Empathy, as a process within and product of literary works, has become an increasingly salient topic of discussion. The notion of literary texts as cultural artifacts that allow readers to identify, comprehend, and relate to the experiences and feelings of others—affectively and cognitively—compels us to consider these narratives’ discursive possibilities. The issue of empathy in literary texts has been highlighted in forums as diverse as David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano’s 2013 article in the journal *Science*, where they posit that reading fiction improves theory of mind, to Barack Obama’s interview with Marilyn Robinson in the *New York Review of Books*. In that interview, the President tells Robinson that “the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen . . . I think I’ve learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with . . . the notion that it’s possible to connect with some[one] else even though they’re very different from you.” Crucially, Suzanne Keen’s groundbreaking study, *Empathy and the Novel*, comprehensively and empirically explores narrative empathy by examining how it is created in fiction, as well as the effects it produces—whether reading moves beyond feeling to altruistic action. In a time of heightened valency of emotional cultures in the context of civil society, media and popular culture, art and politics, the notion and practice of empathy has become a fundamental element in our understanding of and negotiation with texts. This idea arises from the apparently general consensus that the reading of literary texts promotes empathy, a situation that ideally leads to the creation of a more compassionate society.

* This special issue develops from a symposium held at the University of Navarra in October 2015 entitled: “Life Writing as Empathy: A Symposium on Narrative Emotions,” sponsored by the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS) and the research group on Emotional Culture and Identity (CEMID). I thank them for their generous support of the symposium. I would also like to thank the readers of the essays for their generous suggestions. My gratitude to the members of the Board of *Concentric*, for their support and hard work.
The creation of empathy in life writing texts, however, appears to have received less critical attention. Indeed, references to the advantages of fiction over non-fiction in the production of empathy appear in many of these studies. Kidd and Castano note that the worlds represented in fiction pose fewer risks than the real world, and they present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement. More critically, whereas many of our mundane social experiences may be scripted by convention and informed by stereotypes, those presented in literary fiction often disrupt our expectations. Readers of literary fiction must draw on more flexible interpretive resources to infer the feelings and thoughts of characters. (378)

From a broader academic perspective, Keen suggests that “fiction deactivates readers’ suspicions and opens the way to easier empathy” (29), suggesting that fictionality disarms readers and invites them to identify with characters. Indeed, fiction arguably demands less responsibility: though one may identify with characters in fiction, the form of interpellation of the reader in life writing texts is generally more imperative, more urgent, because the people in the text exist or existed, the experiences represented are referential world experiences. No matter how empathetic a reading of fiction might result, the idea remains that readers are less likely to be provoked into action than with a referential text.

A fruitful discussion of empathy in texts, however, requires us to delimit our understanding of the term itself. A useful working definition comes from the field of autism research, as Simon Baron-Cohen describes empathy as “the drive to identify another person’s emotions and thoughts, and to respond to them with an appropriate emotion” (2). Ann Jurecic notes that his use of “the word ‘drive’ suggests that empathy is automatic, spontaneous, beyond one’s control, and thus worthy of neither praise nor blame. But Baron-Cohen also uses the word ‘appropriate,’ which suggests that culture is present, too, shaping what it means to respond in a suitable or proper way” (12). Reflecting on this definition from the perspective of the production and consumption of a literary text, we have to take into account the ways in which authorial decisions shape, not only the creation of empathy but also responses to experiences or emotions portrayed. Empathetic responses or concerns should be examined from cultural, sociological, and even ideological perspectives. Life writing texts, in particular, because of the truth value of the experiences articulated, often interpellate readers to feel with and act with or for their writers, in particular ways.
Moreover, life writing texts arguably draw attention to their production, more than merely to their themes or topics. As highly metalinguistic texts, auto/biographies often narrate the experience of textual production. Peter Goldie’s approach to the concept of empathy in life writing highlights this element when he argues that “Empathizing with another person is an essentially simulationist approach, and involves imagining the experience of a narrative from that other person’s point of view” (178; emphasis in original). He notes that empathy is more than merely emotional contagion, because characterization does not involve only an invitation to visualize or comprehend the other person’s thoughts or emotions, but leads to a more complex relationship with the text and its writer (178). Life writing, despite its structural similarities to fiction, repeatedly calls attention to its writer, more than to characters, ultimately fictional constructs. By empathizing with the writer more than merely with a character, a reader may transcend the imaginative enactment of the narrative in two ways: by predicting the narrator’s emotional responses, “through imaginatively continuing the narrative beyond [an] initial understanding of it,” and, secondly, “come actually to have emotional experiences of the same sort as the narrator” (Goldie 178; emphasis in original). Ideally, as well, these emotions should lead to action, to a proactive participation in the world one might have experienced through the text.

The essays in this special issue produce readings of a diversity of life writing texts and explore the ways in which empathy is understood, created, narrated, and consumed by readers. Read together, they allow us to reflect on the production of specific aspects of emotional cultures enacted in referential texts. The forms of empathy they privilege also invite us to broaden our perspectives on the possibilities of life writing. The issue opens with two essays that question the critical paradigms we use to understand the production of empathy and its place in life writing projects. First, Suzanne Keen’s “Life Writing and the Empathetic Circle” revisits the claims she made in her 2007 book, *Empathy and the Novel*, regarding the privileged place of the fictional in the creation of empathy. Her reconsideration of the points she made earlier opens up new dimensions to the reading of referential texts and the empathetic elements involved in the production of and reception of those texts. Second, Luis Galván offers an epistemological reflection, based on paradigms of literary studies, on the role of empathy in life writing texts, focusing on their cognitive or practical values. He suggests that studying literature as a system of communication and taking into account the systemic role that empathy and emotions play, provides readers and critics with deeper understanding of the text-processing activities.
The subsequent essays highlight how empathy is created through form as much as through the representation of experience. Stephanie Butler uses theories of epistolary narratives to discuss how letters written by English women during World War II attest to their efforts to inspire empathy for their traumatic experiences through images and symbols, in the context of criticism on counterpublics, intimate publics, affective communities, and narrative psychiatry. The next two articles focus on stories of particularly vulnerable individuals. Rosalía Baena claims that, rather than generating pity of a sense of tragedy, personal narratives serve to mediate the public’s response to the fact of disability, challenging societal myths or fears. Reading two of the earliest disability texts, Robert Murphy’s *The Body Silent* (1987) and Reynolds Price’s *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing* (1994), she explains how autobiographical self-reflexivity becomes a tool for a revisioning of perspectives on illness that reconfigures the experience of empathy and shifts readerly approaches to the experience of disability. For Lourdes López-Ropero, empathetic identification lies at the heart of humanitarian narrative, which she explains through a discussion of Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother* (1997) and Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying* (2007), texts that seek to expose and redress refugee or immigrants’ deprivation of individual rights. She enacts a critical reading of these texts to reveal the narrative strategies that favor or block the creation of empathy, noting how the relational dynamics that mark these texts complicate the process of eliciting empathetic responses from readers.

Apart from the more traditional narrative textual form of life writing, essays in this volume also engage multimodal representations of personal stories. These essays evidence not only the complex forms of the genre, but also ask us to question how far we, as viewers or interactive participants in multimodal digital formats, participate in the creation of the emotions that a cultural product aims to create. Sabrina Vellucci’s essay on narrative empathy in two versions of the life of Frida Kahlo—the 1983 biography by Hayden Herrera and Julie Taymor’s 2002 film adaptation of the book—suggests that adaptations elicit empathy through a multilevel relationship between forms of media, a dialogic process. Drawing attention to the gaze articulated on the screen, which triangulates with the biography that highlights the artist’s performance of herself, Vellucci stresses the constructed nature of Frida’s story and its engagement with processes of history. The essay entitled “How Is Empathy Evoked in Interactive Multimodal Life Stories?” by Evelyn Chew and Alex Mitchell studies the techniques the writers of hypertext stories deploy to evoke affective or cognitive empathy. By enacting a close reading of two popular interactive works, Travis Megill’s *Memorial* and Steven Wingate’s *daddylabyrinth*, the authors
distinguish particular strategies and structures that not only invite apparently creative readerly participation, but are organized to promote particular feelings.

The volume concludes with an essay by Arthur W. Frank that uses illness narratives to promote the act of storytelling as a strategy to create empathetic relations. He asks the question: “How then does narrative—including knowing stories, taking some stories seriously as guides to living, and affiliating with others who share appreciation for a common stock of stories—figure in practices of empathy and moral imagination?” His discussion, based on four stories of illness and healthcare practice, distinguishes the ways stories work and how some might fail in the process of narrative empathy.

The question Frank asks serves as a useful conclusion to the discussion raised in this collection of essays because the discussion needs to continue, as varied texts continue to affect the ways we learn about and understand the lives of others. Importantly as well, we are invited to consider not only what empathy might mean in cultural, social, and political contexts, but also its ethical purpose and usefulness. If, in the end, empathy involves our understanding of and identification with the other, we have to assess the ways in which forms of cultural production, including life writing, promote this involvement.

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