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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Special Issue: Gendered Life Stories and the Politics of Imagination

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Abstract

This introduction frames the special issue *Gendered Life Stories and the Politics of Imagination* within a broader crisis of narration, where storytelling is both culturally ubiquitous and increasingly unstable. Drawing on feminist theory and narrative studies, it explores how gendered life stories function as narrative technologies—forms through which marginalised subjects navigate risk, challenge dominant frameworks, and reimagine what kinds of stories can be told, heard, and believed. The introduction situates the contributions that follow as interventions into contested terrains of public storytelling, where voice, recognition, and power remain unevenly distributed.

Keywords

Gendered Life Stories; Storytelling; Narrative Technology; Queer Narration; Narrative Politics; Feminist Theory

We are surrounded by stories. They move through headlines and hashtags, courtrooms and comment sections, performances and parliaments. Stories shape how we protest, how we mourn, how we remember. They form the texture of contemporary life, woven not only through media and culture, but into the everyday rhythms of how we speak, listen, and relate. From public campaigns to private disclosures, from therapeutic spaces to viral confessionals, storytelling has become the dominant way we make experience known. We are asked to speak our truths, to bear witness, to make sense of what has happened by putting it into words. And yet, for all this narrative abundance, something is faltering. The conditions under which stories are told, and the ways they are taken up, measured, or dismissed, have become increasingly

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unstable. Stories often circulate faster than they can be absorbed. What is shared is instantly consumed, and just as quickly forgotten.

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2024) describes this condition as a *crisis of narration*. His argument is not that stories have disappeared—on the contrary, they are everywhere—but that they have lost their depth. What has eroded, he suggests, is not the presence of storytelling, but its power to make meaning. In the past, narrative offered a way of holding time together. It connected past and future, giving shape to experience and allowing people to locate themselves within a shared horizon. To narrate was not only to recount, but to orient: to find continuity between events, to build a sense of self across time, to imagine what might come next. Today, that orientation falters. Narrative has given way to the stream—a ceaseless present in which moments pass without anchoring meaning or memory. We scroll, we react, we move on. In this atmosphere, stories no longer unfold; they circulate. Meaning is not sustained but extracted, rapidly, and often without context. The story becomes content. Testimony becomes trend. Experience itself becomes ephemeral. And the speed at which stories appear further erodes the space in which they can be heard. It is precisely in this context—what Han (2024) calls a crisis of narration—that the essays in this special issue take shape.

And yet, even within this crisis, stories continue to matter. The gendered life stories examined in this special issue both emerge from and intervene in this condition. They are shaped by the contradictory forces of a cultural moment that demands stories as proof of authenticity, even as it narrows the terms on which they are heard, trusted—or allowed to matter. And if, as Han (2024) suggests, narrative's connective power has lost its anchoring force, these stories show that connection is not always lost but sometimes reimagined. In such a context, storytelling is never neutral. These are not stories told freely within a neutral public sphere. They are forged within contexts of inequality and risk, resisting the conditions and limits of their making. They are marked not only by what they say, but by how they are told and who is permitted to tell them (Alcoff 1991).

In attending to these stories, we are not only concerned with what these stories reveal, but also with the modes of attention they require and the narrative practices they make possible. It may not be surprising that Han (2024) contends that contemporary culture signals the exhaustion of storytelling. Yet we suggest that gendered life writing exceeds the limits he identifies. Rather than reducing experience to content or trend, these narratives open space for contradiction, and critique. Even in a saturated narrative landscape, they assert the power of storytelling not only to represent the world but to also imagine it otherwise (Berlant 2011; Anzaldúa 1987).

This special issue asks what storytelling can still do in the wake of Han's crisis of narration. It gathers work that moves through this unstable landscape, examining how gendered life stories press against and rework the limits of narrative form. Across these essays, storytelling emerges not as a lost art but as a practice that adapts and endures under pressure. Each contribution approaches this question differently, asking how stories travel, what they can hold, and where they begin to break. The questions that follow arise from these essays, tracing the distinct sites and stakes through which gendered life stories are told and received. How do survivors of intimate partner violence write beyond the limits of #MeToo, using experimental memoir to voice experiences that dominant narratives leave unheard? How do trans storytellers reshape inherited narrative forms, turning them into spaces for self- definition and imaginative renewal? How do migrant girls speak from within stories not made for them, and what forms of language and narration make their presence felt? How do trans women use digital storytelling to navigate online intimacy, reworking the terms of gender and power? From dating platforms to experimental memoir, from documentary to autofiction, these essays and cultural works trace how stories move across media and borders, revealing what is demanded of them—and what remains unspeakable as they share and amplify their stories (Papacharissi 2015).

Importantly, this turn to gendered life stories also returns us to a longer intellectual tradition that has treated the life story as a way of making experience knowable. In the social sciences and humanities, the

'life story' refers to first-person narratives that recount lived experience, often with the aim of locating a life within broader social, cultural, and historical contexts. Across disciplines—from anthropology and sociology to oral history, feminist theory, and decolonial research—the life story has functioned as both method and critique: a means of connecting individual experience to collective structures while challenging the frameworks that render some lives more knowable than others. From Paul Radin's *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (1926) to feminist ethnography and postcolonial life writing, scholars have treated life storytelling as a practice of situated knowledge, a way to access and value perspectives excluded from dominant epistemologies (Beverley 2004). In this view, subjectivity does not precede narration but is produced through it: the self comes into being in the act of telling, in relation to others, to history, and to the conditions that make speech possible (Peacock & Holland 1993).

Building on this tradition, we turn to Germán Labrador Méndez's (2012) concept of *narrative technology*, developed in his study of life stories produced during Spain's post-2008 financial crisis. Labrador argues that in moments of collective precarity, life stories operate not simply as expressions of individual experience but as technologies of political imagination—forms that translate private suffering into shared social meaning. Through these narratives, subjects rendered invisible by economic and institutional failure come to be recognised as part of a broader collective condition. What distinguishes Labrador's account is his attention to the *form* of these narratives: how they circulate, how they gather affective energy, and how they transform structural dispossession into communicable experience. In this sense, life stories are not only records of experience but instruments that shape how experience is shared, understood, and made consequential within public life.

We take up Labrador's framing but extend it by asking what happens when gender becomes central to this narrative function. If life stories work to translate lived inequality into public understanding, gendered life stories do so under particular pressure. They must navigate not only material conditions, but also the normative expectations that govern who may speak, how they must sound, and whose experiences are granted credibility. Storytelling, we contend, is never neutral: it unfolds within hierarchies of gender, race, class, and sexuality that shape both voice and reception (Ahmed 2021). Yet within these constraints, gendered storytelling generates inventive and sometimes unruly forms of narration. These stories refuse to follow the paths laid out for them. They challenge dominant frameworks not only through what they reveal, but through the narrative experiments they perform. In reworking the terms of narration itself, they do more than recount marginalised lives—they transform the very forms through which meaning is typically made (Labrador Méndez 2012).

If gendered storytelling transforms the forms through which meaning is made, it also transforms the relation between self and story. In these narratives, identity does not precede language but comes into being through it. As Peacock and Holland observe, *"self becomes discourse"* (1993: 368): the act of telling is itself constitutive, giving shape to subjectivity under the very pressures that constrain it. To narrate a life under such conditions is to turn storytelling into inquiry—an experiment in what forms of selfhood and meaning can survive within hostile narrative frames. This understanding reorients what we take storytelling to do. As hooks (2004) reminds us, speaking from such conditions is never just a matter of expression but of survival: a way of claiming presence, of insisting that experience, however fractured, still matters.

The essays in this special issue take up the premise that gendered life stories function as technologies of political imagination. Each contribution traces how storytelling becomes a site where social constraints and creative possibility meet. Working across memoir, digital media, documentary, and fiction, they show how form itself becomes a mode of thought—a way to test, revise, and extend what stories can do. Taken together, these essays approach storytelling as a practice of making and remaking: of generating new ways of understanding and connection within the very conditions that threaten to diminish them.

The opening article, by Bianca Martin, reads Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* as a work of narrative activism that queers the #MeToo movement by centring same-sex intimate partner violence and

exposing the heteronormative assumptions that shape cultural understandings of abuse. Martin argues that Machado's formal experimentation—its fragmented structure, hybrid genres, and shifting narrative voice—works as a critique of the conventions through which victimhood and survivorship are told. The essay shows how the memoir not only bears witness to queer violence but also questions the narrative habits that keep such stories at the margins. In doing so, it demonstrates how life storytelling can produce counter-narratives that resist simplification, rethink the boundaries of consent and coercion, and open new possibilities for telling a queer life.

In '"Cheers to 365 Days of Being a Woman": Dylan Mulvaney, Transgender Womanhood on Social Media, and the Right's Transphobic Countermovement,' Shayna Maskell examines Dylan Mulvaney's *Days of Girlhood* TikTok series as a gendered life story that gains visibility—and provokes backlash—through the dynamics of digital media. Maskell situates Mulvaney's viral narration of transgender womanhood within the aesthetic economies of social platforms and the cultural demand for recognisable identity. Embracing hegemonic femininity, Mulvaney's performance of transition becomes both a mode of self-fashioning and a catalyst for political dispute. Focusing on the Bud Light partnership and its ensuing boycott, Maskell traces how the campaign ignited a right-wing countermovement fuelled by cisnormative anxiety and nostalgic masculinity. Through close analysis of these responses, she shows how Mulvaney's life story operates as a contested narrative technology—one that redefines not only how trans lives are told, but which forms of gendered storytelling are permitted to circulate, be recognised, and carry cultural weight.

In 'Transgender Narratives and Online Dating: Reframing Trans–Cis Relations (in Cape Town),' Elana Ryklief and Sally Ann Murray offer an autoethnographic account of trans–cis intimacy in Cape Town, treating online dating as a site where narrative and desire are continually negotiated. Through the question-and-answer exchanges that structure her interactions with cis men, the authors turn the conventions of the dating app into a mode of inquiry—testing how trans women can articulate agency within environments shaped by cisnormative expectation. The article resists the hypersexualised and medicalised tropes that often define trans representation, instead tracing transition as an open, relational process shaped by race, class, geography and embodiment. Drawing on Hil Malatino's concept of the trans interregnum, Ryklief and Murray read these digital encounters as scenes of affective negotiation and critical pedagogy. In this way, their work positions online dating as a generative, if unstable, terrain of relational world- making—where trans women reconfigure the boundaries of intimacy and desire.

In 'Through Whose Eyes? Triple Colonisation, Vulnerability, and Global Trespassers in Documentaries about Girls Crossing Borders,' Jessica Sanfilippo- Schulz examines how refugee and migrant girls are represented in adult-authored documentaries, foregrounding the tension between representation and agency in contemporary visual storytelling. Analysing two short films— *Crossing the Border to Go to School in the US* (BBC, 2020) and *Ein Weiter Weg Wohin?* (Arte/SWR, 2020)—she introduces the concept of *triple colonisation* to describe how Western, patriarchal, and adult-centric perspectives delimit the narrative frames through which displaced girls can appear. While these films often seek to humanise their subjects, they frequently reproduce familiar tropes of vulnerability and rescue, reinscribing the asymmetries they aim to expose. Against this, Sanfilippo-Schulz turns to John McLeod's (2024) notion of *global trespassing* to trace moments where girls resist these representational confines—through gestures of linguistic play on TikTok, or through the embodied assertion of autonomy in karate practice. These small yet significant acts reconfigure migrant girlhood as an active and imaginative force. In this way, they reveal how gendered life stories, even when mediated by others, can unsettle dominant ways of seeing and make space for more expansive ways of imagining self and community.

In Joanna Eleftheriou's 'Role Model,' the question of how queer lives are told unfolds through an intimate reflection on self-disclosure, desire, and belonging. Turning to Jodie Foster's 2013 "not-coming-out" speech, the essay reconsiders the cultural expectation that confession must serve as proof of truth. Moving between the author's own coming-out story and Foster's ambivalent refusal, it exposes how

prevailing narratives of revelation and redemption can constrain what it means to live openly. Writing from the shifting ground of Cypriot, diasporic, and femme experience, Eleftheriou suggests that hesitation, irony, and withdrawal can themselves become gestures of freedom. In tracing this tension, 'Role Model' extends the special issue's concern with how gendered life stories work under pressure—finding meaning not in resolution, but in the subtle, unfinished ways a life can still be told.

In 'Extracts from the novel *Chiaroscuro*,' Vek Lewis offers a fragmentary narrative of queer survival shaped by gendered violence, mythic imagination, and the unstable terrain of memory. Blending autofiction, visionary hallucination, and religious iconography, these excerpts follow a narrator fleeing suburban precarity and familial abuse into a dreamlike, often nightmarish landscape of transformation. As the text moves through scenes of domestic terror, child sexual abuse, and queer estrangement, it reframes these experiences through mythic and biblical figures—Salome, Mary Magdalene, Nefertiti—who haunt, double, and displace the narrator's sense of self. Refusing resolution or narrative closure, *Chiaroscuro* unfolds as a series of luminous and obscured fragments—what the narrator calls 'veils'—in which trauma is refracted through dream, icon, and prophecy. Lewis's work exemplifies how gendered life stories resist containment by turning to visionary and hybrid forms of meaning-making. Drawing on traditions of queer life writing and mystical autobiography, the extracts position myth not as escape but as narrative method: means of turning pain into texture and form, transforming suffering into a language of survival.

In Sleiman El Hajj's 'Churchill: A Short Story of Contemporary Beirut,' storytelling becomes a practice of speculative intimacy—charting how desire and survival take shape within Lebanon's complex social and sectarian topographies. The story follows Sarah, a young woman from Beirut's southern suburbs, whose marriage to a wealthy Christian man promises escape but instead entangles her in networks of secrecy, shame, and erotic improvisation. What begins as a marriage of convenience opens onto a more volatile terrain, where queerness circulates beneath the surface of respectability—in hidden affairs, uneasy solidarities, and in Sarah's obsessive bond with Churchill, a parrot gifted by her husband's lover. Through this uncanny attachment, El Hajj traces how gendered life persists through deflection and displacement, finding expression in what must remain unsaid. *Churchill* suggests that the power of storytelling lies not only in revelation, but in how silence itself becomes a mode of survival and meaning-making.

If there is one thread that binds the gendered life stories collected in this special issue, it is their refusal to resolve. These are not stories of redemption or repair. They offer no neat arc, no promise of coherence. Instead, they remain with the trouble—dwelling in the contradictions, interruptions, and intensities that define gendered life under contemporary conditions. Whether through experimental memoir, digital narration, autoethnography, documentary, or fiction, these works do not speak from the safety of hindsight. They speak from within the very limits that shape them, turning those limits into a site of narrative invention.

If Han diagnoses a crisis of narration, the texts gathered here respond not by restoring narrative coherence, but by reimagining what narrative can do. These gendered life stories act as narrative technologies precisely because they work through uncertainty, making possibility their horizon. And yet, these stories are told. They remain. They move. In their movement, they expand what can be said, what can be sensed, and what new worlds might still be imagined.

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