



Marilyn Metta

# Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory

Lifewriting as Reflexive,  
Poststructuralist Feminist  
Research Practice

Peter Lang

Memory, embedded in our scripts of the past, inscribed in our bodies and reflected in the collective memory of every family, group and community, occupies one of the most controversial and contested sites over what constitutes legitimate knowledge-making.

Using a reflexive feminist research methodology, the author is involved with memory-work in creating three life narratives written in different narrative styles: her mother's and father's biographies and her own autobiography/autoethnography.

By exploring the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity and culture in the social and cultural constructions of identities in lifewriting, this book maps the underlying politics of storytelling and storymaking, and investigates the political, social, pedagogical and therapeutic implications of writing personal life narratives for feminist scholarship, research and practice.

As a Chinese-Australian woman engaging in reflexive, creative and imaginative lifewriting, the author hopes to create new spaces and add new voices to the small but emerging Asian Australian scholarly literature.

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This book is dedicated to my family, past, present, and future.





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*I could not remember feeling any pain. It was kind of surreal. I stood there motionless, expressionless as my mother repeatedly struck the cane across my body. My mother became a woman possessed by a strange mixture of anger, anguish and helplessness. She lashed out her long pent-up emotions, frustrations and pain on my young body that night. I simply knelt there quietly, defiantly. I did not move or speak. I knew that I could not let her see my fears or my tears. For what seemed like eternity, I remembered time froze and my memory of that night was frozen forever. This frozen frame, retrieved from my memory was to later become my blank canvas, a space where my imagination would dance with my memory to create a re-scripted storied experience.*

\*\*\*

*Today's the second day of the Chinese Lunar New Year (Year of the Dog). Chinese New Year always brings back such strong and contradicting memories of my childhood. I recall fond memories of some of the best times of my childhood. The atmosphere was beaming with life, food, laughter, excitement, lots of people everywhere, new clothes, red packets filled with money, mahjong tables, Chinese New Year cookies and thundering sounds of red firecrackers—all the things that make Chinese people proud to be who they are. Then, there were the dark and bleak memories of fearful anticipation of fights which could explode at any time—screaming matches between my parents, plates smashed into a thousand pieces on the dining floor, the sounds of door slamming piercing through my ears and shaking my tiny body, and the dark and heavy cloud that dragged me into an impasse with my mother's hysterical screams and crying that seemed to last forever.*

\*\*\*

*I see you, my dear papa, lying in the hot, humid and dirty C-class hospital ward, unconscious and burning a dangerous fever. I stood there with my son, Journey, in my arms, in utter disbelief and shock. But nothing could prepare me for the brutal sight of the damage on your body, a sight that would haunt me forever. The resident doctor quietly showed me the huge wound on your back where a bedsore had developed into an open gash the size of a dinner plate. I*

*could see your backbone through the open gash. I was shocked and angry. I felt rage, guilt, deep compassion and strength. Enough was enough. The doctor told me that seventy-five percent of old people in Malaysia died of bedsores. In my mind, it was pure and unforgivable neglect. I felt my heart bleeding and out of that bleeding and raging heart, my spirit came alive and I roared.*

\*\*\*

*Angry fists and feet were banging and kicking on the locked bedroom door. My head was throbbing hard and my heart pounding. I felt like my head was going to explode. There was nowhere to escape. I looked across my shoulders to the baby hammock where Journey lay asleep. I turned around to see my three-year old daughter Jesse with her back pushing hard against the door to stop her raging father from coming into the room. I could never forget the look on her face, the anguish and courage of a little girl desperately trying to protect her mother from her father.*

*Haven't we already cut the umbilical cord?*

# Introduction

*The Past was almost as much a work of the Imagination as the Future.*

~Jessamyn West~

This book is an exploration of the processes of writing personal life narratives as a way of doing poststructuralist reflexive feminist research. It focuses on three life narratives written in different narrative styles: my mother's biography, which I have written from oral sources; my father's biography, which I have written from my own memory and imagination; and my autobiography/autoethnography. I will be exploring the reflexive, creative and imaginative journeys in writing my parents' lives and my own life as ways of doing reflexive feminist research. In my view, this project began many years ago when I was a young adolescent scribbling down little stories on pieces of scrap paper. Looking back now, I realise that while I was intrigued by my parents' lives, a large part of my storytelling/storymaking was a product of the interplay between imagination and memory. Without imagination/memory, none of the lifewriting in this book would have been possible, nor would the reflexive feminist methodology that I have undertaken to perform this research project. Hence, the first and foremost tribute of this book is to imagination and memory.

The book is organised in ways that are closely reflective of the journey of writing involved. *Chapter I – The Ambivalent Conception*, stories the journey of how this research project began and the emergent conceptual positionings informing the methodological frameworks of this book. *Chapter II – The Umbilical of Life* is the lifewriting section of the book, which includes the autobiographical writing and the two biographical writings. *Chapter III – The Ambivalent Act of Doing Research: Reflexive and Feminist Research Methodologies*, explores the various epistemological and ontological positionings informing the methodological frameworks of this book. *Chapter IV – After Birth: Reflections on*

*Writing and Negotiating the Triple Braid* focuses on my reflections on the writing processes adopted in each of the three life narratives and the reflexive research methodologies. Concluding the book is *Chapter V – Conclusion: Bringing Together*, which distils the new knowledges and understanding gained in feminist knowledge-making as well as the limitations of the research and the reflexive research methodology, and the implications for future/further research.

The methodology I have adopted here is a reflexive one. Throughout the book, I foreground the epistemological and ontological assumptions and perspectives that ground this research as well as the specific constraints and limitations of the chosen research methodology. The last two chapters are focused on reflections on the methodological pathways, the limitations and constraints of the process of storymaking and knowledge-making against institutional, cultural, political and ideological apparatuses. How this research developed and evolved is by no means natural or incidental. Rather, it is motivated by particular personal, cultural, institutional, social and political positionings that are historically specific. This research project was originally located within the Cultural Studies Department of the university and as a result of changes in supervision and my own professional training in psychotherapy, the research project was transferred to the Department of Social Work and Social Policy. This shift has contributed to the interdisciplinary nature of this research project and the shift in emphasis from cultural theory to the implications of life narratives on the professional practice and performance of social work and psychotherapy. My involvement with narrative therapy in my psychotherapeutic practice has also been influential in the development of this book. I have taken up a reflexive narrative approach to lifewriting, to be detailed in Chapter I. My teaching in Women's Studies at Edith Cowan University is another major factor shaping this research. The impact of women's personal life narratives on the feminist pedagogical, political and activist practice within social work and women's studies plays a central part in this research. The genesis of this research project and its development are inter-

disciplinary and this has posed both advantages as well as challenges to the research project, which will be explored in the following chapters.

Singh (1987, p. xiv) suggests, a writer “*appropriates* the past” in that the past acts as “merely a vehicle for expressing a certain sensibility, a certain sensitivity. The more the imagination takes hold of the writer and his subject, the greater the appropriation of the past.” This book explores the delicate and complex manoeuvres with memory and the past, underpinning the writing of each of the three life narratives. The past, as much as the future becomes the site of much contradiction, negotiation and ambivalence as one re-remembers, re-imagines and re-tells each of the narratives. It is therefore critical to acknowledge that each of the three life narratives is a reconstruction and a reappropriation of the past and of the lived experiences and memories as well as a re-imagination of the future.

Does the writer write *consciously* of his past and if he does is this *conscious* effort obtrusive? ... I believe a writer's sense of the past is not a sense which is easily fixed and easily understood, nor, by the same token, is it easily defined by the writer himself. In a curious way, that “sense” is not really sense (awareness) as it is the imaginative impingement or consciousness. Between the writer's sense of the past and the ever-present struggle to create, to offer fresh insights into human existence, to illuminate the dark regions of the human psyche, the writer has to choose for himself his mode of communication. (Singh, 1987, p. xv)

The writer's sense of the past is inevitably complex, subjective, interpretive and multi-voiced. By engaging in reflexive modes of writing, I offer a glimpse into the creative and imaginative process that emerged and how memory becomes the site of contradiction, contestation and creativity. I will trace how each of the different narrative styles and pathways has emerged from the reflexive feminist research methodology that has both influenced and been guided by the writing process. It is through these reflexive writing styles and modes that imagination can create and re-create the past and re-imagine the future in ways that were previously silenced. As a Chinese-Australian woman engaging in reflexive, creative and imaginative lifewriting, the challenge is to create new spaces and add different voices to the small but emerging *Asian Australian* literary field and scholarship. I have

italicised the term *Asian Australian* as an attempt to problematise its usage and the embedded politics. I do not claim to speak on behalf of other Australian writers and scholars from Asian backgrounds or to advocate for a collective voice that is *Asian Australian*. While there may be similarities in the experiences or stories told here, I speak and write only on behalf of my own specific and subjective personal, historical and cultural perspectives and experiences. The differences and contradictions in these perspectives, experiences and stories are what defy the grand categorisation of the *Asian Australian* label. My refusal for my own writings and research to be simply labelled as “ethnic,” “immigrant,” “Asian-Australian,” or “third world” is a conscious act of resistance to further marginalisation of non-Anglo women’s work and research. By crossing generic styles and forms in the writing of the three life narratives, this book aims to challenge and problematise some of the prevailing Orientalist assumptions and conceptions of ethnic minority lifewriting that continue to marginalise ethnic minority writers’ work as generically personal, mysteriously exotic and ultimately inconsequential.

In her study of migrant writers in Australia, Houbein (1987, p. 107) writes:

Writing autobiography, which is what we so automatically expect migrant authors to do in preference to any other literary form, is in fact not at all widespread. ... few writers begin with an autobiography, no matter how dramatic their lives hitherto may have been. The motivations are similar to those of mainstream authors: to weave patterns out of the chaos of the past, to write a future that may materialize if written well, to express a worldview different from that held in mainstream society, to dream, to fantasize, to teach, to record.

The relevance of personal and cultural histories in contemporary feminist scholarship across disciplines such as social work, sociology, women’s studies, cultural studies and anthropology reaches beyond the discourses of knowledge-making and scholarship into the ideological, social, political and cultural constructions of nationhood, national identity, heritage and citizenship. This book offers an investigation of how personal, gendered, cultural, racial and hybridised



histories intersect with social, institutional, hegemonic and political histories, and explores the implications this may have on contemporary understanding of the complex and diverse spectrum of what constitute Australian literature, cultural heritage, identity and nationality.

The meaning of heritage is profoundly symbolic: how and what a society values from the past says something about how it sees itself as a community today and how it projects itself into the future. ...

... Heritage is not just what must be “preserved” and “saved”; it is also what can be “built” and “created” out of a critical and creative engagement with the myriad intertwining histories that have made up the nation. As a result, however, and here we have an interesting paradox, the nation itself becomes symbolically destabilised, subject to multivocal contestations and multiple appropriations. (Ang, 2003, pp. 23, 25)

This research is in part a “critical and creative engagement” with a specific thread of “the myriad of intertwining histories” that makes up our Australian heritage. The question and challenge remain in how we can create multiple speaking positions and voices from the “multivocal contestations and multiple appropriations” that can propel us forwards into a future that represents the rich multitude of Indigenous, European, migrant and refugee histories as our Australian heritage. As historian Graeme Davison notes, “Active and ethical citizenship depends ... upon the imaginative capacity to look at the world through the eyes of others” (as cited in Ang, 2003, p. 34).

This lifewriting research carries different speaking positions, voices and tongues that seek to represent the political, the cultural, the historical, the feminist, the reflexive, the imaginative and the scholarly. It is located within both the lifewriting genre and the ethnographical genre, and it speaks from a Chinese Malaysian immigrant perspective, crossing at least three generations, three continents and three cultures.



## Chapter I: An *Ambivalent* Conception

Life narratives as research:

Lifewriting as research methodology

### *Narrative and lifewriting*

Here, I will provide specific definitions of the term *narrative* which resonate with the ways that it is being used in this book. Riessman (2008, p. 3) provides a useful definition of the term *narrative*:

... in everyday oral storytelling, a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience.

This definition of narrative can be used to highlight the relationship between memory and imagination. Imagination operates in a reciprocal relationship to memory and the construction of the self and the lived experiences in writing. Imagination allows the storyteller to select events, stories and themes to tell to a particular audience. Imagination is, the creator of, created by and in co-creation with the self and hence, with memory itself. Imagination can temporarily shift one's relationship with the self and memory beyond the discursive constitutions of culture, gender, race, ideology and history, while at the same time being bound by the very discourses and constitutions it attempts to subvert. It is important to note here that imagination has its limitations. Imagination is, after all, a construct of the constituted and remembered self. Imagination merely allows the past, the present and the future to co-exist in the writing and allows memory to be played out beyond the confines of time and space. Imagination

allows the past to be remembered *differently*, the present to be transgressed and the future to be re-imagined *differently*.

Riessman (2008) points out two contrasting ways of representing the autobiographical narrative. First, “the act of storytelling in dialogue *constitutes* the autobiographical self, that is, how the speaker wants to be known in the interaction”; second, “autobiographical narrative reflects a preexisting self; there is constancy across speaking situations because the self exists independently of social interaction” (p. 29). Riessman’s observation points to the process of writing the self in the autobiographical writings in this book – the act of writing life is a double act whereby the writing constitutes the self and the self constitutes the writing. I would take Riessman’s observation further to suggest that the act and art of writing the self moves beyond this dualism and double act to form a continuous movement and dance where the two acts are interweaving and inseparable in action. The self and the writing co-create each other in a kind of complex reciprocity. In the autobiographical and biographical writings, imagination blurs the dualism between self and writing, and self and other. In the biographical writing of my mother’s life, the biographical self, that is my mother, is created and re-created in the process of her many oral storytellings in various forms as well as my storymaking in a complex reciprocal relationship. The biographical writing is an interweaving of her oral storytelling and my storymaking capturing only glimpses of the biographical self *in progress*.

### *Lifewriting and life narratives*

Lifewriting is a term used in this book to mean the different forms of life narratives which include autobiography and biography, both non-fiction and fictional. It also includes poetic representations of these life narratives. The term lifewriting is also used in this book to describe the creative, imaginative and poetic narrative texts that are produced as part of the research project in *Chapter III – The Umbilical of Life* which include the autobiographical text, the written oral biog-

raphy of my mother, and the imagined biography of my father written from both my memory and imagination. Life narratives refer to the different forms of narratives that are represented in the body of lifewriting – the autobiographical, the biographical, imaginative, creative and poetic narratives. The two terms are used interchangeably to refer to the different forms of narratives mentioned above.

### *Biography*

Biography is a term which refers to the mode of narrating and storying lives. In this book, it refers to the mode of representing the process of storytelling and storymaking in the narration of a person's life both from the perspective of the biographer as well as from the perspective of the subject. This is an important point of departure from the most common definitions of biography. Biography is often defined as a mode of narrating life whereby "scholars of other people's lives document and interpret those lives from a point of view external to the subject" (Smith & Watson, 2001b, p. 4). In this book, I argue for a reflexive, critical and interpretive approach to the biographical writings and foreground the inter-relational and reciprocal nature of the biographical subjects and their narratives.

... the biographical, poetic impulse must produce bodies of critical, interpretive work that reflexively build on one another. It is not enough to produce isolated critiques. If the biographical is to be taken seriously, then each writer has an obligation to create a body of work that embodies a particular ontological, epistemological, and political vision of how things can be made better. (Denzin, 1997, p. 226)

The term biography used in this book refers to the co-authored storytelling by both the author and subject, and the storymaking by the author. Implicit in this process of storytelling and storymaking are the interweaving of memory, imagination, identity, race, history, and culture.

Carolyn Heilbrun (1989, p. 21) traces the history and politics of women's biography:

When biographers come to write the life of a woman ... they have had to struggle with the inevitable conflict between the destiny of being unambiguously a woman and the woman's subject's palpable desire, or fate, to be something else. ... biographers of women have not therefore been at ease with their subjects ... It is no wonder that biographers have largely ignored women as subjects, and that critics of biography have written as though men were the only possible subjects.

### *Autobiography*

As many contemporary theorists have observed, autobiography is a difficult genre to define because it occupies the "borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary" (Cosslett, Lury & Summerfield, 2000, p. 1). The "disruptive interdisciplinarity" of autobiography has been an exciting site for contemporary feminist scholarship and exploration, and hence, is an invaluable source of new feminist research and knowledges (Cosslett et al., 2000, p. 1).

Lifewriting has also been the centre of many debates across many fields of thought and disciplines which have been taken up by many feminist scholars (Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2004, 2007; Lather, 2001a, 2001b; Lim, 2007; Probyn, 2000; Richardson, 2000, 2005; Smith & Watson, 2002). These feminist debates and dialogues on women's autobiographical writings provide an important platform from which to locate the political act of writing the self.

It seemed to me impossible from the first to write a book of this kind without being often autobiographical, without saying 'I'. Yet for many months I buried my head in historical research and analysis in order to delay or prepare the way for the plunge into areas of my own life which were painful and problematical. (Rich, 1976, p. 15-16)

The intersection between the private/personal and the social/political in women's autobiographical writings has been the focus of recent feminist scholarly research. Davis, Aurell and Delgado (2007b, p. 10) point out that autobiography has gained "important

scientific and academic ground as a valid source for negotiating with the past – viewing a public story through stories of the self.” Drawing from Olney’s work, Davis et al. suggest that the “increasing fascination of the critics with life writing is based on the possibilities of the triple dimension of the word “auto-bio-graphy”: *autos*, the portrait of the author’s self that emerges from the text; *bios*, the narrative of the life that it contains; and *graphie*, the writing of the text itself” (2007b, p. 10). The significance of autobiographical writing, hence, lies in the integration of “the history of a particular context, the story of a singular life, and the act of narration of that story” in one text (p. 10).

Davis et al. (2007b, p. 11) assert the increasing importance placed on the “privileged function” of singular stories in the process of history-making and hence, knowledge-making.

Personal and collective memory creates a space where fact, truth, fiction, invention, forgetting, and myth are so entangled as to constitute a renewed form of access to the past. (Davis et al., 2007b, p. 11)

Emphasis is placed on the process of selection that occurs in the act of writing an autobiography, paying attention to the delicate manoeuvre with memory, both real and imagined, in the act of writing self.

The proliferation of memoirs in contemporary literary scholarship and popular literary culture reflects both the increasing value placed on the significance of personal and collective narratives as knowledge-making and the consumerist culture of consumption of yet another popular commodity. Miller reminds us of the paradoxical site occupied by the production and consumption of memoirs:

Memoirs from sites of danger provide a safe space for readers to ponder the nightmare of contemporary global relations, even as the pages display the extreme difficulty of living in times of traumatic history. The story of the other citizen, preferably female—the exotic, foreign self in translation (like us after all)—is also a valuable template in the marketplace of contemporary autobiographical production and consumption. (2007, p. 542)

Australian writer, Brain Castro reflects on his own struggles with generic conventions and the genre of auto/biography:

I suppose I'd been fighting against genre classification all my writing life, and the generic function I've used most of all to do this is a form which is not only unstable in itself and which has undergone intense transformation, but which has the potential to transgress the furthest. This is the auto/biographical form. The slash is already an implosion of multiple forms, dividing the conjunction of prefixes and yet allowing the crossing over between self, life and writing. But while all this should be pretty well accepted and expected in postmodern times, in practice there are still problems. (1995, pp. 26-7)

The 'problems' Castro refers to concern the politics of authority of autobiographical writings by marginalised writers. Castro argues that forms of auto/biography that draw from "collaborative authorships" demonstrate the "impossibility of totalisation and closure" and create "problems for the traditional critic and bookseller" (1995, p. 36). I will discuss how I have struggled with similar challenges in positioning and locating the auto/biographical writings of this book in the next section.

### *Ethnography and Autoethnography*

This research project falls within the genre of interpretive ethnography and this book can be read as an interpretive ethnographic text. Denzin defines ethnography as "that form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about" (1997, p. xi). My autobiographical writing also operates as an autoethnographical text which explores the personal, social, cultural, historical and familial dimensions of the author's life as both subject and researcher. The biographical writings of my parents' lives perform as ethnographical texts which explore the lives of the biographical subjects as well as my own journey in writing and researching their lives as the subject (daughter), biographer and researcher. Ethnographic texts, according to Denzin, are always "dialogical—the site at which the voices of the other, alongside the voices of the author, come alive and interact with one another" and these voices are "textual, performative accomplishments" (1997, p. xiii). The methodological writing strategies of this research



aim to produce narrative texts that are reflexive, interpretive and multi-vocal. The voices in each of the three life narratives speak to, against, alongside and beyond the voices of the others. The boundaries between author, subject, researcher, biographer, daughter, mother, father, text, self and other blur, and the voices, stories and lives interact and overlap in ways that defy closure.

Etherington describes autoethnography as a “word that describes both a method and a text” (2004, p. 140). Scott-Hoy describes autoethnography as a “blend of ethnography and autobiographical writing that incorporates elements of one’s own life experience when writing about others” (as cited in Etherington, 2004, p. 139).

Autobiography has been the focus of many feminist scholarly studies. In particular, I want to bring attention to the postcolonial feminist theorists such as Lim, Trinh, Gunew and Spivak who write widely on the politics and intersections of women’s autobiographical writings and the issues of race, gender, class and ethnicity. As Smith and Watson (2001a, p. 251) observe:

Such texts raise issues of power, trust, and narrative authority, as well as the importance of oral cultural forms. In postcolonial critiques new terms have emerged to designate subjects situated at the “in-between” spaces of de/colonization, such as hybrid, marginal, migratory, diasporic, multicultural, border, minoritized, mestiza, and nomadic.

### *Narrative inquiry*

Chase states that the “explosion of interest in women’s personal narratives was accompanied by feminist challenges to conventional assumptions about research relationships and research methods” (2005, p. 655). Narrative inquiry has been an important field in providing ways of analysing personal narratives as well as the methodological concerns and functions of these narratives. Researchers in narrative inquiry have established that narrative, identity and meaning are socially and culturally constructed (Bruner, 1991, 1995; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; and Riessman, 2008). As a result, the methodologi-

cal apparatuses and approaches with which these narratives and meanings are studied, analysed, and examined within the text and beyond become critically important in the relationship between life-writing, narrative inquiry and social change.

Narratives exist at the everyday, autobiographical, biographical, cultural, and collective levels. They reflect the universal human experience of time and link the past, present, and future... Narrative gives room for expression of our individual and shared fates, our personal and communal worlds... How should we write? If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower people we study, then we should value the narrative. (Richardson, 1995, pp. 218-9)

This book foregrounds the importance and value of personal, familial and cultural life narratives in the scholarly discourses of knowledge-making. By performing lifewriting as a scholarly text, I am also foregrounding the intersectionality of the personal, the cultural, the pedagogical and the political selves in writing and practice.

In this book, a reflexive narrative approach is adopted where emphasis is placed on the meaning and knowledge-making processes of storytelling and storymaking. As Brown and Augusta-Scott (2007) pointed out, stories are produced “through socially mediated language and social interaction” where the “meanings we attach to events are thus never singular, individual, or simply subjective” but have “shared or intersubjective meaning within a cultural nexus of power and knowledge” (p. ix). With a reflexive narrative approach, we can begin to unpack the individual identities, stories and themes and locate them within specific historical, social and cultural systems of power relations and knowledge-making. Drawing from Taylor and White (2000), Percy (2006) suggests, “knowledge is produced through interpretive acts” and the construction of stories are embedded in power relations, which “in turn promote or constrain accessibility to socially tellable stories” (p. 97). Percy argues that “a reflexive and poststructuralist narrative perspective” compels researchers to

“make visible just and relationally ethical actions” in their research practice (p. 97).

I suggest that a reflexive narrative approach to storytelling and storymaking also draws attention to the discursive constructions of identities, selfhood and life narratives through cultural, gendered and racial lenses. Drawing from Rosenstone, Davis et al. (2007b, p. 12) remind us ethnic minority identity is not only shaped by the “stories we have been told and the stories we believe,” but also, and more importantly, by “the stories we tell.” In this sense, this lifewriting research is about (re)searching and unpacking ethnic identities through storytelling and storymaking. In their recent edited collection, *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories: Genres, Performance, and Culture*, Davis et al. (2007b) aptly position the place and function of ethnic minority life writing within academic, historical and social discourses of knowledge-making.

The act of telling and writing one’s story affirms as it performs identity. This idea links the articles in this collection: the intersection between the discourse, practice, and social function of life writing, history, and ethnic minority identity. Our approach is based on a transversal methodology that links genre studies and historiography, using the strategies of each in order to arrive at new conclusions about the writing of the history of globalization, immigration, racial and ethnic minority negotiation, privileging non-official histories in the process. (Davis et al., 2007b, p. 12)

The role and function of lifewriting narratives in the discourses of knowledge-making are also intertwined with the ways in which these narratives are read, approached and interpreted. I suggest a more reflexive, intersubjective and intersectional approach to writing and reading the life narratives that work against, alongside and beyond dominant discourses, genres and paradigms of knowledge-making.

Smith and Watson (2001b) suggest a useful approach to life narratives:

If we approach self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within the writer/reader pact, rather than as a true-or-false story, the emphasis

of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding. (p. 13)

As Chase argues:

When researchers' interpretive strategies reveal the stranglehold of oppressive metanarratives, they help to open up possibilities for social change. In this sense, audiences need to hear not only the narrator's story, but also the researcher's explication of how the narrator's story is constrained by, and strains against, the mediating aspects of culture (and of institutions, organizations, and sometimes the social sciences themselves). (2005, p. 668)

This book attempts to foreground the different interpretive and methodological strategies that underpin the lifewriting research in order to reveal how the complex writing processes and pathways have taken place throughout the different stages of the research as well as the methodological and epistemological constraints and limitations I have experienced. I suggest that the commitment to making as transparent as possible the methodological strategies and constraints of the research is fundamental to a reflexive feminist research approach.

Jones (2005, p. 763) argues that "the personal text as critical intervention in social, political, and cultural life" is not to be read alone. The autobiographical and biographical writings in this book need to be located within the existing body of scholarly literature. To contribute to the existing body of scholarly knowledge, this book needs to be positioned and read against, alongside and beyond other literary texts such as existing *Asian Australian* literary works, ethnic minority lifewriting, feminist lifewriting and scholarly works.

## The place of ethnic minority women's lifewriting in contemporary feminist research

There are two questions: Firstly, is there a place for women's lifewriting in contemporary literary scholarship? Secondly, is there a place

for ethnic minority women's lifewriting in contemporary feminist scholarship and practice? These two questions are central to this book which explores the place of ethnic minority lifewriting within Australian literary studies and contemporary feminist scholarship and practice. In this book, I have chosen to use the term "ethnic minority" to refer to writers who are marginalised by their race, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and nationality. I have deliberately represented the term *ethnic* in italics in order to problematise its usage and to underline the loaded politics implicated in its usage.

Historically, women's lifewriting has occupied a precarious position within social, ideological and scholarly paradigms. As Jill Ker Conway argues, women's life writing in the forms of diaries in the nineteenth-century and in the form of memoirs in the twentieth century represents a kind of "feminist plot" that subverts dominant patriarchal conception of female subjectivity (1998, p. 87). In the nineteenth century, Conway argues, the "mere act of sitting down to write an autobiography broke the code of female respectability, because doing so required a woman to believe that her direct experience, rather than her relationships with others, was what gave meaning to her life" (1998, p. 87).

By placing the personal, the cultural and the familial narratives at the centre of the research project, I am challenging the dominant masculinist and patriarchal discourse of knowledge-making within scholarly paradigms. By examining the relational ethics and practice within the personal, the cultural and the familial narratives, I am also foregrounding the importance of relational knowing and engaged practice and pedagogy in the production and transmission of knowledge across difference. Central to this book is the exploration of the personal and cultural narratives as narratives of resistance to discourses of racism, sexism and marginalisation.

Conway goes on to ask, should feminist memoirs be read as "conscious acts of rebellion" since "writing and publishing one's life history was moving beyond secret rebellion to announce one's reasons for breaking the gender code?" (1998, p. 87). Conway's question points to a central argument in this book. Writing my parents' biographies and

my own autobiography becomes a site of complex and intersecting acts of subverting the dominant patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity as well as the discourses of race, ethnicity, nationality, class and gender.

This lifewriting research is in part a response to the two poignant questions Conway (1998, p. 87) asks:

Could even the most rebellious woman throw over the dictates of cultural conditioning and convince herself, let alone others, that she was her own heroine? Or did she have to contrive some hybrid narrative—part quest for authenticity, part censored report of an inner life, something closer to the medieval woman's reflections on spiritual relationships to powerful enabling figures?

Conway's suggestion that a "hybrid narrative" threads the complexities of life writing resonates more for me in my experience of lifewriting than the notion of the simple act of rebellion.

Autobiography as a literary tradition within the lifewriting genre resonates politically, historically and socially. Memoirs, as Conway argues, are "social documents as well as literary texts—one reason why historians quote them so frequently" (1998, p. vii). Each autobiographical narrative becomes a story intermingled with many other stories placed and displaced within specific social, cultural, political and historical contexts and meanings. Each of these stories can be interpreted and contested in many ways.

From the narrative perspective, Brown and Augusta-Scott (2007) argue that the "stories we tell about our experiences are not separate from the larger social stories that circulate as universal representations of truth while remaining largely unquestioned" (p. xviii). By engaging in the autobiographical writings, I am not only constituting the lived experiences as I write, but the writing also forms and informs my lived and living experiences as both my life and the writing unfold.

As Smith and Watson suggest, autobiographies frequently uncover "unrecited narratives" and through the telling of previously silenced narratives, autobiographical narrators become "cultural witnesses insisting on memory as agency in its power to intervene in imposed systems of meaning" (1996, p. 15). This breaking of silenced codes of meaning

in everyday life proves to be both powerful and inevitable. In the writing of the autobiographical and biographical narratives in this book, many silenced codes of meaning are being challenged and broken.

Harbord argues that “the recent emergence of autobiographical writing within academic texts” can be explored through the “convergence of a number of discourses”: firstly, the postmodern condition of the “moment of crisis of authority and linearity”; secondly, “Moving out of the institution into the realm of the everyday, the boundaries of subjectivity and space become permeable”; and thirdly, “the value of academic knowledge, its purpose and relationship with ‘the world’, is no longer given” (2002, p. 23). This shift has been important in determining the location and legitimacy of lifewriting research such as this within contemporary scholarly discourses.

From a postcolonial perspective, Rupprecht claims that delineation between the institutionalised language of postcolonial theory and political activism can be addressed through the promotion of “politically engaged narratives of self-identity within the postcolonial space which press upon the limits of institutionalized theory” (2002, p. 38). She goes on to argue that such narratives “posit their own grounded and embodied conceptualizations of ‘difference’ which are particular and specific in terms of context, community and place” (pp. 38-39).

Writing women’s lives and women’s self-writings challenge the fundamental hegemonic discourses and assumptions of selfhood, identity and gender by positioning women at the centre of the narratives and knowledge-making. In doing so, women’s lifewriting has many socio-cultural and political implications for the ways we read history, construct knowledges, and imagine future generations. This research is premised on the argument that women’s lifewriting occupies an important and pivotal place within contemporary feminist scholarship and contemporary scholarly knowledge-making. To place women at the centre of scholarly texts, critical analysis and knowledge-making is a highly political act that challenges histories that have long erased women and subjugated their experiences. This challenges the taken-for-granted location of ethnic minority women’s

lifewriting at the margins of culture, which can further subjugate and marginalise ethnic minority women's lives and experiences.

The precarious position occupied by ethnic minority lifewriting within academic discourses is further compounded by the even more precarious position of academic writing within wider literary and social-political discourses. Griffiths argues:

Universities reward us for writing obscurely for distant, small, specialised audiences made up of people educated exactly as we are! As Brett puts it, we are trained to write continually for the approval only of a disciplinary elite, whether we are students handling essays, doctoral candidates writing a PhD for two or three examiners, or academics writing only for refereed journals. (2000, p. 3)

Judith Brett's critique of the place and function of academic writing brings a timely caution:

Academic writing is writing that never leaves school, that never grows beyond the judging, persecuting eye of the parent to enter into a dialogue with the society and culture of its own time, as an adult amongst other adults, with all the acceptance of mutual imperfection which this implies. Always seeking the approval of a higher authority, the academic writer endlessly defers responsibility. I write in this way because I have to pass the exam, to get my PhD, to get a job, to get tenure, to get promotion. I write like this because it is what they want. I don't write in the way best suited to what I have to say, or to win people to a cause, to change the world, to humiliate my opponents, to help people understand their lives, to please my readers, or even to please myself. (Brett, as cited in Griffiths, 2000, p. 3)

The precarious position of women's lifewriting within academic and scholarly discourses can also become the site for intervention, invention and subversion for female scholars who continue to produce scholarly works that challenge the boundaries and genres of scholarly work within the masculinist academic discourse (Davies et al., 2004; Ellis, 2007; Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Grant & Knowles, 2000).

This research project emerges out of this site for intervention, invention and resistance of the masculinist academic discourse, where my professional and pedagogical practice engages directly and inter-