

Chapter 1: Life Stories as Sources for Dance Scholarship

According to linguist Charlotte Linde, life stories are indispensable social interactions that enable people to “exist in a social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person.”¹ Life stories answer the invitation: Please tell me the story of your life. They perform existential and moral work, whether they are orated speeches or told casually off the cuff.² In contrast to a carefully worded autobiography, in which narratives are retrospectively selected, and wordings are inalterable after going to print, life stories emerge in situated, ongoing social interaction and continue to change throughout one’s life. As Linde’s work *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (1993) brings into clarity, life stories are “created, negotiated, and exchanged” throughout a person’s lifetime of social interactions.³ They are fashioned by listening to others’ stories and composing one’s own tales: in dialogue. In this way, they are seldom long, unbroken monologs, but more commonly expressions of dialogic social performance—open and incomplete—and rendered for a particular audience. These very important findings of autobiography research, which have also been reflected upon by other scholars, have only recently been introduced into dance studies research.⁴

Dancers’ life stories have great potential as sources for dance scholarship, as I shall argue and develop over the course of this chapter. But this distinct form of autobiographical testimony also poses theoretical and methodological challenges—from how to access and record these narratives, to how to publish and analyze them. Organizing an interdisciplinary framework for dancer life story research, this book cultivates this emerging research domain by exemplifying how life stories may contribute theoretically to the study of dance and redefine *who* leaves

1 Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*, 3.

2 Here I paraphrase Ken Plummer. See Plummer, “The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research,” 404.

3 Linde, *Life Stories*, 3. (emphasis mine)

4 For example, in the writing of historian Volker Depkat. See Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 36–38.

traces for future scholars to encounter. The main research questions guiding this inquiry are the following:

1. How can dancers' life stories generate knowledge, including self-knowledge and scholarly knowledge of dance practice and dance history?
2. What makes life stories truthful in terms of factual content, or in terms of the meanings, lessons, and values they convey?
3. How do narrative conventions shape the ways dancers tell their life stories?
4. What can we learn from dancers' embodied storytelling: how they move, perform, and enact their life-narratives?
5. How do dancers' life stories reveal constitutive experiences and negotiations of embodiment, thereby giving insight into embodied history and body politics?

This chapter begins my engagement with these questions by reviewing key theoretical precedents in auto/biographical and life story research, and outlining debates for how to produce, interpret, critique, and publish life stories. Building on this, the heart of this book (Part II) presents a case study of four body-reflexive life stories—body-biographies—that provide new examples of this exploratory form of scholarly writing.

In this chapter, I will examine diverse theoretical landmarks, from dance oral history to the *testimonio* genre, to clarify my premises about the distinctions between life stories and other related auto/biographical genres; by doing so, I motivate and frame the leading term of this study, the neologism *body-biographies*. Responding to difficulties I had in telling my own life story as well as addressing undertheorized aspects of life story research, I invented the term body-biography to name research into the *embodied* aspects of dancer life-story narratives. Please tell me the story of your life—with reference to your body—serves as a reminder to bring bodies conscientiously into our dimensions of self-narration, not necessarily as material objects, but also as sensual subjects, being, and becoming. Body-biographies offer scholars sources for investigating the role of embodiment in dancers' self-understanding and its influence on life story performance. I questioned how dancers' body-biographies might decenter or resist traditional androcentric notions of autobiography, or even propose alternatives. Furthermore, I sought to understand how my awareness of my own bodily movements could guide both the rigor and care work involved in eliciting my dance teachers' life stories.

In this chapter, I will provide a theoretical scaffolding to elevate my scholarly interests and arguments. First, I orient my research within the vast and growing multidisciplinary field of “auto/biography” studies, and then the smaller but booming field of “auto_bio_graphy” research in dance studies. In the third section, I clarify my research focus by reviewing current cases and debates in life story research. The fourth and final section of this chapter concludes by considering

the subject of “life review,” focusing on themes particular to interviewing elders; I introduce the specific dance narrators chosen for this project and define important themes emerging from this selection. In synthesis, these sections support the argument that dancers’ life stories—self-narratives revealing dimensions of embodiment, produced from and through aesthetic and social performance—must be understood as dynamic narratives that enable the scholar to explore the meanings and values of a life constituted through the art of dancing.

Auto/Biography Studies

The idiom *auto/biography* is an umbrella term that marks the contemporary fluidity and multiplicity of autobiography and biographical life narratives. Theoretical attention to these fascinating sources—extending from written texts to oral accounts and aesthetic expression—has grown considerably since the 1980s, such that the field is currently recognized as a substantial, transdisciplinary, and global domain of scholarship.⁵ The wide scope of this inquiry extends from literary studies and the social sciences, via neuroscience and psychology, linguistics, and gender studies, to the arts—including dance. This scholarship has led to a more complex view of narrated lives across cultures and throughout human history. Scholars have examined their specificity as texts, while also undertaking expanded readings of their multimodal components. Varying terminologies within these inquiries canvass a range of investigations of self/*auto*, life/*bios*, and description/*graphy*: including life stories, life histories, life-writing, memoirs, testimonio, *écrivain*, self-narratives, ego documents, biographical interviews, ethnographic autobiography, autoethnography, autofictions, and autotheory, to name just a few.⁶

As this long list makes clear, modes of auto/biographical inquiry vary appreciably in their authorship (collective or singular) and practices (methodology) of creation. Because of this breadth, one encompassing definition is impossible. Instead, one must consider interweaving discourses, mediums, and markets. The field of auto/biography studies has developed by critically revising canons and careful theoretical exploration of the individual life narratives within. My study of

5 For an overview, see Chansky and Hipchen, *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*; Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*.

6 In general, see Plummer, “The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research”; Chansky and Hipchen, *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. I review life stories in detail in this introduction. On autotheory, see Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. For a survey also of autofiction, see Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*. On autoethnography, see Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography*. For a concise yet rigorous introduction to many of these genres, see also Marcus, *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction*.

body-biographies is part of this meaningful new literature, working with sensitive regard for the personal and the phenomenon of dancing bodies. Like the scholarship to which I refer in this section, my writing aims to further decenter the androcentric canon of autobiography and contribute to critical dance scholarship that explores autobiographical modes of personhood, self-reflection, and embodied narration. In my research, therefore, I open an autobiographical space in which tensions exist between prior conventional cultural scripts, on one hand, and dance-specific conventions for telling one's life story, on the other. Reviewing these, for readers unfamiliar with these debates in auto/biography studies, will enable more nuanced reading of the life stories that follow.

A primary narrative characteristic of traditional androcentric life-writing and life stories is *coherence*: that autobiographical narratives come together credibly around a central protagonist. Coherence, Charlotte Linde writes, is twofold. On the one hand, it is a textual property: that the sub-elements of a narrative relate sensibly to each other, for example, in their sequence and contingency. Coherence is also negotiated socially. Linde describes it as “a cooperative achievement of the speaker and the addressee.”⁷ The specific cultural and personal values of the narrator and interviewer therefore impact how coherence becomes structured through negotiation. The relevance of this coherence for dancers' life stories will be examined from multiple angles throughout this study.

Writing in the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (2018), historian Volker Depkat similarly observes how the common understanding of autobiography revolves around the coherence of the self: “as a retrospective narrative in prose about a lived life, focusing on the story of the author's own personality.” Depkat stresses that this convention is, however, “deeply indebted to the Enlightenment concept of the autonomous individual, its unique individuality, and its quest to find a place in society.”⁸ According to this tradition, an autobiography typically focuses on the author's whole life—retelling landmark events chronologically in time, with enough detail to be interesting and plausible. Moreover, the narrative is unified through the authority of the central protagonist and their (typically White and male) voice, speaking strongly in the first person. The plot is structured lucidly according to self-centered actions and descriptions of others that show mastery of one's rhetoric and coherence of ideology. The central subject articulates through one voice, one speaking I; their stories totalize a personal and world view.⁹ Confessions may also feature in such narratives, whether religious or secular in form.¹⁰ Lastly, the narrator is conscious of their place in history and can describe their importance within

7 Linde, *Life Stories*, 12. See also 16–19.

8 Depkat, “History,” 73.

9 Smith, “The Impact of Critical Theory on the Study of Autobiography,” 84–86.

10 Marcus, *Autobiography*, 9–24.

it.¹¹ These Western conventions are not universal, but they are strong normative underpinnings of the autobiographical genre.¹²

In contrast to the autobiographical literature of the Enlightenment and Romantic eras, critical studies of auto/biographies today focus on the multiplicity of diverse styles and topoi of “life-writing,” a more open concept widely used today in the fields of literature and cultural studies.¹³ Scholars investigate the distinct ways that authors perform and write expressions of the self—whether coherent and unified, composite and fluid, or even incoherent, divided, or fragmentary. The anchor of the androcentric self—unified and singular—may be split, decentered, and qualified. The self is conceived to be created and performed through autobiographical self-narration. Earlier autobiographic conventions, such as centering upon public success and evaluating or aggrandizing one’s place in history, have given way to different tones of introspection and questioning private/public boundaries.

One abundant source of innovation in this field has been women’s writings. Women do not write, as Virginia Woolf memorably put it, like men using the “essentialist” autobiographical ‘I,’ that Woolf describes as “honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding.”¹⁴ Sidonie Smith, in her extensive research on women’s autobiography and feminist theoretical perspectives, has interpreted the diverse narratives, poetics, and performativity of women’s writings. Relationality is one characteristic of this writing. Exploring the work of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, Smith interprets how these authors’ writing interweaves positions—times, persons, and things—to dispel a central protagonist and create “multiplicity of voices from the margins.”¹⁵ Women’s writing has also highlighted aspects of embodiment, privacy, and intimacy.¹⁶ In *Women’s Autobiography* (1980), Estelle C. Jelinek considers that women may, in contrast to men, pursue and expose in their writing “a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding.”¹⁷ Highlighting that women’s autobiographical writing troubles the central androcentric features of coherence, Sidonie Smith summarizes that for women, the “conception of individuality may not motivate the most informed

11 Misch, “Conception and Origin of Autobiography,” 16.

12 For an exploration of the intersection of anthropology and autobiography, see Okely and Callaway, *Anthropology and Autobiography*.

13 See Marcus, *Autobiography*, 1–8.

14 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 150. I cite Woolf’s punctuation in this edition rather than the version with the colon given in: Smith, “The Impact of Critical Theory on the Study of Autobiography,” 85.

15 Smith, “The Impact of Critical Theory on the Study of Autobiography,” 88.

16 Further examined in Smith and Watson, *Woman, Autobiography, Theory*.

17 Jelinek, *Women’s Autobiography*, 15.

reading of women's autobiographical texts."¹⁸ These matters of embodiment, intimacy, and relationality, as well as the interweaving of public aesthetic work and private bodily lives, even the borders of inside and outside the human body, will all be explored in the body-biographies that follow.

While the cutting edge of auto/biography studies today works to dispel earlier genre claims of male and female difference, these ideas are part of the conventions of storytelling from which dancer autobiographies may be interpreted.¹⁹ Building on critical feminist scholarship, from the early 1980s into the 1990s, more recent authors have destabilized and called into question the ideology of the essential self "that privileges individuality and separateness over connectedness."²⁰ Prior claims differentiating male and female writing have now themselves been overturned, in favor of more precise theoretical explorations of engendered acts of resistance and self-creation.²¹ What I wish to highlight from this short review is the manner in which life stories emerge in response to the normative conventions within the narrator's lifeworld. They reflect the shifting identities and norms of self-presentation that *change* over the course of narrators' lives and thus often expose these inherent societal *and* personal shifts. In this research, I sought to open a space for producing and interpreting dancers' life stories. I wished to create a platform that critically and creatively considered alternatives to androcentric autobiographical conventions. To this end, I aimed to host dialogues of mutual life review that permitted incoherences and aesthetic expressions—valuing the body and embodied aspects of the self that themselves have been disregarded and are difficult to narrate. Working with four narrators, I highlighted relationality in the research process and offered an alternative format of publishing dialogues rather than monologues.

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To round out this discussion, I would like to foreground a few further points regarding the troubles and credibility of autobiographical reflection—both written and as oral history. Firstly, the lexical authority granted to the written word does not mean that oral autobiographical testimony has less value for the scholar or is less credible. Autobiography scholar Rolf Haubl observes that in contrast to oral autobiographical sources, written sources allow the author greater control and scope for rationalization. Comparing the two, Haubl notes: "As the spontaneity diminishes, so do the logical breaks and grammatical inaccuracies that are typical

18 Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 12.

19 See the discussion in Smith and Watson, "Introduction," 8–16.

20 Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, 12.

21 See the discussion in Smith and Watson, "Introduction," 8–16.

of oral storytelling and often allow an insight into latent processes, strong emotions and unwelcome thoughts that are shooting off the page.”²² Because of this performative rawness, oral testimony may reveal dilemmas and contradictions among values when telling personal stories: For example, when stories reveal embarrassing, shameful, or contradictory themes that may discredit the image of the self that the narrator wishes to present. In such instances, a scholar may use this evidence of discontinuity itself to interpret the morals and values of a person’s lifeworld. Oral testimony may furthermore reveal signatures of vulnerable registers, when written control would lead to the erasure or omission of such testimony. Often these are present in the form of pauses, unanswered questions, and gaps in narrative. Oral historian Luisa Passerini has shown how: “silences and other ruptures point to aspects of experience not fully mediated by group interpretation of past events.”²³ Such gaps may meaningfully outline dreams, fears, disassociations, repression, submissions, censorship, etc.

Secondly, a frequent focus in autobiographical writing is narrating turning points and life transitions—we will discover this by example within the body-biographies that follow. Sociologist Norman Denzin describes these meaningful events as “epiphanies” that become strong narrative points for retelling the past retrospectively. In addition to positive revelations and opportunities, they may include the “sting” of painful memories, especially from childhood, in the form of lessons carried through one’s life.²⁴ Narrators may also focus on relating key turning points where life-changing decisions were made or events with irreversible consequences occurred. For dancers, these might take the form of artistic revelations. They may also include crises, migration, family-planning decisions, changes of employment status, injury, and other matters of health. Significant political events will also fall in this category. Turning points, epiphanies, and their narrations enable people to describe and rationalize the values behind the decisions that shape the course of their lives. These stories will often link past and present; narrators may even suggest alternative lifelines or decisions that might have been—for better or for worse. These are key moments for readers to learn about an individual’s major life themes and their socio-historical context. Many examples from the body-biographies will illustrate this further.

A final point of importance in auto/biography studies is credibility and truth. This has been a widely discussed topic in critical autobiography studies, particularly

22 Haubl, “Autobiographisches Erzählen,” 336. Translation by the author.

23 Smith, “Popular Memory and Oral Narratives,” 98 (reviewing Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism.”) On fragmentation and recursion, see Friedman, “Spiraling Desire,” 82–89.

24 Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 28.

regarding discernment of the relationship of autobiography to fiction.²⁵ The line between fact and fiction in autobiography is often clarified by the author's intent in naming their genre (i.e. as memoir, autobiography, life story, etc.). One of the most widely cited theories of autobiography is Philippe Lejeune's, involving his concept of the "autobiographical pact."²⁶ According to Lejeune, the author makes a commitment in autobiographical writing to tell the truth, a promise that sways how the reader interprets the story—as real, not fiction. While not legal, this moral commitment nonetheless influences how people read and appreciate autobiographies.²⁷

But is it true? Not only are autobiographies artful, but today we have a richer understanding of how retrospective memories themselves become complex narrative constructions, blending individual and collective recollections. Memories may be told truthfully, and yet not be true.²⁸ Oral historian Alessandro Portelli sums it up in *What Makes Oral History Different* (1981):

But what is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus, the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context.²⁹

Therefore, even when protagonists narrate with sincere intent, memories are fragile and creatively shaped in the present. Memory is subjective and must be interpreted through this understanding. Given current scholarly interest in the subjective aspects of meaning through life-narration, truth-telling evaluation may be backgrounded in scholarship favoring critical examination of *how* life stories are narrated.³⁰ To this end, Laura Marcus emphasizes that autobiography "asks of its

25 See, for example, Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," 27. Marcus, *Autobiography*, 110–122.

26 Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 3–30. This popular theory was developed and revised throughout his life, see the discussion in: Missinne, "Autobiographical Pact."

27 Missinne, "Autobiographical Pact," 24.

28 The expansive literature on memory studies is beyond my scope here. On memory, see Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 78–105; Nordera and Franco, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Memory*. See also, the website of the project "Mnemedance – Memory in Motion. Re-Membering Dance History," <https://phaidra.cab.unipd.it/o:449891>, last accessed November 21, 2024.

29 Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," 69.

30 For example, Charlotte Linde does not focus on facticity. See Linde, *Life Stories*, 14–15. See also Summerfield, "Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice."

readers that they be open to the complexities of truth.”³¹ I will end here with this invitation, and turn now to recent dance studies scholarship.

Auto_Bio_Graphy and Dance

In contrast to the auto/biography studies boom of the 1980s, dancers’ autobiographical materials have only recently received due scholarly attention.³² Outside of dance studies, reception was delayed by the prevailing logocentrism, as well as the first canon, which focused on men’s writing and professions.³³ The current boom within dance studies reflects the provocative manner in which interpreting dancers’ autobiographical sources develops epistemological and ontological debates on dance, discursivity, and method. It is also driven by experimental artworks choreographing reenactment, life review, and representations of dancers’ identity, some examples of which I will identify below.³⁴ This interplay between written and performative sources, as well as theory and practice, positively informs the field.

Of course, life-writing by dancers dates back much further, to memoirs by dance stars of the nineteenth century, such as the publications by Lola Montez (1851) and Margitta Roséri (1891).³⁵ Dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter, in her handbook article “Autobiography in/as Dance” (2018), highlights the complex performativity of dancers’ life narratives, which appear not only as written memoirs but also as dance solos in the modernist period. Brandstetter observes that these dance artists, entwining self-presentation and authorship, stage the dialogue of subjectivity, self-invention, and identity commonly reflected upon in written autobiography.³⁶ She also discerns that by the twenty-first century, these self-narratives in dance performance are increasingly intermedial and tension-ridden: revealing the limits

31 Marcus, *Autobiography*, 4.

32 In addition to work by my colleagues Christina Thurner, Nadja Rothenburger, and Julia Wehren and others cited in this section, further dance scholarship includes: Albright, “Auto-Body Stories”; Hardt, “Mit biographischen Quellen arbeiten”; Thoms, “Martha Graham’s Haunting Body”; Wortelkamp, “Namen und Geschichten.”

33 Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 16–20.

34 Providing in-depth analysis of artistic examples in Germany and Switzerland, see in particular Rothenburger, *Autochoreografie im Zeitgeschehen*. As three important indications of this within this broader literature, see: Franco, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment*; Ruprecht, “Tanzhistoriografie”; Wehren, *Körper als Archiv in Bewegung*. In Germany, this development is related to cultural funding from Tanzfondes Erbe for such projects (2011–2019). Ruprecht, “Tanzhistoriografie,” 369.

35 See Thurner’s list of references organized by author and chronologically. Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 227–34.

36 Brandstetter, “Autobiography in/as Dance.”

of self-knowledge and even the multiplicity of performing a self. As testament to this growing performative work, recent performances with autobiographical dimensions that linger in my memory include: Saša Asentić's *My Private Bio-Politics* (2007); Jérôme Bel's *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2005); William Forsythe's *You Made Me a Monster* (2005); *Becky, Jodi and John* (2007) by Becky Hilton, John Jasperse, and Jodi Melnik; Martin Nachbar's *Repeater – Dance Piece with Father* (2007); Xavier Le Roy's *Product of Circumstances* (1999); Meg Stuart's *Hunter* (2014); and Ann Liv Young's *Michael* (2005).³⁷

The dance studies project "Auto_Bio_Graphy as Performance. A Field of Dance Historiographic Innovation" (2020–2024) at the University of Bern Institute of Theatre Studies has brought new theoretical attention to dancers' autobiographical sources and their potential for dance historiography.³⁸ These materials span different mediums: Firstly, the genre of dancers' and choreographers' written autobiographies and memoirs. Secondly, autobiography in/as dance, choreography, and performance—including solo performances, choreographies for group ensembles, and installations that stage autobiographical documents, gestures, and narratives. Thirdly, autobiographical oral history interviews with dancers, a rapidly growing component of performance archives. Fourthly, sundry personal documents and archival sources, such as diaries, letters, photos, reviews, employment contracts, and videos; today this also includes digitally published manifestos and biographies now commonplace on dancers' websites. To promote consideration of these sources and their interpretation through a dance-studies-specific framework informed by autobiography research, Christina Thurner, Nadja Rothenburger, Julia Wehren, and I have named and promoted the extended concept of "Auto_Bio_Graphy." This expanded term embraces the interweaving discourses of dancers' self (*auto*) life (*bio*) descriptions (*graphy*), enabling review of how they interrelate and provide material for historical writing and analysis.³⁹

As part of my collaboration with these scholars at the University of Bern, we have published an extensive bibliography surveying sources of dancers' and choreographers' Auto_Bio_Graphy (focusing on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in English, German, and French). These provide a trove of dancers' self-narratives, dance experiences, and personal testimony of historical

37 For further examples, see Brandstetter, "Autobiography in/as Dance"; Friedman, "Oral History a Go-Go"; Friedman, "Fractious Action"; Rothenburger, *Autochoreografie im Zeitgeschehen*; Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 79–93.

38 Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation under the direction of Christina Thurner. See also <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/192436>, last accessed November 21, 2024.

39 Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 23; Hilari et al., "Auto_Bio_Graphical Urgencies. Vier Tanzwissenschaftliche Perspektiven."

events.⁴⁰ To develop their reception in dance studies, our scholarship has honed modes of interpretation of these sources that render their subjective and aesthetic components fruitful, rather than dismissing these aspects as inutile fictions or, conversely, reproducing eyewitness remarks uncritically. Secondly, we have encouraged field-specific dialogue on the discursive practice of dance historiography itself, exploring the cutting edge and experimental ways that history has been produced, organized, and inscribed; these contribute to scholars' heightened discussion of dance as a research focus.⁴¹

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This book proactively produces in-depth traces of dancing lives and bodies, recognizing how dance studies scholarship has been limited by how little remains. This attention to the ephemerality of the moving, performing body and the challenge it poses to interpretation and traditional archives marks the formation of dance studies discourse.⁴² Prior to the digitization boom of the 1990s, the majority of dancers' lives left little more than a scatter of textual and image fragments in newspapers and magazines, compared to ample volumes of materials and secondary literature on ballet "big names" and prominent choreographers.⁴³ What remained was also based on the Western canon and its biases. Dance historians writing in the twenty-first century have advanced a new research paradigm, strongly criticizing prior ethnocentric attempts at "World History" and overturning genius-adoring, balletomane writing.⁴⁴ Theoretical developments in feminism and gender studies, postcolonial studies, and area studies began to redress neglect of non-Western and subaltern forms of dance, challenging prior histories that limited their view to Western "high art."⁴⁵ Carefully addressing problems of source selection

40 Castillo et al., "Auto_Bio_Grafie als Performance. Bibliografie zu Autobiografie im Tanz/in der Tanzgeschichte." See <https://boris-portal.unibe.ch/handle/20.500.12422/44522>, last accessed November 21, 2024.

41 This is summarized eloquently in Lucia Ruprecht's recent handbook article on dance historiography. Ruprecht, "Tanzhistoriografie."

42 Examples include: Giersdorf, "Dance Studies in the International Academy: Genealogy of a Disciplinary Formation"; Phelan, *Unmarked*; Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*; Schneider, "Performance Remains"; Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*; Wehren, *Körper als Archiv in Bewegung*.

43 Carter, "Destabilizing the Discipline," 120. See also, Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 144.

44 Sachs, *World History of the Dance*; Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris*; Kirstein, *The Book of the Dance*. For an overview, with valuable critique of Sachs, see Ruprecht, "Tanzhistoriografie," 366–69.

45 Bales and Eliot, *Dance on Its Own Terms*; Nordera and Franco, *Dance Discourses*; Giersdorf and Wong, *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*; Nicholas and Morris, *Rethinking Dance History*.

and limitation, theoretical framing, models of time, and scholarly authority/self-reflexivity, these new histories are written with closer regard to the testimonies and practices of the dance artists that they focus on.⁴⁶ To this end, Timmy De Laet has called for new collaborative methods for studying the recent past, working together with artists who are reenacting performance practices.⁴⁷ As one example of these types of collaboration, oral history collection has expanded dance archival holdings, while also broadening from audio tapes of interviews to video recordings in the last decade.⁴⁸ My work docks into these precedents.

Dance autobiographical sources may be legitimately contested for their veracity and authorship, as in the case of Victoria Phillips' concern for Martha Graham's posthumously published *Blood Memory*, which was developed from Graham's diary.⁴⁹ Yet dance scholar June Layson has argued that such sources, when evaluated critically, nonetheless provide "valuable primary source material for what is revealed about authors, their personal relationships, their perceptions and views about the particular events in which they were involved and the prevailing climates of opinion within which they worked."⁵⁰ Dancers' autobiographies offer insider accounts of the phenomenological experience of dance and choreography. They may yield insights into economic aspects of the profession, including memories of the daily business of dance production and rehearsal. They reference societal values and expectations, defining how dancing may address or resist these norms—of gender, class, or other modes of social performance. They provide historians with a feeling for the past, especially understanding of the emotional and moral factors that guided dancers through decisions, difficulties, and turning points. Last but certainly not least, as dance historians Susan Foster and Karen Eliot have proposed, the historian's

46 Carter, "Destabilizing the Discipline"; Carter, "Reshaping Dance Through Time." Highlighting transnationalism, see also Manning, "Dance History," 314–21.

47 De Laet, "(Re)Making Dance History Together."

48 Examples include the growing Oral History Collection of the Swiss Archive of the Performing Arts, the substantial collection of the New York Public Library's Dance Oral History Project, the "Legacy" project founded by scholar Jeff Friedman at the California Museum of Performance and Design, and the digitally archived project "An Oral History of Hong Kong Dance (1950s–1970s)." For online references and a broader overview, see Wehren, "Oral History"; Wehren, *Oral Dance History*.

49 "The recovery of the book's history demonstrates that self-interested parties—perhaps not always with her intentions in mind—sanitized her elliptical poetic descriptions, excluded people (and even her desired insertions), and embellished others." Phillips, "Martha Graham's Gilded Cage," 65.

50 Layson, "Dance History Source Materials," 25.

empathetic embodied analysis of these narratives may reveal the dancer's body as the material from which dance was created and made.⁵¹

One such study, Karen Eliot's *Dancing Lives: Five Female Dancers from the Ballet d'Action to Merce Cunningham* (2007), envisions "embodied history" by developing a biographical approach to dance historiography. In contrast to history writing stratified by epoch, period, region, or dance genre, Eliot's feminist writing focuses on the lives of five female protagonists; she considers especially their roles as woman, exploring the ideological tensions they faced as female dancers, mothers, and wives in their diverse historical and cultural worlds. Interweaving analysis of primary and secondary sources—including autobiographical writings, diaries, and, when available, oral history interviews—as well her own embodied "intuition" and "empathy" as a former dancer—Eliot crisscrosses historical time and space to reconstruct and interpret these artists' dance practices and subjectivity.⁵² She describes looking at history not in the macro, but with a fine grained "microscope."⁵³ Her remapping of history along personal lifelines, exploring the textures of embodied lives while remaining attentive to the macro structures of history, is one model for biographical historiography. Working with dance elders, in my research I explore how to collaborate with living dancers to represent their biographical past on this micro scale: as Eliot writes, "dance history as it has been created on, in, and through their [the dancers'] bodies."⁵⁴ Eliot's concept of "embodied history" will be a throughline of this book, carefully considering bodies as materials, as well as expressive and social registers, giving meaning to dancing lives.

In this way, the dance autobiography genre is enabling dance scholars to reflect on a broader range of historical voices and to expand the variety of positionalities given prominence in their field. Yet the voices uncovered are still far from comprehensively reflecting the many people who become dancers and the roles that they have fulfilled in society. Dance historian Alexandra Carter has underscored how visibility and power shape our understanding of dance worlds, leaving many contributors disregarded:

We know about the big names, and we will probably never know the actual small names, but we can be alert to the notion that the dance event is produced not only by individual creative artists but by unacknowledged armies of dancers,

51 Though Susan Foster's writing at large brings the body of the dance historian to the fore, to my knowledge she does not address auto/biographical materials specifically. See in particular: Foster, "Choreographing History." See also Eliot, *Dancing Lives*.

52 Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 6.

53 Eliot, 2.

54 Eliot, 6.

walk-ons, administrators, scene builders and movers, front-of-house, publicity and marketing people and so on.⁵⁵

Adding to Carter's list: Voices still missing in the genre of written memoirs and autobiographies include low level corps de ballet dancers, freelance dancer-choreographers, dancers working within styles and networks outside of Western stage dance, dance elders, as well as dancers in positions such as rehearsal director or teacher. Despite these many gaps, there are enough examples of dancer autobiographies and memoirs by the twenty-first century that one may consider this discourse to be a professional genre of life-writing.⁵⁶

There is no shortage of new voices being published: from Misty Copeland's *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina* (2014), to Mark Morris's *Out Loud: A Memoir* (2019), and Ellen O'Connell *What You Become in Flight* (2020). These recent memoirs tell narratives of dancing resolutely in the face of racism, sexism, and homophobia, and even, in the case of O'Connell, achieving empowerment by leaving dance altogether.⁵⁷ As both Thurner and Eliot have shown, gender performance plays a strong role in dancers' life-writing, as they empower themselves through the written word and expose the tensions between gendered societal roles, aesthetic experiences, and their private lives. Specifically, Thurner illustrates how gender plays a special role in the autobiography of female dancers *because* the art of dance has been considered a female art of dance since the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ The body-biographies here will also be revealing of gender ideologies—unveiling how traditional binary gender roles as well as the twentieth century association of dance with femininity and queerness impacted my protagonists' perception of the profession. My need to add another form of biography to this flourishing discourse stems from a desire to deepen the self-reflexive and body-reflexive character of autobiographical analysis—something I aimed to achieve by involving my body in my research, thinking across multiple autobiographies as body-biographies.

My research on body-biographies will spiral more deeply into these debates all the way from the individual introductions to these life histories to my conclusions. Partly this is because of the role that examples play in my research. The nature of my work problematized the scale of dance-historical research by focusing microscopically on a small number of dancers' lives, concentrating on little-known rather than canonical figures. Rather than using these microhistories for the

55 Carter, "Destabilizing the Discipline," 120. See also, Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 144.

56 Even, as Thurner argues, in cases such as Balanchine dancers, an interwoven paratext. Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 279–308.

57 Copeland, *Life in Motion*; Morris and Stace, *Out Loud*; O'Connell Whittet, *What You Become in Flight*.

58 Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 223–42.

purpose of generalization about the macro, they are intended as a much-needed form of historical supplement: exploring the communities of practice in which dance transmissions take place.⁵⁹ Body-biographies articulate the mobilities of dancers: across times and regions, paying heed to the very fine-grained materiality of individual bodies. My closeness to the protagonists, based on our teacher-student relationships, made the fine-scale and autobiographical aspects of the historian's body and life-narratives more accessible as sources of embodied history. This very personal, intimate approach is part of the growing plurality of methods within dance studies and demonstrates the theoretical potential of collaboratively working with living artists to develop dance history projects together.⁶⁰

Dance Oral History

"The *source* is alive" writes Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* (1995). Citing Trouillot, dance oral history scholar Jeff Friedman draws attention to the gaping holes in history where *live bodily experiences* have decayed, been disregarded, or omitted.⁶¹ Decentering the dusty, inanimate document as a source of history, Friedman has in the last decades promoted oral history as an elaborate processes of kinesthetic dialogue capable of "recuperating" the body.⁶² His research has drawn attention to oral storytelling as a method that fluidly interweaves dance and performance and triangulates with textual artifacts. In addition, Friedman has argued that the shortage of self-reflexive accounts of the past—describing embodied, kinesthetic sensations, movements, and feelings as well as descriptions of one's own and others' bodies—reflects the strongly internalized Western dualism of mind and body, as well as the dominance of visuality over the other sense modalities.⁶³ Following Friedman, I envision a dance studies scholarship that works with sensitive authority to unsettle academic conventions of disembodied writing, seeking instead to develop embodied inquiry through life-story research.

As a dancer myself, I presume that dancers live kinesthetically vibrant lives—lives that involve inward and outward reflection on their and others' dancing bodies, as well as bodies in the activities of daily life. In my prior research, I have questioned how dancers' lived experiences and embodied knowledge are

59 The term "microhistories," varies in meaning. Microhistories may be written about well-known figures, or little-known persons living in small towns or communities. For an illuminating discussion, see Peltonen, "What Is Micro in Microhistory?"

60 See De Laet, "(Re)Making Dance History Together"; Ruprecht, "Tanzhistoriografie," 369; Turner, "Time Layers, Time Leaps, Time Loss."

61 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 29 (emphasis in the original). Cited in: Friedman, "Oral History a Go-Go," 171.

62 Friedman, 171. See also Williams and Bendelow, *The Lived Body*, 1–8.

63 See, for example, Friedman, 170.

encountered by dance scholars and inscribed in language. Seeking to enrich the sources and practices that scholars may examine to write about dance, I have largely focused on the powers of ethnography to do this.⁶⁴ For this body-biography project I turned to new terrain, asking how life story interviews and published life-writing might further provide access to these embodied memories and worlds, when they are thought of as sources that are “alive”—i.e. embodied, creative, and in process.

When dancers are learning to dance and rehearse for public encounters with an audience, they engage in rich dialogues that seamlessly interweave exchanges of movement, touch, and language. In her essay “Écouter les mouvements de la mémoire de l'autre,” (Listening to the movements of another's memory) (2023), dance oral history scholar Julia Wehren describes the significance of these practices for the oral history interview. Observing the close physical proximity of interviewer and interviewee, as well as the liveness of discovery palpable in an interview dialogue, Wehren discusses how the interview will “echo” the physical transmissions of dance practice; therefore, she argues “the dimension of bodily perception and sensory experience must be taken into account as an essential component of the whole process of an oral history interview.”⁶⁵ Not only do dancers' oral history narratives suggest ways of sensing the compositional elements of their aesthetic practices—rhythm, harmony in space and time, contrast, and affects—but the oral history interview itself as a dialogue will trace intersubjective aspects—shared presence, shifting attention, even the lead and follow of duet dancing.⁶⁶ Moreover, the interviewer may, through showing respect and listening empathetically, infuse historical reflection with these relational qualities.

With the proliferation of digital recording techniques and the spread of oral history culture, dance communities, choreographic centers, and dance scholars are attracted to the possibility of recording interviews—in audio or video—as a way of enlivening history, as a dialogue between persons and between past and present. Consequently, dance oral history projects and scholarship are undergoing steady expansion.⁶⁷ As performing arts institutions acquire competence in oral history archiving, these history collections will richly transform the field of dance studies and dance education—offering dancers and dance scholars new representations

64 Waterhouse, *Processing Choreography*, 28–29. Hilari et al., “Auto_Bio_Graphical Urgencies,” 490–93.

65 Wehren, “Écouter les mouvements de la mémoire de l'autre,” 4. Translation by the author.

66 Wulff, “Instances of Inspiration,” 167.

67 For an overview, see Wehren, “Oral History”; Wehren, *Oral Dance History*. Examples influencing my reading here, in addition to the previously cited works by Jeff Friedman, include: Anderson, *A Dancing Paradox*; Anderson, “Dance Overview of the Australian Performing Arts Collection”; Bräuninger, “The Oral Archive as a Form of Dance Archive”; Chernetich, “Orality at Work in the Body-Archive”; Young and Zabriskie, *Black Theater Is Black Life*; Wong et al., *The Unspoken Dance*.

of history to study.⁶⁸ Like first person autobiographic writing, first person oral testimony is accessible and inviting, especially for pedagogical purposes such as classroom discussions or introducing students to perspectives they may never have encountered before.⁶⁹

Dance oral history also holds theoretical potential. Oral history as a discipline has explicitly focused on expanding the persons whose lives are considered in history, under the adage of “giving voice” to underrepresented or marginalized persons; as Wehren observes, by foregrounding new voices, these “micro-histories expand the grand narrative, while forcing us to question it.”⁷⁰ Contrary to objective interview survey techniques in which the interviewer aims to ask standardized questions to a large sample, most oral historians today understand their work as *collaborating* on historical narration.⁷¹ Interviews are recognized to interweave verbal and nonverbal conversations—as in Jeff Friedman’s pioneering oral history interviews, during which he danced with his interlocutors, closely observing their body language. Through these processes, Friedman has shown how a discerning dance scholar may discover common metaphors, lying between narrative strategies and kinesthetic experiences.⁷²

The interview may be the final stage of the process; alternatively, a published transcript, a written oral history, or even a performance may result. Friedman has also used the creative registers of choreography to develop a kinesthetic review of history and diverse modes of publication: “oral history for/as/in performance.”⁷³ In interweaving oral, dance, and written components of life story research, my scholarship picks up on these important precedents. I clarify how oral history and life story research overlap in the next section, introducing debates in these fields and specifying their impact on my project of body-biography.

68 De Laet, “Expanding Dance Archives.”

69 Mary Luise Pratt rightly and critically situates such curricular claims within American discourses, where autobiography’s role serves “as an expressive vehicle both of individualism and an egalitarian notion of the subject.” See Pratt, “‘I, Rigoberta Menchú’ and the ‘Culture Wars,’” 39–40, here p. 39.

70 Wehren, “Écouter les mouvements de la mémoire de l’autre,” 5. Translation by the author.

71 Many authors have substantiated this. See, for example: Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 24–25; Portelli, “A Dialogical Relationship”; Wehren, “Écouter les mouvements de la mémoire de l’autre.”

72 Friedman, “Spiraling Desire.”

73 Friedman, “Oral History a Go-Go.”

Life Story Research

This section addresses the broader interdisciplinary frameworks of life story research—circling back to the writing of sociolinguist Charlotte Linde that was referenced at the start of this chapter. In contrast to *written* memoirs and autobiographies produced by the author themselves, life stories are designated by their production in *oral* conversation—including through guided autobiographical storytelling, i.e. interviews with the researcher. Scholar Robert Atkinson, in his key text *The Life Story Interview* (1998), defines the life story as follows:

A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another.⁷⁴

The researcher actively elicits, ethically participates, and after the interview has concluded, becomes a custodian who makes the life story audible (through recording) or visible, in the form of a transcript or theoretical analysis. Scholars today are highly reflective and conscientious, not apprehensive of these entanglements.

Life story research highlights the constitutive power of narration, as a poetic and political act of meaning-making and the production of self-knowledge. Life stories do not merely give rich portraits of one person, these scholars argue. Rather, they manifest cultural values, such as an individual's understanding of their identity, their social position, and the events that have made them who they are. A life story will also commonly account for how one's life fits into larger frameworks, such as history and for many people, spiritual orders. Cognizant of this, psychologists, sociologists, folklorists, anthropologists, oral historians, and linguists have taken to this qualitative methodology: relying on interviews as a method to listen and record life story testimony.⁷⁵

While recognizing that life stories are culturally prescribed, Charlotte Linde views them in everyday terms as narratives exploring “what events have made me what I am,” and “what you must know about me to know me.”⁷⁶ She describes life stories as the circulating tales that individuals use to reflect and to make themselves intelligible to others. There is a script-like and acted quality to these rehearsed and accumulated stories of the self, in which fragile memories may also be stretched

74 Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*, 8. (emphasis in the original)

75 Plummer, “The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research,” 398. Atkinson, “The Life Story Interview as a Mutually Equitable Relationship.” For an overview of foundational literature, see Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*, 3–7.

76 Linde, *Life Stories*, 20.

and embellished. Narrators exaggerate to tell a good story, or to conceal painful or discrediting experiences. To differentiate life stories from other narratives, Linde emphasizes that their focus is on oneself (rather than others, history, or the world); to distinguish them from general reports of daily events, she highlights their repeatability in multiple social contexts. Linde underscores the plurality, complexity, and performativity of life stories in her definition: “A life story consists of all the stories and associated discourse units, such as explanations and chronicles, and the connections between them, told by an individual during the course of his/her lifetime.”⁷⁷ Accordingly, I conceive my body-biography inquiry with dancers as exploring this collection of shifting self- and body-narrations, studied through longstanding multi-year research using various methods (interviews, participant observation of dancing, cooperative life-writing, narrative analysis, and movement analysis).

Linde’s research in sociolinguistics has explored the forms and social strategies with which people articulate their life stories and negotiate their coherence—the nuance of sentence building, the structures of turn-taking, and the organizations of narratives. She has emphasized that life stories can be studied as speech units of varying size. While improvised in conversation, these structures have been strung together, practiced, edited, and performed on previous autobiographical occasions with diverse interlocutors. Life stories may be studied in real-world conversational environments, as recorded speech, or elicited by the researcher in formal interviews—such as those on professions that are interpreted in Linde’s study and those on the dancing body that I explore here. Linde focuses on conversation and talk, not written forms of autobiographical testimony, nor hybrid forms as I do here. Linde, drawing on Foucault, emphasizes that life stories are subject to power structures and should be studied historically and as interweaving sites of discourse articulation. Though embodied aspects of these articulations are beyond the scope of her study, my inquiry into body-biographies brings these dimensions into the foreground.⁷⁸

Pivotal Case Studies: *Testimonio* Literature

Influenced by debates about representation and research ethics, life story scholars in oral history and anthropology have become increasingly reflexive about their roles in selecting and producing these narratives of others, transforming oral testimony into archival holdings and print accounts. The ethical and political dimensions of

77 Linde, 21.

78 Linde, as a linguist, limits her discussion to discourses as speech events, and does not, like Foucault, extend the term discourse to actions without linguistic units, such as Foucault’s example of public executions. Linde, 223–24.

life stories, as well as their theoretical value, are shaped through these actions. I shall consider two examples briefly here, both from the testimonio literature. Though located in different cultural debates than my dancer life story research, these examples introduce the central discussions of research design and interpretation of life stories. Above all, they involve matters of authorship and ethics, stemming from the fact that the scholar must translate and refine the interview dialogue into a written and published text; these examples also raise the question of how narrative interpretation may be enriched, by adding the researcher's self-reflexive writing on methodology, place, embodiment—and other relevant theoretical issues. To state the key questions directly: While respecting our narrators' voices, how do we participate ethically in shaping them for broader public? How do we preserve their "authentic" testimony, while intensively reflecting on the constructed nature of the interview itself? I provide two examples to explore this.

One of the most well-known and controversial examples, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984), presents the life story of an indigenous Guatemalan human right activist. This testimonio describes Mayan traditions and Menchú's eye-witness accounts of violence against indigenous persons. Produced through interviews with anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Dubray in 1982, the book is listed under Menchú's authorship with Burgos-Dubray as the editor and Ann Wight as the translator of the English edition.⁷⁹ The manner in which Menchú's life story interwove personal testimony and collective memories triggered scathing public criticism.⁸⁰ Had Menchú fabricated her life story for political purposes? Had Burgos-Dubray unconsciously facilitated or deliberately staged this fiction? Or rather, as Leigh Gilmore examined decades later, was Menchú's life story not fiction at all, but a subtle form of "jurisdiction," owning cultural memory through life-narration?⁸¹ This example raises valuable points for dance studies: Firstly, it canvasses the methodological challenges and ethical issues involved in publishing life stories, in which a private interview conversation is manufactured into a public narrative; secondly, it highlights the importance of contextualizing introductions and fact-checking; thirdly, it demonstrates the challenge involved in cross-cultural narration of a subject for an assumed Western audience, or more broadly said, narrating an "other" to a public.

Another significant example for my research, again from outside dance studies, is Daniel James' *Doña María's Story* (2000). Here, in contrast to Burgos-Dubray, James constructs a highly reflexive and relational text, representing his interview

79 Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

80 See Arias, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*.

81 Gilmore, "Jurisdictions." I leave the nuances of these debates to scholars with a specialty in Latin American Studies and a local understanding of Guatemala's history. Aceituro, "Arturo Taracena Breaks His Silence"; Arias, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*.

partner's life review under the anthropologist's authorial signature—the model that I take here for *Body-Biographies*. James' book has two parts. The first section presents the edited first-person testimony of Doña María Roldán—an Argentinian meatpacking laborer, militant union activist, and Labor Party member—translated and condensed from interviews. Shaping a way of reading this testimony, James notes in a preface that Roldán's "unique voice carries within it tones and lyrics imbued with the sharp outlines and the fading traces of the cultural, ideological, and moral context that Berisso bequeathed to her."⁸² In dialogue with Roldán's storytelling, the second part of the book comprises four reflexive essays written from James' scholarly perspective. These immensely thoughtful chapters position the transcript's production and historical value for understanding working-class labor and political mobilization under Peronism. James' writing combines meditation on the secrets and disclosures of his narrator, their composition, and the limits of his comprehension in the face of resistant testimonio.⁸³ Situating his embodied listening as an interviewer in the context of the cold homes of his interlocuters in the city of Berisso and the changing scholarship of anthropology of Latin American studies and testimonio, James produces a complex and self-reflexive scholarly text, negotiating the limits of memory and cross-cultural understanding.

These two examples illustrate developments in life story research since the 1990s, as it has responded to the decentering tremors of postmodernism, postcolonialism, gender theories, and critical theory, and subsequently developed forms for reflexive life stories and explorative writing strategies. In his review, "The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research" (2001), Ken Plummer highlights the genre's increasingly "reflexive and recursive" texts—the direction exemplified by James' aforementioned writing, and which I also take here.⁸⁴ Today, published life stories may blur the genres of biography and autobiography, typically through collaboration between a narrator and a scholar who begin with life story interviews, and then transform those materials into written text. The final text form may also interweave genres of ethnography, sociology/anthropology, and even fiction. Writing may also crisscross cultural analysis with reference to the scholar's life (or scholars' lives), as in the genre of autoethnography—for instance, in the works of Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, and Tony Adams.⁸⁵ These developments are still fraught with debates on the criteria for evaluating self-reflexive writing, and the problems with structuring analytic

82 James, *Doña María's Story*, 31.

83 See, for example, James, 140–41.

84 Plummer, "The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research," 398. (emphasis in the original)

85 Bochner and Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography*; Ellis and Bochner, *Composing Ethnography*.

writing within or around more poetic or creative writing techniques. Furthermore, discussions of authorship and ethics mean this is still an exploratory terrain.⁸⁶

Sensitive to these difficulties, in the subsequent Chapter I will rethink these theoretical challenges while reflecting on my methodology. Further discussion of debates in life story and oral history research in the following section lay the groundwork for this appraisal of method.

Debates in Life Story and Oral History Research

“Skeptics might reasonably ask: At a moment when the autobiographical voice is so highly commodified—most visibly in the talk shows of Oprah and Geraldo Rivera—shouldn’t scholars write against the grain of this personalizing of culture, rather than reproduce it?”⁸⁷ While, according to sociologist Robert Miller, autobiographical and biographical sources are increasingly recognized as valuable for fine-grain readings of history and culture, especially for looking at longitudinal change, they are still often met with criticism, even when applied in the correct contexts.⁸⁸ This was illustrated in the last section through the example of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The scholarly value of life story testimony for dance studies hinges on these wider debates regarding first-person biographical testimony as a source for historical and cultural study—or in my case for the study of dance. Critically responding to these is my focus in this section, in which I look across disciplines.

The main arguments against the legitimacy of autobiography research as sources for historical or cultural study foreground concerns that people lie, exaggerate, and self-aggrandize, so their stories cannot be trusted as credible sources. Anthropologist Franz Boas distrusted life histories for these reasons.⁸⁹ Similarly resistant, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined his reflexive approach as “anti-autobiography,” seeking instead critical reflection on the researcher’s habitus and stringent objectification of ethnographic data and encounters.⁹⁰ As mentioned previously, even when narrators were not deliberately lying, the subjective aspects of recalling memories and telling stories have been stumbling blocks for researchers working with life stories as data within positivistic frameworks in the social sciences.

This concern for the accuracy and facticity of first-person testimony remains legitimate. My protagonists in *Body-Biographies* wished for their life stories to

86 Providing valuable critique, see for example Hermer, “The Personal as Primary Focus.” Winkler, “Doing Autoethnography.”

87 Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 25.

88 Miller, *Researching Life Stories and Family Histories*, 21–40.

89 Peacock and Holland, “The Narrated Self,” 367.

90 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 213. Cf. Reed-Danahay, “Bourdieu and Critical Autoethnography,” 147.

be perceived as sincere and truthful dialogues on the past and the present, giving subjective accounts of lived history—not fictional and self-aggrandizing mythologies. To support this, I therefore fact-checked the names of artists, titles of artworks, and dates of key events in their narratives, and under the protagonists' supervision, edited these facts into their chapters. Evidence of further archival triangulation is found in my footnotes. Where there were ambiguities between dance history sources and the testimony of my interlocutors—i.e. when other credible sources or persons reported differently about the events they had described—I brought this to their attention. Here, rather than changing their stories, I made these ambiguities explicit through the footnotes, as has been advised for best practices in oral history.⁹¹

Beyond their factual content, academic debates around the value of autobiography—in short, its legitimacy as a source for scholarly study—have also turned around the matter of the researcher's reflexivity and their recognition of what a "life story" is epistemologically. This has been debated in terms of the "portal" vs. the "process" models to life story research.⁹² According to anthropologists James Peacock and Dorothy Holland, in the "portal" approach to life story studies, the life story is elicited by the researcher as a gateway to see and reconstruct events in cultural history. In this model "the life history is regarded as a trace of some external reality that is more important than the story itself."⁹³ This has been the approach of realist anthropologists, like Boaz, who used social survey techniques to gain access to data on cultural events. Accuracy and impartiality were deemed important to acquire objectively good and representative data. In contrast to these objectivity-seeking methods, in subjective approaches, the life story was used as a window onto the narrator's psyche and subjective experience. Drawing upon psychology and psychoanalysis, researchers working with this approach considered the life story to illustrate the psychological reality of its protagonist, which in turn was viewed as a mirror of culture.

The metaphors of life stories as "portals" onto events in cultural history, and "mirrors" of culture may still be productive categories for interpreting life stories today. However, from the perspective of recent life story research informed by cultural anthropology, earlier explorations are viewed as insufficiently reflexive about the processes through which life histories are produced, mediated, and theoretically interpreted. As anthropologists shifted from gathering life histories according to positivist assumptions, to analyzing life stories as complex story-telling processes, more reflexive research methods were developed, subsequently followed by experimental modes of publication. In this "process" model of life

91 See Shopes, "After the Interview Ends"; Shopes, "Editing Oral History for Publication."

92 Peacock and Holland, "The Narrated Self." Cf. Linde, *Life Stories*, 48.

93 Peacock and Holland, "The Narrated Self," 368.

stories, the researcher viewed the narrative fabrication of a “self” and “life” as a construction that could be explored theoretically—constituted by both the narrator *and* the scholar. In sum, according to Ken Plummer, by the twenty-first century, scholars are working at a meta-level: “less concerned with what the story tells us than with understanding the processes through which the life is composed, constructed, and created.”⁹⁴ Case studies enabling probing of the “social sources of constructing lives,” ask “from what bricolages and fragments does a person come to assemble their stories?”⁹⁵ These are very relevant questions for dancers’ life stories, which I will take up in subsequent chapters.

Overall, when we consider the interrelated debates in oral history and life story research, we find similar developments. In her essay on “Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice” (2016), oral historian Penny Summerfield discusses shifting ideas about oral history production that, since the 1970s, have paralleled the anthropological debates discussed here. Summerfield summarizes: “Oral history today is less a quest for objective eye-witness accounts in which the narrator provides the historian with data for interpretation, and more a means to engage with experience, subjectivity, and historical imagination.”⁹⁶ This parallels sociologists Svend Brinkmann and Steiner Kvale’s discussions of interview research; using rich metaphors, they differentiate between research that is like “mining” for data, (i.e. gathering information), and research that is like “traveling,” (i.e. producing knowledge through active inquiry).⁹⁷ They summarize:

The data-mining conception of interviewing is close to the mainstream of modern social sciences where knowledge is already there, waiting to be found, whereas the traveler conception is nearer to anthropology and a postmodern comprehension of knowledge as socially constructed.⁹⁸

As these metaphors clarify, the study of culture and history have become attuned to the subjective positionality of the researcher and the ethics of researching not only “about” but also “with” one’s interlocuters. This extends such work from fieldwork and interviews into the poetics and politics of *Writing Culture* (1986), as one seminal anthropological text marking a turn in these matters puts it.⁹⁹ While anthropologists and oral historians are still concerned with theoretical rigor and debating objectivity on the part of the researcher, today great attention is also being paid to reflexivity and research ethics. My research on body-biography draws

94 Plummer, “The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research,” 399.

95 Plummer, 399.

96 Summerfield, “Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice,” 1.

97 Brinkmann and Kvale, *Doing Interviews*, 18–22.

98 Brinkmann and Kvale, 20.

99 Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*.

upon these important precedents and reconsiders them in the framework of dance studies.

Each paradigm of life story research points to its intention: whether to interpret history, culture, or dance as I do here. Cultural studies tend to look across space by means of traveling, whereas history looks back in time. Dance scholars may do either of these, or as I do here, look across the geographic times and places of embodied transmissions. The various scales and shapes of dance studies, as described by historian Alexandra Carter, are becoming increasingly investigative, experimental, and nonlinear.¹⁰⁰ Christina Thurner has also forecast new models of time in dance historiography, imagining time layers, discontinuous leaps, and creative gaps.¹⁰¹ The opportunity to explore lifelines as a source of history is one potential of body-biography, providing new scales and shapes of experiential time.

For the sake of discussion, my writing in this section has highlighted two contrasting paradigms: of the life story as a *portal* to study of culture and history, vs. the life story as a *process* to study narrations of the self, reflecting the mobility of its cultural and historical protagonist and their relationship with the researcher. I have highlighted that the former denotes more objectivity on the part of the researcher, and the latter greater reflexivity, interpretation, and attention to ethics. Part of this reflexivity might even warrant inspection about the extent to which historical narrative (as well as cultural understanding and aesthetic experience) can be reconstructed at all, including the difficulties of reconstructing memories.¹⁰² I recommend that the reader's close inspection of life stories be accompanied by triangulation with other sources of history, in dialogue with the interpretive framework I have outlined in the introductory texts and footnotes.¹⁰³ I view myself as a scholar-facilitator, sharing authority in dialogue with my interlocutors. Interweaving the present time and the past, the research partner and the narrator, life story research may be both evocative and rigorous.

Life Review: Training, Aging, and Injury

The age of the protagonists foregrounded in *Body-Biographies* is also significant. To introduce my narrators again: Christine Kono, born in California in 1946, is at the time of writing seventy-eight years young. Marcus Schulkind, born in 1948 in New York, is seventy-seven. Hilary Cartwright, born in Leamington Spa in the United Kingdom in 1943, is eighty-two. Chris Lechner, born in 1963 in Myanmar, is sixty-

100 Carter, "Reshaping Dance Through Time."

101 Thurner, "Time Layers, Time Leaps, Time Loss."

102 Summerfield, "Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice," 5.

103 I elaborate upon this in Chapter 2, in the section "Making This Book," 78–87.

two. While these artists rarely described themselves to me as “old,” they were all going through processes of life review. Hilary Cartwright had been asked to give interviews by multiple people, including one reflecting on her life as a teacher as an honoree for the 2023 Dance Teacher Award.¹⁰⁴ In 2024, Marcus Schulkind made a performance with three solos as a form of retrospective in Boston. Christine Kono was exploring self-discovery since her cancer’s remission and questioning the new place dance would hold in her life. Lechner celebrated his sixtieth birthday during the research process; in the last two years, I witnessed him restructuring his teaching to focus more on his practice of Fascial Yoga, including a new description of his life and work on his personal website. These personal acts of self-reflection infused my research with substance for dialogue.

Oral historian Penny Summerfield describes “life review” as: “looking back questioningly to evaluate a life as it was lived; comparisons of the self with other individuals or of the younger with the older self; and the search for self-affirmation.”¹⁰⁵ After his interview with me, Marcus Schulkind summed this up in his own words. He said we should discuss, “*what* we are doing [today], *how* we do it, and how I look at what we are doing *now* as a seventy-five-year-old person, how I looked upon it as a younger person, and . . . what are the important things now the younger people know? It is phenomenal how much change has occurred, honestly.”¹⁰⁶

I was not prepared for how deeply emotional this life review process would be, one that brought me closer to my interview partners and also gave me greater self-understanding. Interviewers should be mindful of this: both the emotional care involved, as well as the possibility of receiving back very personal, meaningful insights.¹⁰⁷ While making this research, I was “middle aged,” another phase of life where life review is known to be important.¹⁰⁸ Writing now at the age of forty-five, I am confronted by the norm that dancers cannot sustain professional labor as performers after forty; on the other hand, ensembles such as Dance On from Germany challenge this assumption, creating new visibility around the value of dancing throughout life.¹⁰⁹ Many dancers continue their self-growth and exploration throughout their lives, changing roles within and beside the dance profession: from dancer, to choreographer, teacher, rehearsal assistant, somatic worker, and healer, to name those that appeared during these interviews. I was

104 Holmes, “2023 Dance Teacher Award Honoree Hilary Cartwright.”

105 Summerfield, “Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice,” 7. Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*, 13.

106 Schulkind, “Body-Biography Interview with Marcus Schulkind,” March 18, 2023.

107 See Atkinson, “The Life Story Interview as Mutually Equitable Relationship”; Bornat, “Remembering and Reworking Emotions.”

108 Hamilton, *Middle Age*.

109 See Nakajima and Brandstetter, *The Aging Body in Dance*.

curious how my protagonists would articulate the coherence and explain the reasons behind their career shifts.

When reading these body-biographies, we can, as Summerfield describes, observe how life review is co-constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee. We can also listen to and learn from any contradictions that might be disclosed within. Summerfield writes:

Historians can deepen and build understanding of an individual by eliciting her subjective assessments of the value of her life, studying the sources of affirmation and denial in her account, and noting the continuities and contradictions in her comparisons with others and with her younger self.¹¹⁰

For example, in the interviews you will read of Schulkind's deep avowal of his artistic path and freedom, yet reticence about his lack of savings and status. Lechner acknowledges his shame at only realizing his privilege as a White man performing ballet later in life, and affirms the subsequent prosperity within poverty he experienced, as a nomad and improviser in contemporary dance. Kono fully encourages dance as a mode of life for everyone yet denies that she is emotionally attached to performing and expresses concern about the isolating effects of dance's professional culture. Cartwright confirms the vulnerability of her body after multiple surgeries, distancing herself from her younger drives of ambition and perfection as a ballet dancer. The interviews that follow will substantiate and "breathe life" into these matters.¹¹¹

One question I have frequently received from scholars responding to my work was why the dancers were not all the same age. Why had I chosen one protagonist, Lechner, who was significantly younger than the rest? Based in Bern, Lechner was my go-to friend for dipping into movement research. For personal and academic reasons, I was very excited to include his novel approach of moving the body's fascia (explained at length in his chapter). Also, adding Lechner allowed this collection of voices to traverse from dancers trained in the 1960s, to Lechner's own training the 1970s, to my own experience of dancing since the 1980s. I gained a longitudinal comparison, as well as one of cross-cultural perspective.

In particular, Lechner and I discussed the somatic aspects of dance training and embodiment studies, foregrounded in the study by dance scholars Melanie Bales and Rebecca Netti-Fiol in *The Body Eclectic* (2008).¹¹² These authors' observations about the increasing "eclecticism" of the American dancing body since the Judson period theorized these in terms of "deconstruction" and "bricolage," giving insight

110 Summerfield, "Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice," 7.

111 Peacock and Holland, "The Narrated Self," 370.

112 Netti-Fiol, "Somatics: An Interview with Martha Myers."

into the “messiness” of dance training, and requiring close examination of the specific process in which dancers and choreographers work.¹¹³ I was very interested to learn how Lechner’s encounters with dance techniques around the millennium in Germany and the UK would compare to Bales and Netti-Fiol’s writings and reports from sources in America as well as my own experience as an American. Furthermore, the contrast between Kono, Cartwright, and Schulkind’s applications of anatomy and somatic practices and Lechner’s, as a member of a different generation, is striking in their body-biographies, showing longitudinal shifts in body-understanding that warrant further study. Therefore, Lechner’s inclusion was crucial.

One final topic that recurs throughout this inquiry is aging, highlighting the significance of injury and illness to dancing lives. Broader research is needed to determine whether these body-biographies highlighting physical resilience and the acquisition of bodily knowledge through practices of healing constitute a general feature of professional dancers’ life-narrations, or whether they have been foregrounded here through selection.¹¹⁴ My background, as a dancer with mild scoliosis and numerous dancer-related injuries, underpins my attraction to these four teachers—all of whom have refined expertise to instruct fragile and injured bodies like my own. Before our interviews, Lechner and Kono had not foregrounded their stage injuries in their discussions with me, only their sicknesses unrelated to dance: a lung infection (Lechner) and cancer (Kono). Cartwright’s tragic slip onstage and subsequent back injury was a seminal turning point in her life story, reported in her autobiography *Dancing for a Living* (1974).¹¹⁵ I had received acupuncture from Schulkind, who refers to his discovery of acupuncture treatment after a knee-injury as one of his life’s redefining moments.¹¹⁶ These stories are retold, with new layers, within the subsequent body-biographies. We can read into these narratives the tensions of life review: revealing ageism and the lessons of personal experience. Themes of resiliency, acceptance, compassion, and self-knowledge will be central narrative elements in the subsequent body-biographies, interweaving the topics of aging, healing, and discourses of Western and other medical traditions.

In sum, by giving voice to my teachers’ life stories, *Body-Biographies* presents new impulses for dance history writing and designing dance studies research by opening personal matters to scholarly interpretation. To underscore, for this autobiographical project of life story collaborations, I have chosen protagonists with significance for *me*, whose distinct perspectives on dance throw light on various

113 Bales, “A Dancing Dialectic,” 14–15; Bales, “Training as the Medium Through Which,” 35.

114 Similar arguments are raised in this study of life stories with professional ballet dancers. See Aalten, “In the Presence of the Body: Theorizing Training, Injuries and Pain in Ballet.”

115 Cartwright, *Dancing for a Living*. See in particular her report on the injury, 94–103.

116 See <http://www.marcusschulkind.org/acupuncture.html>, last accessed November 21, 2024.

aesthetic styles and socio-cultural positions. I draw upon our existing relationships and rapport to engage in and then promote mutual life review as a practice. By means of my neologism “body-biography,” we return recursively to the body. The emotional challenges and rewards of this have already been alluded to; the intellectual ones will be grasped subsequently, troubles included.

Summary

Life stories are fascinating and complex sources for the study of dance, history, and culture. They offer micro-perspectives for understanding subjectivity and embodiment, enabling interpretation of dancing lives as “mirrors” of culture and “portals” onto history. This chapter has laid groundwork for embodied life story research in dance studies, positioning dancing subjects and dancing bodies within the cross-disciplinary currents of auto/biography research.

Advancing body-biographies as rich sources for embodied life story research, this chapter has contextualized “life story” research within the broader field of “auto/biography studies.” Beginning with the pivotal scholarship of sociolinguist Charlotte Linde, I have highlighted that life stories are *created, selected, and composed* through social interaction—*narrating and performing the self*. Referring to life stories in the plural, I have emphasized that this collection of stories shifts throughout one’s life: They are filtered and transformed across contexts of social exchange as well as changing over time, and must be interpreted accordingly as transmutable and performative gestures of self-narration.

Life stories are composed to express self-understanding, often drawing from narrative examples reflecting one’s profession, identity, and social milieu. The embodied aspects of these narrative performances are under-theorized, aside from pioneering work in dance oral history. Despite strong androcentric “hero” conventions of autobiographical literature—focusing on narrative coherence, chronology, and centering the self—today there is also great visibility to life-narratives from minoritarian voices, drawing attention to diverse examples of lived bodies and their experiences. Significant for my project of body-biographies, collaborating with living dance elders on publishing their life stories, I have highlighted both theoretical and ethical challenges in inscribing biographical writing based on oral interviews. My writing in this chapter has also considered debates on facticity, memory, and reliability—underlining scholars’ increasingly self-reflexive writing.

Growing scholarly attention is being paid to dancers’ autobiographies, in which autobiography takes multiple forms (i.e. “auto_bio_graphy”): written, oral, dance and performance. Recognizing the potential as well as the challenges of these interwoven autobiographical discourses, dance historian Christina

Turner has demonstrated their canon-critical and polyvocal potential for dance historiography—analyzing artists' changing perceptions of their self-understanding and aesthetic experience of dancing.¹¹⁷ My micro-study of body-biographies, developed with four of my dance teachers, similarly opens new perspectives for studying dance history. This research explores a fine-grained perspective into practice-linked networks of practitioners. I argue that the value of dancers' body-biographies lies not only in their potential to add new positions to our understanding of dance history, but also in helping us envision the complex temporalities and interpersonal bodily exchanges of “embodied history,” a term that I draw from dance historian Karen Eliot.¹¹⁸ Realizing this potential requires methodological approaches attuned to how dancers' share memories and narrate—i.e. *perform*—their life stories. It calls for a body-reflexive participation on the part of the researcher, carefully and theoretically cooperating with dance elders on publication of their life review.

The process of making this book is therefore reflected upon methodologically in the next chapter. Expanding the sensory and participatory dimensions of life story interviews, I invited the participants to record conversations with me about their embodied lives and to collaborate on editing this book. During recorded interviews as well as in unrecorded conversations and lessons, my teachers shared their memories of the past and reflected on their present activities in dance; we also reviewed any relevant sources in their personal archives of memorabilia—such as digitized videos, photos, scanned press clippings, and their teaching notes. To elicit conversation and stimulate memory, I brought into the interviews my recollections of dancing with them in the past as well as sources from my background research—such as photographs, reviews, and articles. These exchanges enlarged my understanding of their teaching, a valuable resource for my professional development. Beyond the personal relevance of this mutual life review, however, it is a legitimate question, “whether it is possible to obtain the distance needed to interpret one's experience with all its emotional attachments.”¹¹⁹ In the next section, I will explore this and other relevant questions within the context of interview research and the publication of oral history and life story narratives.

117 See Turner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*.

118 Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 2.

119 Hermer, “The Personal as Primary Focus. Reviews in Anthropology,” 386.