



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Flinders University & Griffith University

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“Feeling bad” and “refusing reading”: Teachable moments in the life narrative classroom

Abstract:

In Life Narrative studies, the apology has been theorised as a mode of writing broadly concerned with instances of failure, denial, erasure and contestation. In our life narrative classrooms, notions of apology or anti-apology have also played a role in how non-Indigenous students encounter and witness life narrative texts by First Nations writers. This paper aims to explore our experiences teaching First Nations life narrative as non-Indigenous teachers who want to engage students in questions of knowledge, history, memory and truth that are especially relevant to reading and responding to the first-person voices of Indigenous people in Australia. Through Life Narrative studies, we argue, students can understand colonial structures of violence and domination in the context of lived experience, examine the writer’s strategies for communicating or refusing to communicate that experience, and connect the personal or auto/biographical voice to larger logics of inequality, power and reparation.

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Keywords:

Life writing, First Nations writing, apology, refusal

Introduction

Since 2008, the word “sorry” has carried significant resonance within the Australian context. On February 13, at the opening of parliament that year, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered a formal apology on behalf of the nation to Australia’s First Nations Peoples, particularly the Stolen Generations, who were forcibly removed from their families and communities under the laws and policies of consecutive Australian governments (Turner, 2023). “For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind,” stated Rudd in the opening of his apology, “we say sorry” (Rudd, 2008). National Sorry Day, held annually on May 26, recognises and remembers the Stolen Generations as part of broader efforts to bring greater awareness of the impact of colonisation for First Nations peoples. Sorry Day also aims to support national conversations and actions towards recognition and reconciliation.

The language of recognition, as Indigenous Australian author Tony Birch points out, “has coincided with a global critique of the colonial baggage and psyche framing both the term and its supporting narrative” (2018, p. 7). North American Indigenous scholars such as Audra Simpson (2017) have critiqued the political practice of recognition as cover for settler-colonial governments to continue to evade responsibility for the ongoing impacts of colonisation for First Nations peoples [1]. Simpson (2017) posits the term “refusal” as an alternative to recognition politics in settler-colonial society that refuses the notion of coloniser recognition as the end point of justice. It is an alternative that attends to the ways “Indigenous life ... refused, did not consent to, and *still refuses* to be folded into a larger encompassing colonising and settler colonial narratives of acceptance” (2017, p. 18, original emphasis).

This context connects legibly to the interdiscipline of Life Narrative, in which the apology has been theorised as a mode of writing broadly concerned with instances of failure, denial, erasure and contestation. The apology is both a genre and “a major stance of self-presentation in personal narratives” that is often used as a means of contrition and regret but also redemption and absolution (Smith & Watson, 2024, p. 207). As Leigh Gilmore (2022, p. 422) explains, “The apology is a form with two related but distinct views of responsibility ... an apology is as much about making excuses and dodging responsibility as it is about taking responsibility for wrongdoing and making amends”. In this paper, we approach both the apology, with its implication of recognition, and the notion of refusal as dual frameworks that bring us into productive confrontation with settler-colonial structures of inequality and exploitation. We explore the opportunities and challenges of this confrontation in the context of Life Narrative studies and in our university classrooms where we read and respond to life stories by First Nations writers alongside our students.

We are Life Narrative scholars and non-Indigenous educators working in varied institutional contexts of higher education. As such, we acknowledge the importance of engaging with First Nations life narrative texts in our classrooms. We want to communicate to our diverse cohorts of students how witnessing First Nations histories through life stories can enable an understanding of the politics of recognition and refusal. As Laurie McNeill and Kate Douglas

(2016, p. 5–6) remind us, life narrative texts “can embody issues and concepts – such as power, agency, ‘race,’ and class – that need to take form for students to contend with them in meaningful ways, encouraging readings that are textually and contextually responsive and recognizing the lived implications of these concepts for subjects who may not typically be heard”. Life narratives by First Nations writers offer an important example of how non-fiction forms and genres can confer authority and agency to marginalised subjects. The potential of life narrative texts to engage students in questions of lived experience, knowledge, history, memory and truth become especially relevant to the work of reading First Nations life narratives. Ethical responsiveness to these texts requires methods of teaching “that can open up conversations about historical contexts, identity, agency, resistance, and intersectionality” (Lael Netzer & Spallacci, 2022, p. 376).

In our teaching and research, we have had the consistent privilege of learning from and engaging with First Nations knowledges through conversations with First Nations colleagues and students, by reading widely on the challenges and ethics of teaching Indigenous texts as non-Indigenous educators, and reading First Nations authored literature (Hook & Jessen, 2022; O’Dowd, 2010; Steele et al., 2023; Worrell, 2024). Our work aligns with our university’s principles of decolonising the curriculum and our own social justice stances on narrative authority and the importance of own voices.

In this paper, we explore two experiences of teaching life narrative texts by First Nations writers and examine how the concept of apology plays a role in how non-Indigenous students encounter and witness Indigenous life narratives in the classroom. We reflect on the valuable presence of First Nations students in our classrooms as discussion leaders and consider our own positionalities as both non-Indigenous teachers and Australian/global citizens. We investigate how “feeling bad” (a kind of apology) has potential to transform into a teachable moment and how “refusing reading” (an anti-apology) functions as a narrative strategy of First Nations life writers that we should think carefully about. As a discipline embedded in public and political discourse, Life Narrative is particularly adept at introducing students to difficult subject matter, such as the histories and ongoing impacts of colonial violence presented in the life narrative texts we discuss. And as Gina Snooks (2022, p. 1) argues, “The purpose of teaching difficult or traumatic subject matter is to help students learn how power and privilege operate in specific cultural, social, political, and historical contexts; and to understand its ongoing effects”. This was our goal as we approached our teaching of First Nations non-fiction.

The Australian Curriculum mandates the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and knowledge in primary school and high school curriculum. The curriculum also explains how all students should see themselves as engaged in “reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world’s oldest continuous living cultures” (Steele & Gower, 2024). Similarly, in the university context, robust attempts to decolonise the curriculum and to include Indigenous knowledges across a range of disciplines have been well-documented (Christie & Asmar, 2021; Hollinsworth, 2024; Hook & Jessen, 2022; Kuttainen et al., 2023). These studies also acknowledge the many challenges that come with decolonising the curriculum, which include the ongoing racial power structures that exist in institutions, workload pressures on

Indigenous members of staff, and lack of training for non-Indigenous educators on methods for teaching Indigenous content. Teaching life narrative within the “ostensibly apolitical space of English studies” (West-Pavlov, 2005, as cited in Healy-Ingram, 2011, p. 78), and amid the structural issues associated with the neoliberal university, brings these challenges into sharp relief. As Wiradjuri poet, writer and academic Jeanine Leane has argued, fear and reticence by non-Indigenous teachers to embed First Nations literature in the English curriculum may well be a product of these pressures; however, an inclusive pedagogy is critical to decolonising the curriculum as part of ongoing investment in educating and socialising students (2025, p. 12).

For instance, in their study, Carly Steele, Graeme Gower and Sophie Benson (2023) interviewed non-Indigenous Initial Teacher Education students who proactively chose to include Indigenous content in their lesson plans, with the aim of discovering what motivated them to do so. Their “interviewees said official requirements were not a major factor in their thinking. Rather, they felt morally compelled to include this content” (Steele & Gower, 2024). The students’ decisions were impacted by their own sense of social justice, of wanting to build a more equal Australia through their teaching.

These findings resonate with our experiences of how non-Indigenous students respond to the inclusion of First Nations texts in the classroom. Our sense is that most non-Indigenous students who populate a life narrative classroom feel ashamed about Australia’s racist history and its continued legacies. Life Narrative studies is particularly amenable to the work of interrogating and deconstructing this history – and telling a more complex story of the Australian nation and people in the process – because it acknowledges and centres the political dimensions inherent in literary study. As McNeill and Douglas argue (2016, p. 1), reading and writing life narrative has a particular power in engaging students in “critical thinking, exploring subjectivity, and promoting diverse experiences and perspectives”. Attentiveness to the personal but also necessarily relational, historical and political contexts and stakes of a life story, as well as the creative choices made by its author, enables a more expansive framework for reading and working with First Nations literature. Through Life Narrative studies, we argue, students can understand colonial structures of violence and domination in the context of lived experience, examine the writer’s strategies for communicating or refusing to communicate that experience, and connect the personal or auto/biographical voice to larger logics of inequality, power and reparation.

In the sections below, two co-authors of this paper discuss case studies of life writing taught in their upper-level undergraduate tertiary classrooms to explore these ideas in action in a classroom context.

“Feeling bad”: Memoir and risk

In 2024, as part of an undergraduate Life Writing intensive class at Flinders University, the students and I (Kate) read Stan Grant’s essay/memoir *The Queen Is Dead* (2023). Grant is a well-known Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi activist and award-winning journalist and author. *The*

Queen is Dead is a powerful and provocative memoir that focuses on the ongoing legacies of Australia’s history of colonisation under the British monarchy.

This book is a confronting read. As Gilmore argues of those who give testimony in the public sphere (2022, p. 421), Grant’s memoir demands accountability. It challenges white readers to think about the ways that racism functions covertly in Australia, and how white Australians have long been the beneficiary of Australia’s racism. There is no doubt that for many white students reading this text, it would have been a very uncomfortable and upsetting experience.

We read *The Queen is Dead* as the focus of one of the intensive days, so roughly a five-hour class. The format was as follows:

- First, I gave a lecture on the book. The lecture was steeped in Grant’s voice through interviews and talks. I explored my positionality with the students, that I am a non-Indigenous academic, and encouraged them to think about their own positionality. We had developed positionality statements early in the subject as a classroom activity. We had also spoken about #ownvoices and who gets to speak publicly on particular issues [2]. I encouraged the students to consider some issues that they felt comfortable leading discussion on, and to look for opportunities to be discussion leaders throughout the semester.
- The class completed some critical and creative activities (including a short creative writing prompt “I am Australian?” This writing exercise asked the students to be vulnerable in interrogating their feelings around their own cultural and national identities. I wrote a flash memoir about getting sunburned and fainting in primary school as we saluted the flag in a daily nationalist ritual.
- In the second half of the class, we had a group discussion led by a small group of three students. Students led the latter part of each of the intensive classes, and this was one of their assessment tasks. The group’s prompt was:

Imagine you are a group of teachers (high school or university), and you would like to include this book in your teaching. Please role play a discussion for the class about *The Queen is Dead*. You might include the audience as a population of fellow teachers. Please draw on the readings set for your topic to inform your discussion.

- Why is this book important? Why this book now?
- Discuss responses to this book (reviews etc.).
- How might this book be employed to decolonise the curriculum?
- Why would this book teach well?
- What issues might arise in your teaching of it? What might be difficult and how might you navigate this?
- Share/ discuss some key passages from the text.
- Include one or more learning and teaching activities for the class.

As previously flagged, I had invited students to think about their own positionality and to explore topics that they felt comfortable leading discussions on. I wanted to approach larger questions around the authority to speak about an Indigenous text, the reluctances and difficulties that come with this, and the responsibility we have as Australians to engage with Indigenous stories and histories. Students were able to select which reading or topic they would like to present on, and it seemed as though for most if not all students this choice represented an opportunity to work with their own positionality and authority to speak. When it came to discussing *The Queen is Dead*, there were one Indigenous student and two non-Indigenous students in the discussion-lead group. On the day, the two non-Indigenous students took the role of supportive second lead, with the Indigenous student leading the discussion and activities. Our student leader introduced the students to the concept of “yarning” and “yarning circles”, Dreamtime stories, and the importance of oral storytelling and its significant differences to written life storytelling. The students talked about the ways in which life storytelling was vital to First Nations storytelling – supporting the retention of Indigenous cultural knowledge and practices (often in the face of trauma).

The students led the discussion for an hour, and this included asking some provocative questions and offering some examples of how students and teachers (whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous) can engage with First Nations stories. The students drew on Grant’s stories as they close-read sections of the book and asked for responses. Many of the students spoke up – about how confronted they felt reading *The Queen is Dead*; how they had taken on white, colonial knowledges about Australia that were deep-rooted in their own families; the shame they felt for how little they knew about First Nations history; how they would like to decolonise their bookshelves, their approaches to knowledge, and their approach as future teachers and creatives in the Australian context.

The student leaders took risks in relation to analysing this book. They drew on diverse methods of literary analysis including forms of autocritical analysis. The students framed their reading of Grant’s book in terms of their own positionality. The students did not necessarily meet all the formal requirements of the task perfectly. The students (unapologetically) owned this knowledge space, seeing themselves as co-creators of knowledge in this space. Part of the feedback I gave them was this:

The structure you chose went well: you worked with the information you wanted to express while engaging consistently with the class – with generosity and without fear! I am very proud of you and how well you worked together. You demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of life narrative texts and theories.

It feels risky to promote disruption to the ways we teach literary studies, especially considering many of our students lack robust skills in literary analysis, but Life Narrative studies, and the texts we need to teach now, require us to teach in ways that invite risk.

“Refusing reading”: The personal essay and narrative agency

Empowering students as critical readers in the context of the history of colonialism and ongoing legacies of violence and shame is an aim that I (Kylie) also try to approach in my upper-level class on genres of creative non-fiction. In this topic, we cover relatively canonical forms of diverse literary non-fiction (broadly considered as ‘creative non-fiction’), such as literary journalism, nature writing, humour, biography, historical fiction and forms like autofiction and autotheory, as well as personal essays. We learn about non-fiction genres in the weeks of content and read foundational examples as well as relevant secondary criticism.

This topic also incorporates a three-week writing workshop designed to support the production of an original work of creative writing in one of the genres we have studied. Practising life writing alongside studying theory and concepts about life writing is an important pedagogy in my teaching (Cardell & Douglas, 2016; Douglas et al., 2022). By combining theory and practice, students learn how to craft a work of non-fiction and to discuss their work in ways that demonstrate and reflect on their knowledge and understanding. As an example of how this topic works, I will talk about a form that has proven very popular with students (and which will be useful for further framing the concerns that this paper addresses): the personal essay.

In the context of teaching Indigenous literature, combining theory with practice is a powerful tool for allowing students to reflect on an experience in which they are then also the maker – and so subject to an interpretative framework – when more often in literary studies they may have been asked to make a masterful, authoritative reading of a text. As Wiradjuri poet, writer and academic Jeanine Leane and Munnunjali and Dutch author, editor and educator Ellen van Neerven observe, First Nations subjects have too often been regarded as sources of “information” for colonial-knowers, particularly in genres of non-fiction (2024, p.6). Given this, attending to our own positionality is a means of recognising how easily settler reading practices can slip into forms of resource extraction, where Indigenous stories are treated as material to draw from rather than as sovereign knowledge shared within specific cultural, historical and relational contexts.

The essay is a flexible, creative form of life writing that mobilises ethics and aesthetics in challenging some of the assumptions about evidence and “truth” that adhere to non-fiction as a literary genre (Gilmore, 2014). The essay, as we discuss in class, has an activist history. It is entangled in literature as a rhetorical medium and is a genre of discourse that has as a mandate an intention to speak to readers to change their opinion or to offer further information or a new point of view. This is a history of the essay that can be traced to Black activism and feminist movements and that informs new and experimental kinds of politically informed life narrative modes like autotheory (Fournier, 2021, p. 34). I set my students secondary work, by scholars including Mario Aquilina, Cheryl A. Wall, Ellena Savage and Lauren Fournier, who all in some way approach the essay as a genre that is both “politicized and politicizing” as Savage asserts (2024, p. 447).

In taking this approach and offering a framing of the essay as a literary mode that is a form of speaking-back, as well as speaking-out, that draws into view particular histories and contexts in relation to disenfranchised and marginal subjects as well as to protest and activism, I am

asking students to think about not just why authors choose to narrate and share autobiographical material but why the *how* also matters.

One of the essays that we study for this discussion is a work of First Nations life writing by Goori-Lebanese writer Mykaela Saunders: “Communing with Uncle Kev Through the Archives: 1991–2021.” In “Communing with Uncle Kev,” Saunders crafts a chronological account of two decades during which she comes to find her vocation as a writer, acquires (against the odds) a university education, and comes to re-discover a lost legacy of writing and storytelling produced by her Uncle Kev that she then reclaims. Saunders uses the essay form very carefully and deliberately, navigating a double bind of speaking as a marginal subject already over-interpolated or excessively (negatively) visible in various dominant cultural and literary discourses of Australian colonialism. It is an aim Saunders makes clear also in/by the essay itself, deploying a strategy of silence and refusal in the narrative. She turns attention to questions of authority, evidence and agency as part of a story she will *not* tell. “This is not a vindication of me, nor am I throwing my people under a bus,” says Saunders, recounting her “improbable” achievement of acquiring a university education, “this is a condemnation of the injustice system, the welfare-to-prison pipeline, but I won’t write any more about this because I don’t want it in the archive” (2022, p. 7). Not-writing is an act of agency and control that draws the reader’s attention to the power of narration and its consequences. In what is a piece of personal, creative life writing, Saunders also uses tropes of the essay as a form of scholarship, including citation and reference. Crafting a chronological structure that calls to mind a personal archive or diary, she makes visible First Nations scholarship and experiences that have more often been *erased* in the colonial record and story of First Nations lives. Saunders’s narrative enactment positions life writing as a literary strategy in which creative choices also have political, ethical and moral aims.

My students recognise this text as an unapologetic disruption to the reader as a “knower” and to non-fiction about First Nations experience as a source of “information”. When they come to write their own non-fiction works, many of the students choose to reflect on Saunders’s text as an influence; her work crystallises the stakes – ethical, political and aesthetic – for life writers in creative forms who speak back to a dominant narrative more often told *about* them, and that has been used to control and define First Nations identity (Wright, 2016).

Reading First Nations authored non-fiction that refuses or contests various conventions of the genre is an important encounter for students at university. And by reading a personal essay like “Communing with Uncle Kev,” along with working on their own piece of writing in a non-fiction genre, students come to understand more deeply the extractive potential of life writing genres and the significance of ethics to the field. In supporting them to think carefully and pay attention to the ways in which authors shape their work in order to navigate the “coaxing” of life narrative forms, they become better readers in relation to the constraints of genre as also being an effect of power in a dominant culture.

Conclusion

Almost twenty years on from Kevin Rudd’s apology, and against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter, Free Palestine and other movements, as well as ongoing efforts to establish a national treaty with Australia’s traditional owners, the contemporary classroom is shaped by underlying currents and aftereffects of colonial violence and systemic injustice. Life Narrative, with its interdisciplinary focus on reading as witness and writing as personal and political response, has the capacity to respond potently to this moment. Our discipline enables us to teach texts in ways that “think about knowledge as reciprocal, ethical, and a means of mobilizing social justice” (Lael Netzer & Spallaci, 2022, p. 376). Students do not always (perhaps not often) see the act of reading and writing in the university classroom as having power or consequence outside of it. Changing this perception is a driving force of Life Narrative studies, and foundational to its interdisciplinary homes of the Humanities, Social Sciences and the Creative Arts.

Life writing – reading the first-person voices of Indigenous people – is one of the primary ways that non-Indigenous students encounter and come to understand First Nations experiences and lives. But as Waanyi author Alexis Wright argues, a desire to “know” the Indigenous subject is also entangled in a symptomatic colonial “knowing about” that has shaped the dominant narrative of Indigenous lives and this has also been an exercise of colonial power (Wright, 2016, p. 58). In our life narrative classrooms, we can activate practical and ideological means for students to see how engagement with reading and responding to life narrative is meaningful and contributes to processes of decolonisation or narrative reparation. For example, in foregrounding First Nations voices (alongside those of other minority groups) and engaging our students (whatever their cultural heritage) as active speakers, writers, listeners and readers, we position learning as critical to untangling the ongoing effects of colonial violence and power and a necessary step toward recognition and reconciliation. As non-Indigenous educators committed to the project of decolonising our pedagogy and curriculum, approaching First Nations lives and histories through life narrative texts is a meaningful way for our students to understand recognition and refusal as spaces of discomfort that are also generative and essential to learning and teaching in the Australian context.

Notes

[1] In this article, Simpson expands on arguments made previously about recognition and refusal in their book *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (2014).

[2] The #ownvoices movement references growing recognition, in Australia and elsewhere, of literature written by and about people from marginalised or minoritised communities (see Booth & Narayan).

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to colleagues at the International Auto/Biography Association, Asia-Pacific (IABA A-P) and the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) 2025 conference, where we presented a version of this paper for feedback. Many thanks also to the peer reviewers for their thoughtful engagement with our paper, whose comments and suggestions helped strengthen the work. And thank you to our wonderful students, whose learning we reflect on in this paper.