Presidential Address 2011

Narrating Lives and Contemporary Imaginaries

SIDONIE SMITH

GOOD EVENING, COLLEAGUES AND FRIENDS. TONIGHT I HAVE the honor of talking with you about my decided passion, narrating lives.

Emerging from dispersed global locations, circulated for differing purposes, life narration moves along predictable and unpredictable routes to publics and to archives near and far. High forms and low forms. Long forms and short forms. Lyric forms and documentary forms. Narrated lives in the first, second, third, and plural persons. Life stories in print, comics, photography, film, and *Second Life*.

My coauthor Julia Watson has observed that our contemporary "memoir *boom*" has become a financial boon to the publishing business. Memoirs regularly appear on the bookshelves of stores that are still brick and mortar and on online sites such as *Amazon*. If you like that, you might like this—an Amazonian form of life writing by algorithms assembling our prospective lives as consuming and reading subjects. Over the last six months, new memoirs have stirred radically different kinds of cultural buzz. Keith Richards's *Life*, Patti Smith's *Just Kids*, George W. Bush's *Decision Points*, and Darin Strauss's *Half a Life*. The musical world has adopted fascinating modes of life writing too. Wyclef Jean has issued a new album, a multimodal spoken, sung, and hummed autobiography in the *subjunctive* mode. *If I Were President: My Haitian Experience* meditates aurally on the conditions in postearthquake Haiti and Jean's failed attempt to become a candidate for its presidency.

Should we academics regard such popular forms as a crass commodification of personal confession, evidence of insatiable demand for ersatz reality? True, the tabloid lives of celebrities and presidential wannabes launching their candidacies are everywhere. And the

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digital spectacle of public confession teems with the claims of the I—vitriolic and bloviating blogs, online archives of daily meals, constantly updated geopositionings of tweeted selves. People used to tell you they were writing a novel; now it seems that everyone is recording or publishing his or her story. We may wax cynical about virtual narcissism and the networked morass of self-display and opinionating. We may wearily observe that what Stephen Colbert wryly called the postmodern condition of "truthiness" is all too pervasive (*Colbert Report*). We may feel reduced to a vast yawn or to laments about the insufficient attention to language and literariness or to anxiety about the alliance of selves and marketing in a brave new world of commodities exchanges trading consumption data. This is one way to regard the brave new world of the I. But I want to argue that the narrating I is currently much more than this reductionist dismissal suggests.

You may think that I am being defensive here. Many of us in the field of autobiography studies began our scholarly labors some forty years ago on the periphery. To many, our focus seemed marginal and dismissable. Our interest in autobiographical acts and practices seemed an intentional fallacy in the era of high theory, with its pronunciations about the death of the author. But as work in autobiography studies accumulated, the field earned its bona fides, and the MLA's imprimatur, gaining divisional status in 1989. Those of us in the field then were pleased we no longer needed to convene our meetings in someone's hotel room. In the last two decades, life writing studies has moved from the periphery to an academic center, in dissertations and in critical studies. Indeed, autobiography studies, with its capacious reach, is now a site of prodigious theoretical activity.

But something else important has happened along the way. The central concepts of a stable genre, a monolithic I, and a bounded life have come undone. The narration of lives has become entangled in cross-generic provocations as the disparate genres of life writing proliferate in print, in performance, and online. The contemporary diversity in narrated lives confronts us with different understandings of what constitutes three key concepts: the I, the life, and the narrating of lives around the globe. Over the last two decades, the project of studying autobiography has had to be reconceptualized and approached from multiple and supple points of view.

In this address, I want to step back from the day-to-day activities of a scholarly and teaching life to explore how narrated lives, improvising I's that signify beyond presumed singularity, register shifting national, global, and posthuman imaginaries. This gives me the opportunity to suggest how narrating lives and reading and teaching narrated lives matter now. I will conclude by suggesting how narrating lives registers a professional imaginary and how, in that context, life writing might be mobilized as a mode of advocacy in confronting the crises affecting our profession, the humanities, and the future of higher education.

Narrated Lives and the National Imaginary

Narrating lives becomes an occasion for assembling and claiming identities, securing and releasing social relations, and negotiating affective attachments. These acts can connect people to an intimate past animating a historical imaginary identified with family and nation. Cultures around the globe have disparate traditions of oral storytelling through which ancestry is recorded and legacies shaped for the next generations. Through traditional ceremonies, Indigenous Australians participate in communal stories of origin in performances of song cycles that express kinships and spiritual connections to land. African griots recite embodied communal histories for tribal members and urban groups alike. Here I want to consider the ways reanimation of the ancestral past unfolds in North America.

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One route is through genealogy. Thousands of filial sleuths navigate the genealogical public sphere, netizens of heritage roaming the Web on the lookout for clues, connections, and confirmations. Increasing numbers submit DNA swabs to laboratories in hopes of discovering ethnic heritage through global genetic migration. Now, this tracking of ancestral lines has sometimes had a troubling history and can be put to troubling, even violent, ends. The social work of tracing ancestry is part and parcel of nation building and its discontents. The rise of genealogical societies over the course of the nineteenth century in the United States coincided with the migration of children from farm families to new industrial centers and with the entry into the country of waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Memorializing bloodlines and securing kinship became a way to moderate anxiety about the loosened bonds of the traditional family and about the erosion of traits Anglo-Americans considered fundamental to the American character and story (Taylor 21). Nationalistic, exclusionary, racialized, and backward-looking, filiopietism exposed larger anxieties about America's suppressed conquest of native peoples and the violence of its nation building. The "birther" movement's attempt to delegitimize the Obama genealogy is a current symptom of this long-lived obsession.

The search for bloodlines reinforces the notion of the I as a singularity whose identity can be preserved in the lines of a family tree, the I whose national identity can be asserted unequivocally. But many genealogies are hidden from history, some are repudiated, and some are suppressed. Consequently, lines on a family tree are not always sufficient to reanimate a usable past. Life stories about families need telling—to compensate for the paucity of records and the frustrations of archival defeat as well as to capture as heritage the densities of familial histories and the idioms of communal remembering.

Of course, family stories can be mobilized for the utilitarian purpose of turning one's life into political capital. We see this aspect of animating the past in celebrity politics, as presidential candidates issue obligatory autobiographies to launch campaigns. A corporate production, the candidacy of late capitalism is crafted, packaged, marketed, displayed, polled, and sold. In this environment, optimum political capital attaches to the personal story as a performance of the character, authenticity, and truth of the candidate. That story does the political work of individualizing the candidate as a recognizably self-made American and situating his or her story in family legacies that reproduce nationalist norms of citizenship.

Yet celebrity lives are also available for animating heterogeneous legacies and disrupting normative histories of citizenship. Our colleague Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has mobilized celebrity culture to capture, for a broad audience in North America, the frisson of tracking DNA along routes of migration and displacement across the globe. And for the PBS series *Faces of America* he animates celebrity heritage in ways that can trouble myths of legacy, confound self-understandings, and reroute personal narrative through the stories of others. These projects document and perform the pleasures and responsibilities of making occluded histories and left-behind legacies public.

So too do the alternative modes of writing family histories filling contemporary bookshelves and Web pages. These projects attest to the difficult labor of discovering and patterning not genes but stories through which filial inheritors interpolate the legacies of other people's lives into theirs. "Postmemory"[1] generations, such as the children of Holocaust survivors, explore the position of the intimate witness to the afterlives of momentous events, along the way recovering lost relations, ruminating on adoptive memories, and exposing stranded filialities. First- and second-

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generation immigrants tell family stories of geographic displacement, arrested or hyperactive assimilation, and filial ambivalences. Memoirists of mixed heritages mine diverse archives to investigate historically concurrent but culturally distant and dissonant lived histories. The relational I in these contexts is often dispersed through multiple filial attachments: languages, sounds, foods, treasured objects, photographs, snippets of heritage stories, and popular culture references.

Acts of rethinking the familial, communal, and national I as vexed collective history have generated some astoundingly complex and challenging experiments in family narrative, among them the two volumes of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, in comic form. Let me mention two others. Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is a post-second-wave-feminist comic in which Bechdel thinks back through her father rather than her mother. In *Fun Home,* Bechdel recursively entwines the story of her father's closeted sexuality and suspicious death with her own coming-out story as *künstlerroman*. But *Fun Home* is also an homage to her father's habits of reading, an homage to an international archive of writers he and she read, a catalog of the material culture through which her father expressed his aesthetic sensibility, and a story of region, the precisely mapped small-town Pennsylvania of the 1970s, which she locates on the interstate highway running from the Haight in San Francisco to the Village in New York City. The second, Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother,* probes the intersection of familial and colonial history, confounding distinctions among biography, autobiography, and fiction to create transnational mappings of affective legacies.

These cross-genre, multiply mediated provocations in family storytelling project identities beyond singularity as they reanimate intimate ancestral imaginaries. Unsettling the exclusions of unifying fables of national heritage, these forays confront us with intimate relationality as an effect of genetic, material, psychic, and communal flows that crisscross national boundaries. Prompting us to comprehend how we are no longer only national but also global subjects, they challenge us with contested versions of the modernist institutions of family and nation, complicating our understanding of the affective routines through which legacies attach us to citizenship and confronting us with radically different definitions of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

The Global Imaginary of Narrated Lives

As life writing is caught up in the circuits of production, circulation, and reception, it contributes not only to reanimating, differently, family and nation, but also to the constellation and alignment of new global identities and transnational reading communities. We see this effect of narrating lives in the constellation of global youth cultures. As I note elsewhere, young people dispersed across the globe participate in the online life writing of *Facebook* walls and personal blogs; they consume one graphic narrative after another, many of them memoir versions of coming-of-age stories; they fashion themselves and "rearrange" their desires (Spivak 525) through the life stories of celebrities. These everyday practices of producing and engaging narrated lives position them in transnational identities and a shared sociality reaching beyond the local and the national.

The flow in narrated lives also becomes a means for increasing numbers of people around the globe to imagine themselves as global citizens within the contemporary human rights regime: the ensemble of discourses, instruments, institutions, and venues of advocacy and adjudication that address injustice and immiseration and manage their geopolitics (Schaffer and Smith). Indeed, memoir, survivor narrative, and narratives of

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witness are overlapping genres that produce and perform transnational rights claims, identities, and literacies.[2] The narration of lives can document brutality, memorialize the dead, expose histories of violence, model survival, and register heroic legacies of resistance. Such narratives circulate emergent rights identities, such as "lost boy," "child soldier," "comfort woman," and "beneficiary." They position readers as secondary witnesses, enlisting them to confront violence, advocate for the redress of injustice, and donate to rights organizations.

Yet every geopolitical context, every scene, and every form of witnessing raise troubling questions about the global politics of storytelling. A survey of Web sites and bookshelves indicates what kinds of narrated lives gain saliency in human rights arenas. This is a question of moment. The time is or is not ripe for particular narratives of witness. While some stories gain readers, others find no outlet. And the shelf lives of witness narratives can be short, as one global hot spot displaces another and attention drifts at differing rates across the world. Let me illustrate this point with a story about timing.

During the first meeting of the International Auto/Biography Association, in Beijing in June 1999, I was approached by a woman who handed me a typed manuscript of about two hundred pages. She asked if I could find a publisher for her memoir about being a "sent down" girl during the Cultural Revolution. Her narrative of desolation and loss contributed to what had become known as "scar" literature, autobiographies of mourning for the years lost to the radical ruptures and violence of the Cultural Revolution (Schaffer and Smith). I couldn't help her find a publisher in the United States, and unfortunately she may not have found one in China. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Western publishers were no longer interested in the Maoist exotic, and Chinese readers had wearied of an older generation's stories of the nation's pariah past. Other life stories of the post-Mao, post-Deng China had taken hold of readers in both locations, particularly "chick lit" with Chinese characteristics. This is a story of wrong timing.

What happens when the time is right? The narratives that gain transnational purchase circulate across the globe, accumulating and shedding translations and interpretive valences depending on where they land and how they are read. For instance, retitling by publishers and reviews in print and online media can turn the story of a child witness into a decontextualized story of universal childhood (Rak).[3] Zlata Filipović's *Zlata's Diary*, registering daily life in Sarajevo under siege in the early 1990s, was repurposed for classrooms in the United States and used to teach tolerance and identification across difference to teenagers. Marjane Satrapi's first two volumes of *Persepolis*, originally published by an avant-garde press in France, were, as Julie Rak observes, subtitled *The Story of a Childhood* when published in the United States by a mainstream trade press. That subtitle repositioned Satrapi's graphic memoir of growing up in revolutionary Iran as a universal coming-of-age tale, obscuring the lived realities and the complex histories of sectarianism, revolution, and resistance in Iran. Post-9/11 narrated lives from Middle Eastern nations and Afghanistan, as Gillian Whitlock observes, have been marketed and framed so as to reinforce stereotypes of the backwardness of Muslims and to position "Westerners" as rescuers of oppressed women in those nations (Introduction). Narrated lives in this context, she suggests, become the "soft weapons" of propaganda wars.

Because narrated lives play so prominent a role in human rights activism, they are often contested sites, where advocates, apologists, suspicious readers, and online sleuths contend about questions of truth telling. Ismael Beah was taken to task by journalists in Australia and Sierra Leone for misrepresent-

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ing certain details of duration and location in *A Long Way Gone*. Conservatives in Japan challenged the former sex prisoners' assertion that they had been forced into organized brothels by the Japanese military during the Pacific War. Campaigning against apology and reparation, they represented the sex prisoners as willing prostitutes (Schaffer and Smith 147). Allegations of hoaxing haunt narratives of witness, threatening the utility of life stories as a bond of surety in geopolitics.

And yet hybrid forms of narrating lives can provide salutary provocations for confusing rather than settling rights identities, confusing rather than settling the habitual affects of secondary witnessing, confusing rather than settling the decidability of truth telling. In *The Little School*, Alicia Partnoy's narrator inhabits multiple voices and subjectivities to glimpse the last moments of the disappeared victims of Argentina's "dirty war." Art Spiegelman routes his postmemory narrative of the Holocaust through the comic form, testing his and our understanding of trauma and its aftermath and unsettling the norms of visualizing trauma and intergenerational histories. The South African Antjie Krog pursues secondary witnessing through three volumes as she tries to imagine a place for the Afrikaner beneficiary of apartheid in postapartheid South Africa. And recently Dave Eggers turns the oral history of Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese "lost boy," into a novel, entitled *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel*. The I here is composite, at once the narrator of Deng's recorded oral history and the fictive I of Eggers's novelistic character "Deng." This witness narrative multiplies the singularities of the I, ruptures metrics of the authenticity of the subject who speaks, and confounds the referents of both the genre of witnessing and the lived life.[4] And we are left to grapple with Deng's observation in his preface: "The book is historically accurate, and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages" (xiv). In this inversion of the paratextual apparatus at work in many life narratives telling the story of surviving structural violence, the subject of the story authenticates the fictional version produced by the amanuensis. The claim to truth telling is at once secured and rendered indeterminate. In the end the question of autobiographical truth telling is both problematized and put in the service of generating income for the educational foundation Deng and Eggers created to build schools in South Sudan.[5]

Thus, we discover that the very vehicle that has proved so powerful in constituting global citizenship around human rights advocacy also instructs us about how a geopolitical imaginary emerges and secures its subjects. We learn about the local and global social work that life storytelling now does and the efficacies of reading life writing for publics differently situated in networks and meshworks of power, influence, and capital. As reading is implicated in problematic cultures of rescue, we confront certain ponderables: the psychic costs of witnessing, the ethics of citing others' testimony, the dynamics of the global trade in represented suffering, and the specter of the hoax. Along the way, such life storytelling challenges us to resist simplistic notions about the transparency of authenticity, truth telling, and accountability, challenges us to become self-conscious of our position as secondary witnesses and to test our strategies for responding to violence and immiseration.

The Posthuman Imaginary and the Future of Life Writing

Life writing constitutes and unsettles a national imaginary, constitutes and unsettles a global imaginary. Now let me turn to the intersection of life writing and a possible posthuman imaginary.

The post-Enlightenment form of traditional autobiography seems to be fully a product of "humanism." As a genre, it has often

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been suspect, even maligned, for reifying the individualist form of the human, variously termed the Cartesian subject or the imperial subject. As I noted, however, contemporary practices of life narrative have challenged and redefined this formation. And now life writing genres offer provocative futures for what is variously termed "the human species subject" (McHugh 489) or the posthuman subject. Indeed, narrating lives intersects with theorizing the posthuman, as the very concepts of memory and embodiment, at the heart of life writing, are put under pressure.

The human relation to remembering is being reconfigured by the capacious, constantly updated and updatable archive that is the Internet. Every ort and fragment of digitized life posted on a *Facebook* wall, on a blog, or in a tweet remain retrievable. This is an archive without an archivist, without rules of collection, and seemingly without rules of privacy. Far from encouraging purposeful self-representation or self-invention, this vast memory machine may well constrict life writing. Jeffrey Rosen observes that "the Internet is shackling us to everything that we have ever said, or that anyone has said about us, making the possibility of digital self-reinvention seem like an idea from a distant era" (33). Rosen further observes that the records residing in this memory machine function to preserve iterations of identity from the past and thus "tether us to all our past actions, making it impossible, in practice, to escape them" (32).[6] In this situation, the relation of self-narrators to the plots, tropes, terms of interiority, and subject positions we identify with contemporary acts of life writing will attenuate in perplexing ways. For instance, the genres often associated with life writing in the United States—such as the bildungsroman, the confession, and the survivor narrative of addiction and recovery—may prove untenable, even suspicious, as intelligible and creditable versions of a life; they may be rendered untenable by the voracious recording capacity of the Internet and the resilient presence of a digitally unerasable past, including past versions of the life. In such an environment, acts of life writing may well become acts of "self-deletion." Or, as the enabling capacity of forgetting erodes, the social uses of life writing may well reduce to a deployment of prosthetic technologies to "manage" "reputation," as Rosen suggests (34–36). Or, perhaps, as the sleuths of autobiographical "transparency" troll this vast archive, a life story may become a wiki life, the compositing of oneself as an other by others, endlessly updatable.

Embodiment as the ground of autobiographical acts and practices is changing radically as well. Multitasking, search trails, networked sociality are all effects of human-machine-ensemble exchanges that structure everyday life in developed and developing countries. To what extent do these phenomena affect the organization of consciousness? In her recent work, N. Kathryn Hayles asserts that the neuroplasticity of the brain may well reconstellate self-consciousness, thereby influencing the kinds of stories future generations will make of their lives. Online modes of life writing suggest intriguing possibilities. The Web site *Tumblr* projects a form of future life writing in its idiosyncratic deployment of other people's pleasures and its assemblage of online creative convergences—visuals, bits of song, search trails, found virtual objects. The self is remixed and repurposed as collage. Some blogs project the self as what one of my students last semester termed a "kitschy assemblage of pop cultural fixations" (Kim). *LifeCasting* gives us the self in 24-7 boxed camera angles; we become entries and exits. The 140 characters of *Twitter* make the self a minimalist condensation. *PostSecret* projects an anonymous confessor mediated through digital and print postcard versions. In all these modes, bodies, selves, and temporality are displaced, fractured, disassembled, reassembled.[7]

Then, too, digital technologies enable virtual embodiment through the autobiographi-

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cal avatars of games and virtual worlds. These avatar versions of selves can have nonhuman bodies. Some are identifiable as animals, some as composite beings adapting aspects of different species. In recent decades, representing the body's materiality has stimulated autobiographical projects among people with disabilities and among people confronting illness and disease. In the future, surgically, genetically, or digitally altered modes of embodiment will surely inform the tropes, narratives arcs, subject positions, and affective charges of life writing. What new stories will we be telling of embodiment, simultaneously organic and technological, as emergent experiments in inhabiting bodies unsettle boundaries between species and species, human and inert, human and quantum?

As the posthuman gets a life, it will be fascinating to observe and engage adaptations of narrative lives routed through an imaginary of surfaces, networks, assemblages, prosthetics, and avatars. Modes of narrating lives will chart these emergent subjectivities and index shifts in the human and posthuman imaginaries. And they will expose the impact on subjectivities of asymmetries in the distribution of digital hardware, software, and literacies that widen the gap between the education haves and have-nots across the globe.

Narrating Lives and the Professional Imaginary

I've been observing the centrality of narrating lives to conceptualizing and negotiating national, global, and posthuman imaginaries. I want to conclude by affirming the centrality of narrating lives to our professional imaginary. Let me point to three ways it is important to our professional lives now.

First, the work of composing and analyzing life stories lies at the heart of what we do in the humanities. We engage students in thinking about what it meant and what it means now to be human: to tell stories, to constitute community, to negotiate identities, to imagine worlds, to relate to one another ethically, to survive, and to imagine a future. We share with our students the skills and intellectual curiosity enabling them to reflect on the stories they tell of themselves as well as of their engagement with others' stories. In turn, the stories of our professional lives alter as we encounter the stories told by students, including the increasing numbers of students who come to our campuses from around the world with their own modes of narrative. Occasions for the performative, intersubjective praxis of life writing in formal and informal exchanges may aid us in comprehending emergent student subjectivities and literacies.

Second, an archive of our narrated lives would provide an invaluable resource for analyzing and historicizing what it was and what it is now to be a teacher and scholar of languages and literatures. So much has changed since I began my academic career. When as an untenured assistant professor at the University of Arizona I decided to have a baby, I was fortunate that my timing worked out. My son arrived on 31 December. I returned to teaching within a week and a half. Now men and women in tenured and tenure-track positions can take parental leaves. And yet those positions are becoming more and more scarce. We ought not forget the changes won by hard work in the past. We cannot escape the distressing trends in higher education now. Through narrating lives, we can remember the past of our profession in all its complexities and contradictions and register the effects of the current transformation. Further, over the next decade our professional lives will be influenced by open-access scholarly communication, the transformation of the book into a distributed, processual, and multiply mediated entity, and the increasingly collaborative environment of our work. As crowdsourcing and community outreach expand, as the boundaries between the academy and the world outside become more permeable,

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our professional lives will be lived in multiple locations. The value attributed to the work we do in the classroom and the archive, the status of our work as intellectual property, and the way we do our work and with whom—all are changing. Indeed, the transformations in the expertise associated with the scholarly and teaching life will create a dramatic gap between the current generation and next ones. An archive of stories of this professional life would enable us to look beyond a singular I with a singular career model to the transformation of an imaginary—that is, to the collective story of a profession, to generational stories about scholar-teachers, and to the structural story of the new economy of higher education as it affects humanists and academic institutions across the globe.

Third and last, we can recognize the political stakes of narrating professional lives by mobilizing life narration to advocate for the humanities. In convention sessions organized around the theme of The Academy and the Economy, our colleagues spoke passionately about the current crises in the academy and laid out agendas for advocacy.[8] We must all engage the crises, individually and collectively. Some of us will act through unionization efforts, some through improving departmental conditions for non-tenure-track faculty members. Some will contribute to making a vigorous case for the liberal arts to the public, as Martha Nussbaum has recently done in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Some will mobilize through Internet sites such as *4Humanities,* a resource created by digital-humanities scholars around the world and using multiple digital modes—blog, wiki, social network—to make the case for the humanities. I hope that we will mobilize life writing as a way to connect with the public around the work we do.

As we address campus administrators and legislators, parents and pundits, and the general public, we need to assemble and lobby life stories—our own and those of our students. Here is one of mine. I went to Washington last year for the annual advocacy day sponsored by the National Humanities Alliance. There humanities scholars gathered for a day to practice lobbying skills in preparation for meeting congressional staffers to discuss the importance of the humanities and to urge increased funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities. The next day we took our case to Capitol Hill. We had appointments for five to ten minutes tops. We did the House side of Congress first. Twenty-somethings sat across from us in cramped public spaces. We made our case. They took notes, though distracted by the next set of lobbyists waiting. The visits on the Senate side went a bit better. One of my senators is Debbie Stabenow, whose passion is health care. I argued to a young aide that the humanities are central to the scenes of health care delivery. These are sites in need of language proficiency, translation skills, and skills of listening to and interpreting life narratives of patients and their advocates. I liked making this case, although I wasn't skilled at it. I caught the energy and found a way to communicate my passion about how people narrate their lives and why that is important to our nation.

We can put narrated lives, ours and others', on the line. Such stories will help us convey to the public the meanings of our work as it is shaped through books, through research in scholarly archives, through college teaching, and through the experiences of our students. So find a genre—say, ecobiography, or autoethnography, or political manifesto. And link your story to a structural analysis of the conditions affecting higher education. Doing so, we can become, in Lauren Berlant's phrase to me, "the architects of a new imaginary for the relation of our knowledge and our teaching" and, I would insist, a new imaginary for our relation to a broader public.

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Notes

1. The phrase is originally Marianne Hirsch's (22).

2. Alicia Partnoy. Art Spiegelman. Sally Morgan. Jacopo Timerman. Rigoberta Menchú. Aung San Suu Kyi. Zlata Filipović. Wei Jingsheng. Nelson Mandela. Antjie Krog. Ishmael Beah. Valentino Achak Deng. Maria Rosa Henson. These names evoke sites of violence, brought to a global public through life narrative.

3. Marketers can present a story of victimization as the story of a spunky survivor battling against the odds, thereby reproducing the liberal fable of individualist self-making and promising feel-good reading.

4. There are two historical actors and storytellers in this book: Deng, the oral narrator of his history as a "lost boy" of Sudan—surviving murder, displacement, hunger, and the plans for his transformation to a "child soldier"—and as an immigrant living precariously in Atlanta after his "rescue" from a Kenyan refugee camp, and Dave Eggers, the creator of a novel out of an oral history. Dissonantly, the I of Eggers's novel and the I of Deng's oral history tell different stories of "lost" boys and "found" cultures of rescue.

5. According to the foundation Web site, the Marial Bai Secondary School opened in Deng's hometown in 2009 (Larson).

6. Rosen cites Viktor Mayer-Schönberger's *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* on "societal forgetting," the forgetting that constitutes our notion of the human being as "evolv[ing] over time" and having "the capacity to learn from past experience" (Rosen 32).

7. As my colleague Phil Pochoda has observed, "When 40 million people play AND have a 'Second Life' does that mean that life-writing becomes necessarily and literally schizophrenic (or worse)? Commodities are apparently fungible between 'real' and 'second' life, so perhaps life-stories are as well."

8. Other colleagues have been writing about the changing conditions of funding and administering the academy, among them Marc Bousquet, Cary Nelson, Frank Donoghue, and Louis Menand. Our professional organization, the Modern Language Association, has focused attention on the assault on the humanities at campuses across North America and issued responses to measures to cut language programs. The MLA has also produced materials advocating for better working conditions and compensation for non-tenure-track faculty members.

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