

INTRODUCTION: PERFORMING LIVES

It seems that life stories, both biographical and autobiographical, are everywhere: memoir and autobiography frequently top the bestseller lists, biopics draw sizable audiences in the cinema and on television, and social networking sites like Facebook invite users to share personal stories and experiences online. 'Real lives' are the bread-and-butter of reality TV programs, and are used for everything from selling products to human rights activism.

This special issue of *LiNQ* focusses on life narratives—the stories individuals tell about themselves and others. More specifically, the theme of the issue 'Performing Lives' considers autobiographical and biographical stories as constructed 'performances' rather than as simple acts of recalling and telling lives. This theme also gestures to the way life writing in print form has, in a technology-saturated era, migrated into other media including film, television, online, theatre and the gallery.

In the academic field of auto/biography studies, the idea of performance in life narrative is not new.¹ Prominent scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain that the idea of 'autobiographical acts' in narrative form was conceptualised by feminist scholars in the 1970s. This idea again became popular in the 1990s, with Paul John Eakin's work being a key example.²

Earlier this year, when we were invited to guest-edit this issue of *LiNQ*, we decided that it would be worth returning to the notion of 'performance' in life narrative. Given the recent shifts in technology, and the way that 'authenticity' is now a valued commodity, we wanted to use this issue to consider how writers, artists, filmmakers, playwrights and others use autobiography and biography in their work. What kinds of 'performance' emerge?

In our call for papers we asked for creative and scholarly work that broadly considered performance both in a literal sense, such as in the theatre, on film and television, as well as in a metaphorical sense. How are identities constructed and narrated in auto/biographically-based stories? How do authors and artists choose to represent themselves? What do they include and exclude?

¹ The slash in 'auto/biography' indicates the way autobiographical writing is inevitably relational. We cannot write about our own life without including family and friends in our story. As theorist Thomas Couser puts it, "one person's autobiography is inevitably someone else's biography. That is, it is generally admitted that one cannot write about oneself without representing others" (140).
Couser, G. Thomas. "Genre Matters: Form, Force, and Filiation." *Life Writing* 2.2 (2005): 139-56.

² Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011 (61). See also: Eakin, Paul John. *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992 (143); Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

The response to our call revealed the way life narrative and auto/biographical methods have infiltrated approaches to work both inside the academy and out. Sue Eckstein and Bobbie Farsides' work shows how life narrative can be used in a clinical setting to do important cultural and social work. In exploring 'performing lives' in a more literal sense, Eckstein relates her creative process as a playwright commissioned to write a play based on the experiences of patients in an English hospice setting. In 2003, Eckstein was charged with the responsibility of creating a theatrical work that would help those "caring for dying patients gain further insight, and help to demystify the dying process and the dying patient." Over the course of the commission, Eckstein transformed cancer patients' experiences—in the form of social workers' notes, originally transcribed as private, personal conversations—into a dramatic, public work. Narrating 'real' lives brings with it a need to consider the ethics of representation, and Eckstein eloquently articulates the dilemmas she faced in balancing the demands of a 'telling a good story' with 'doing justice' to those people whose lives were the basis of the play.

The term 'performance' can imply an act, a veneer, a prescribed way of being, something that seems 'true' but perhaps isn't entirely. Alyson Miller's article explores this territory in a particularly prevalent form of contemporary life writing: the 'misery memoir'. Misery memoir, which usually relates the author's triumph over childhood trauma, poverty, sexual abuse, violence or addiction, has been enormously popular in recent years. Perhaps because the genre has earned such commercial success, a few authors have attempted to capitalise on the misery memoir trend, sometimes embellishing hardships and in a few extreme cases, appropriating identity and engaging in hoax. Miller considers three such 'misery memoirs': James Frey's much-discussed *A Million Little Pieces*, Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called 'It'*, and Kathy O'Beirne's *Don't Ever Tell*. Miller explores the various autobiographical performances in these texts and investigates how far readerships are willing "to accept a blurring of 'truth'" in such narratives.

Explorations of identity in life narrative raise political questions, too. In contemporary Australia, the debate about Aboriginal identities and the unstable concept of 'authenticity' recently came to the fore once again. Last year's racial vilification court case brought against conservative media identity Andrew Bolt highlighted the politics of contemporary Aboriginal cultural identities. The case symbolised a state-endorsed, public rejection of the idea that Aboriginal identities must be justified through reference to 'skin colour.' The case was also a reminder of the fact that the identifier 'Aboriginal' is a culturally constructed one. Yet, judging by the amount of media comment the case generated, the issue of identity and identification, particularly when it relates to Aboriginality, remains a fraught and contested one in Australia.

In this context, Eva Rask Knudsen's article, "Reflections on the Life and Work of Mudrooroo", is timely. After being declared by some in the literary establishment as one of the most significant figures in twentieth century Australian literature, in 1996 Mudrooroo's

identification as an Aboriginal man was famously questioned and subsequently denounced in the mainstream media and some areas of academia. Viewing Mudrooroo's work as "literary experiments with 'life writing'" Knudsen reviews the writer's oeuvre to consider how his "many literary 'performances'" function as public and private negotiations of self in the context of Australian identity politics. Knudsen suggests that it is time to reconsider Mudrooroo for the writer that he is, despite the earlier controversies, and argues that Mudrooroo's work functions to destabilise notions of authentic identity.

When it comes to life writing in print, prose is often the first form that comes to mind. However, this issue includes a selection of poetry that could be considered life writing. To accompany and complement Knudsen's article, we are fortunate to be able to include some of Mudrooroo's recent poetry. As Knudsen suggests, these poems invite autobiographical readings. Likewise, Louie Crew's poem about migration from Britain to the United States could also be read as autobiography. And poems by Changming Yuan, Kevin Densley, and William Wright Harris are all biographically-inflected in various ways.

Some essays we've included in this issue indicate the way the lines of auto/biography and scholarship or creative practice are frequently blurred. In her autobiographical essay, "Performing in the Afternoon", Ann Webster-Wright narrates her life in the form of a four-act play. This structural device acts as a way to consider notions of authenticity in relation to aging, while Karina Quinn's fictocritical essay explores her creative practice as a writer.

In her essay, Elizabeth Stone talks about how the process of making a short film has provoked her to consider the ways in which theories of performativity apply to her work as a life writer. Stone's work illustrates that life writing is no longer simply a print form, and that writers can choose to use the interplay between text and image to narrate lives. Stone's short film is available on the *LINQ* website, and we'd encourage you to take a look at it.

Different contexts demand different 'performances' of identity, as Elizabeth Hanscombe's article, "Autobiographical Performance in the Academy" demonstrates. Hanscombe explores how her identities, as an autobiographical writer on the one hand and a literary critic on the other, often conflict. She demonstrates how, in academic contexts, a personal writing style is often perceived as undermining the authority of the scholar-author.

Finally, the short prose pieces we've included here reinforce a key idea behind this special issue, that memoir is never simply just writing your life story. It is always an act of selecting particular aspects of a life and using literary devices to actively construct the narrative. Margo Laidley-Scott and Jillian Schedneck's memoir pieces gesture towards the myriad ways a life can be told, while the shifting narrative perspective in Threasa Meads' *Bad Fruit* leaves us wondering whose story we're hearing.

In editing this special issue, we have been very fortunate to have the support of *LINQ*'s editors, Victoria Kuttainen and Lindsay Simpson, as well as Chantel Russell. We would like to

thank them for providing us with the opportunity to receive and read a range of fascinating work, the bulk of which we don't have the space to publish here. Nevertheless, we hope that you appreciate the selections we've made, and enjoy Volume 39 of *LiNQ*. Happy summer reading!

Pamela Graham and Melanie Hocking

