025) have argued that the disciplinary methods and approaches of scholars in these fields have much to contribute as we navigate and negotiate the current spread of AI tools. Humanities thinking in relation to AI is as relevant in the classroom as it is for scholarly ethics and research practices in academic disciplines more broadly, if not even more so. This feels like a topic for another special issue, and Life Narrative scholars could make an important contribution to this conversation.

Among the varied approaches to teaching life narrative shared in this special issue, the significance and value of empowering learners through integrated and meaningful forms of participation and assessment is clearly emphasised. Life narrative is a human activity embedded in the everyday lives of students and mediation is a foundational concept: it matters how and in what forms we tell stories about ourselves and others and this includes negotiations with evolving tools and technology. In workshopping our papers for this special issue, we aimed to share ideas and resources with the goal of maintaining and growing disciplinary strengths and benefiting from each other’s practice.

Working with life writing scholarship as well as concepts from Indigenous scholars, such as treaty citizenship, Orly Lael Netzer offers a case-study for situating the “public work” of life narrative in the Canadian Studies classroom. In “Lives of the Nation: On Teaching Life Writing in the Canadian Studies Classroom”, Lael Netzer pursues a range of pedagogical, ethical and social justice questions and intentions, including how to ensure students’ privacy and safety when discussing challenging issues of identity and citizenship. Lael Netzer offers a series of thoughtful theoretical scaffolds as well as practical exercises that invite students to engage in conversations about national identities and formations through the lens of life stories and in relation to the complex stakes of agency, truth, responsibility and relationality that are at the forefront of both personal and national narratives.

In “‘Life Writing as Leadership’: Teaching Life Writing in the General Education Classroom”, Nicole Stamant’s account of incorporating life writing in a course on leadership is a fascinating and methodologically rich discussion of life writing’s flexible and interdisciplinary reach. Initially sceptical of leadership studies and its potential to instate hierarchical claims, Stamant explains how she incorporates practices and methods of life writing to expand students’ understanding of what a leader is and how they come to be. Using a wide range of texts and media, such as speeches, memoirs, graphic narratives, novels, biofiction, TED Talks, podcasts, and innovative assessment including life writing and interview-based tasks, Stamant guides her students to consider and re-think their various assumptions, expanding on dominant perspectives of leadership as hierarchical and positional, and creating an inclusive space for future leaders to flourish. The essays of Lael Netzer and Stamant each demonstrate the ways in which Life Narrative methods can emerge and prove very useful in disciplinary contexts beyond their traditional home of English Literary Studies.

Like Lael Netzer and Stamant, Rachel Sykes is invested in meaningful curricula and assessments that foster and draw on practice-based critical engagement with the ethical dimensions of life writing. In “Confessional Labour: Teaching with Drafts in the Non-fiction Classroom”, a personal essay on their experience designing and teaching a course on “confessional” writing, Sykes reflects on the results of guiding students to think about life writing as also implicitly the result of creative process, including how authors in this genre make strategic negotiations with style, voice and content. Sykes’ teaching practice is contextualised by the broader post-truth cultural moment of 2017–2020, in which global instabilities, and the questions surrounding truth and authenticity that adjacently emerged, posed unanticipated challenges to how their students read and critiqued intimate, “confessional” forms of life writing. Sykes reflects on the stakes of non-fiction as a form that contests straightforward ideas about the self as transparent or truth as objective even as they also wrestle with the ongoing ethical challenges of how to do so in this cultural moment.

Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle shares an intimate and urgent account of teaching Latin American women’s life writing in a US university during a time of increasing scrutiny and governmental intervention in Humanities and Arts Institutions. In “Teaching the Truth: Navigating Student Bias in the Life Narrative Classroom”, Ortiz-Vilarelle reflects on the student evaluation of teaching as a deeply flawed instrument that harmfully amplifies bias and perpetuates dominant ideology in ways that are particularly risky for marginal and diverse teachers. Ortiz-Vilarelle takes the temperature of a challenging moment for educators engaged in teaching life narrative and reflects on the potentialities of life stories as a way for students to ethically encounter the lives of others. Like Sykes, Ortiz-Vilarelle attends to teaching life narrative currently, reflecting on a distinct moment in which life narrative pedagogy has become a critical practice for disrupting students’ assumptions about the cultural function and value of Literary Studies. Both articulate some of the nuanced and ongoing tensions that arise when students are asked to sit with discomfort and uncertainty over neat understandings and resolutions.

In “‘An Inventory of the Traces’: Reading Anticolonial Theory and Writing Decolonising Life Narratives”, Terri Tomsy discusses using life narrative as pedagogy in a senior undergraduate class on Empire and Postcolonialism. As Tomsy explains, her intention is not only to teach students about this subject but to prompt students to both consider how their own experience and positionality can matter in public discourse and to deepen their engagement with the centrality of the embodied and experiential self in postcolonial experience and theorising. Tomsy draws on anticolonial and postcolonial theorists who have used life writing and personal experience as a basis for theoretical work, such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Jamaica Kincaid. She explains how she embeds a teaching practice in which students write personal journals to engage with these theories, showing how lived experience can support critical understanding of colonial power, subjectivity, and knowledge production and encouraging students to also find voice in this context. In its consideration of the ways that life narrative practice can engage students in real-world questions, Tomsy’s essay draws parallels with Lael Netzer and Cardell, Douglas and Sandford, whose work is similarly interested in life writing as a mode of ethical response.

In “‘Feeling Bad’ and ‘Refusing Reading’: Teachable Moments in the Life Narrative Classroom”, Kylie Cardell, Kate Douglas and Shannon Sandford, the editors of this special issue, contribute a case-study based discussion of “apology” and “refusal” as concepts connected to larger logics of colonial violence, dispossession and inequality. As in Lael Netzer’s and Tomsy’s papers, this essay considers the contribution that life narratives can make to decolonising literatures and classrooms. Contextualised to the Australian political and tertiary education landscape, they consider how apology or anti-apology can open teaching practice up to exploring but not necessarily resolving what students think, feel and learn in the process of reading and responding to life narratives by First Nations writers. As non-Indigenous teachers in Australian university classrooms, they reflect on the importance of understanding and acknowledging positionality in the classroom, being willing to learn, as well as ways to consider and approach Indigenous life stories ethically and with sensitivity by drawing on reading methods that centralise Indigenous voices.

A life writer who also teaches creative writing, Vanessa Berry reflects on and shares insight and methods from her years of creative practice as a zine-maker and autobiographical essayist. In “Lively Experiments: Writing Exercises and Life Writing”, Berry highlights the usefulness of writing exercises – a mainstay of the creative writing classroom – in helping students work with their memories, observations and experiences to produce impromptu life writing texts. Berry’s attention to the value of writing exercises in framing processes of memory or “ready-to-hand” material that includes students’ life experiences and stories suggests the possible interventions of practice-based learning in understanding life writing as a practice and genre. Like Cardell, Douglas and Sandford, Berry’s essay champions the importance of combining theory and practice as an empowering act for learners who then expand their understanding of life narrative genres and theory while they work at the intersection of personal and cultural engagement.

Leila Pazargadi's innovative account of teaching life writing online, "Retracing Memory: Using Multimodal Scaffolding to Create Autographics in the Classroom", offers a case study of practical strategies and scholarly reflection for engaging student empathy and sense of self through creative writing. Describing the process of creating a two-part autobiographical workshop for undergraduate English composition students, Pazargadi reflects on two distinctive methods: a multi-modal scaffolded approach and a narrative approach. Interested in fostering and supporting autobiographical exchange in the classroom, Pazargadi turns attention to an innovative form of life narrative practice in line with a responsive pedagogical approach. Pazargadi's inquiry highlights the importance of life narrative that is political and engaged in memory work – at a time in global history when memory and lived experience is often invalidated. Like Tomskey, Pazargadi's classroom exercises foreground students' positionality and reflexivity as key moments for learning, as students practise ethical exchange through personal writing.

In "Walking with the Past: Teaching Life Narrative Through a Wartime Memory Walk in Tartu", Leena Käössar explores how walking can be an effective method for teaching life writing. "Memory walks" have pedagogical potential for encouraging students to consider the history of their city and the different narratives that shape it. These are landscapes moulded by political power, and by loss and absence. Käössar draws on her own family archives to construct the journey across the city, asking students to reflect on Tartu's complex histories and collective trauma as they walk. The teacher's aim is to provide an embodied experience for the students, encouraging them to unlock relational and situated memories. The students' experience is transposed into creative life writing exercises that challenge their sense of historical truth. As in Berry's essay, student engagement and practice is central to this learning activity. Students are asked to learn through experiential and experimental pedagogies that ask them to reflect (through spontaneous writing as well as walking) on memory, trauma and history, and how these are constructed and shaped as narrative. Käössar's autoethnographic, creative method draws on history and memory studies scholarship. Her discussion demonstrates some of the innovative, experiential ways that diverse pedagogies of life narrative can be brought into practice.

We see our discipline of Life Narrative as a robust, interdisciplinary space that encourages reflexive, collaborative, personal and ethical practice between teachers and students. By engaging leading scholars in the field, this special issue joins a now substantial body of dynamic scholarship on what it means to teach life narrative, building on W. Craig Howes' and Miriam Fuchs' field-shaping collection *Teaching Life Writing Texts* (2008). Other key texts and projects in the field include Laurie McNeill and Kate Douglas's *Teaching Lives: Contemporary Pedagogies of Life Narratives* (2017), "The Teaching Life Writing Project" (2020–2022) and Lael Netzer and Spallacci's *Teaching Life Writing: Theory Methodology, and Practice* (2024). The essays in this special issue demonstrate how vital this work continues to be at this cultural moment. Life Narrative studies seek to empower students to know and articulate who they are. Life Narrative studies ask students to consider what it means to be human, open-minded, to witness and engage with the lived experience of others. This field equips students to lead, to respond with thought and fairness. We look forward to seeing what

happens next in this space, and continuing to be a part of this rich, creative scholarly community.

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