

Dance Memoir and Autobiography as a Literary Genre

SURG | Arts, Humanities, and Performance (AHP) | *Tags: Literary Analysis*

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well, or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal's structure and content.*



Proposal Strengths	Areas for Improvement
There is a reading list appendix included with a specific timeline for each of the readings selected	The introduction and background section lack in-text citations, which are needed to support the claims being made.
The methodology of this project is well described using specific actions that will be performed during the review of selected literature. Additionally, each point of methodology was justified in terms of how it helped to answer the research question/approach the research aim.	A broad justification is given for the readings that were selected for this project. This work would be strengthened by annotating the reading list to explain each of the chosen pieces (in an appendix), and by giving at least one specific example justification (in the body of the proposal).
	The output of the project was kept vague. You should give your reader clear parameters of success.



Other Key Features to Take Note Of
Every project that involves the methodology of literature review should have a reading list of the selected readings. This list can be organized as this author did, chronologically, or it can be organized thematically, categorically, or in another way that helps a reader understand the project. These reading lists can also be annotated in a way that helps a reader understand what you plan to get out of each reading or subset of readings.
It is helpful to have a clear output in this type of research. Using “if, then” statements to give examples of what you might find, and what that would mean for your research question can help make these outputs more concrete for your reader.

Adaptation theory is a field that has been widely discussed and explored, and there are numerous ways in which texts have been adapted into movies, plays, musicals, and dances. Dance adaptations of literature are relatively commonplace and the ways in which dance can be used to capture literature have been explored heavily. The reverse, however—dance being turned into literature—has received very little attention. Many notable American modern dance choreographers in the past 100 years have written autobiographies, memoirs, how-to guides, criticisms—many different forms of literature that are based on dance. One such form—perhaps the most notable, certainly the most widespread—is that of a choreographic memoir. Little exploration of these memoirs, however, has been done. I propose that choreographic memoirs and autobiographies can be considered their own literary genre, and I will do a literary analysis of numerous choreographic memoirs in order to find the components and criteria for this genre. With the breadth of information and knowledge I will gain from this summer research, I will be able to focus my senior honors thesis on several of these memoirs and components thereof that encapsulate the literary genre of choreographic memoir.

In-text citations are missing

Clear proposal statement

Memoirs are often written by people who have succeeded in a realm outside of writing—in this case, dance—who then put their experiences into text. The authors of these memoirs are not writers, per se, but rather dancers who write. In *Memoir: An Introduction*, G. Thomas Couser asserts that memoirs mimic life and represent actual experiences; they are rooted in diaries and other “inner monologue” styles of writing that necessarily dictate the form memoirs take today. Through reading many articles and books about memoir, I have created a list of criteria that make up a traditional memoir that will continue to develop as I study these literary forms. While some of these criteria will hold true for dance memoirs, I expect that not all will. For example, I expect that the stream-of-consciousness narrative writing of traditional memoirs will be broken up by passages that detail dance and choreography, creating a different format and style than that of traditional memoirs. Dance memoirs also have the added task of tracking not only the development of the individual, but also the development of their choreography, which affects the form of the book overall.

Identifies gap in knowledge

It is not clear what this criteria is based on

The dance world is interconnected and insular. Many of the more well-known and integral modern dance choreographers over the past 100 years worked together throughout their lives, and if they did not then they were likely influenced by one another or read each other’s memoirs. I am interested in the ways in which the writings of these different choreographers connect to one another, and if there is a literary through line that exists among them. In doing a thorough literary analysis of numerous choreographic autobiographies and memoirs, I aim to examine the ways in which modern dancers have narrated both their lives and works in memoirs, and whether a distinct literary genre of choreographic memoir emerges out of this. I want to closely examine dance-based passages that break up the overall life story of the choreographer and investigate how this sets dance memoirs apart from other memoirs.

Clear research aims that address gap in knowledge

Some context to these names would be helpful. This can be done by choosing one as an example and showing the reasoning behind that choice

In order to do this, I will take a survey of autobiographies and memoirs by modern dance choreographers in America over the past century. This will include, but is not limited to, the works of Isadora Duncan, Yvonne Rainer, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Martha Graham, Twyla Tharp, Bill T. Jones, Alvin Ailey, and Paul Taylor. I will also consider autobiographies that were left incomplete and later published by editors, including those of Jose Limon and Katherine Dunham. In addition, I will explore writings about dance that are not autobiographies, in order to examine the ways in which they differ from and relate to autobiographies. These will include the works of Ralph Lemon, Liz Lerman, and Doris Humphrey.

An in-depth analysis of these works and a comparison between them is necessary for furthering the field of dance literature. How is dance autobiography or memoir separate from other autobiographies or memoirs? Does a choreographer vary the way in which they write when they’re discussing their personal life, versus when they’re discussing their choreography? Is there a through line in the way in which choreographers write about dance, or does each

choreographer discuss it in their own individual and separate manner? And, overall, what literary conventions characterize modern dancers' autobiographies or memoirs?

During my eight-week grant period, I will examine the works of about two choreographers each week; this will allow for in-depth case studies of 14 choreographers. I will go in chronological order, from the early 1900s through choreographers who are still alive and working today—any variation in this is intentional, in order to study choreographers who worked together or have similar styles (see Appendix for full list and pairings). I will read each choreographer's autobiography or memoir once through, as if it were simply for pleasure—not annotating or highlighting, but rather simply paying attention to what stands out to me as being notable or distinct. I will then read the book a second time through, playing closer attention to the devices and choices made. As I read the second time, I will keep track of places in which the narrative breaks in order to focus on dance and choreography. I expect that there will also be passages that are about both the choreographer's life and their work, which I will note as well. I will take notes about the literary devices and writing styles that can be found in each distinct section, keeping track of which devices and components show up in the sections about life, which show up in the sections about dancing, which show up in the sections about both, and which show up in multiple sections. Through this, I will be able to see if dance language exists in passages about the choreographer's life, or whether the writing in the different sections is wholly separate. If the writing does overlap, then this is an additional distinction that dance memoirs have from non-dance memoirs—not only do they contain passages about dancing that break up the stream-of-consciousness narrative of the writer, but the writing style itself is also different because of the integral part that dance plays in the choreographer's life.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of each choreographer and what they are writing about, I will also watch videos of the works that are referenced in their writings. This will aid me in ascertaining whether the writing style is directly influenced by the choreographic style, or whether the two styles are entire separate from each other—for example, if a choreographer's style is sharp and choppy, does the writing reflect this? If a choreographer discusses a particular dancer or other choreographer, I will also investigate works by that dancer or choreographer and the ways in which they interact and correlate. I will make note of the ways in which these videos and works in relation to how they are described in the original memoir, and any links between the two in terms of style and devices—if two choreographers worked together in their dancing throughout their lives, do their writings about choreography reflect this? If two choreographers were personally connected, do their writings about their lives reflect this?

After I have gained a wide breadth of information about these choreographers, I will have the knowledge necessary to find the literary through lines among all of their writings, and I will be able to determine whether there exists a distinct literary genre of choreographic memoir. I will be able to say whether writing about dance is different from writing about life, and whether literature that derives from and draws upon dance is distinct in and of its own right.

As a double major in Dance and English Literature, I have read a considerable amount of autobiographies and memoirs and a significant amount of writing about dance. I have a deep and thorough knowledge of dance and choreography, which will be useful in understanding and interpreting the language used to discuss dance and choreography. I have previously read dance autobiographies in my Ballet III courses, and the chance to re-read these works will undoubtedly open them up to me even further and will allow me a fuller understanding of these texts. In addition, I have written about my own dancing and my own choreography in my Dance Composition course, and I will be taking two more choreography courses—one of which is an independent study—this coming spring. In both of these courses I will have the opportunity to write about my own dancing and read about the choreography of others, and this thinking will set me up to investigate choreographic autobiographies and memoirs as a genre of their own. This will pave the way for me to write a thorough and fully-developed senior honors thesis about dance memoir and autobiography as its own distinct literary genre.

Methodology is described in explicit detail. Referencing the appendix would have made it even better to show the timeline of the project.

Methods are justified by an explicit connection to what the method will help the author learn in regards to their research aims.

Preparation section addresses literary and choreographic competencies

Specific tasks are defined for reading

An example of a literary device that could be found would strengthen this section

The outcome of the research is addressed but remains vague. The author should address: What are the parameters of success? What outcomes would indicate a distinct genre?

Bibliography

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- Kadar, Marlene. *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1992. Print.
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- Rak, Julie. "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity." *Genre* 37.3-4 (2004): 483-504. Web. 15 Feb. 2016.
- Renza, Louis A. "The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography". *New Literary History* 9.1 (1977): 1-26. Web.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. N.p.: U of Minnesota, 2010. Print.
- Steinberg, Michael. "Writing Literary Memoir: Are We Obligated to Tell the *Real Truth*?" *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction Fourth Genre* 1.1 (1999): 142-47. Web.

Appendix: List of Books and Timeline

Week One

My Life by Isadora Duncan (Gollancz, 1996)

Feelings Are Facts: A Life (Writing Art) by Yvonne Rainer (MIT Press, 2006)

Week Two

Wisdom Comes Dancing by Ruth St. Denis (Peaceworks, 1996)

An Unfinished Life: An Autobiography by Ruth St. Denis (Harper & Brothers, 1939)

One Thousand and One Night Stands by Ted Shawn (Da Capo Press, 1979)

*Note: Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn were married and created their own dance school together; they frequently created work together.

Week Three

Blood Memory by Martha Graham (Doubleday, 1991)

Push Comes to Shove: An Autobiography by Twyla Tharp (Bantam, 1992)

The Creative Habit by Twyla Tharp (Simon & Schuster, 2006)

*Note: Twyla Tharp studied under Martha Graham.

Week Four

Last Night on Earth by Bill T. Jones (Pantheon Books, 1995)

Story/Time: The Life of an Idea by Bill T. Jones (Princeton University Press, 2014)

Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey by Alvin Ailey (Birch Lane Press, 1995)

*Note: Bill T. Jones and Alvin Ailey are both more modern-day African American contemporary choreographers.

Week Five

Private Domain: An Autobiography by Paul Taylor (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999)

Jose Limon: An Unfinished Memoir by Jose Limon, ed. Lynn Garafola (Wesleyan, 2001)

Week Six

Island Possessed by Katherine Dunham (University of Chicago Press, 1994)

A Touch of Innocence: A Memoir of Childhood by Katherine Dunham (University of Chicago Press, 1994)

Hiking the Horizontal: Field Notes from a Choreographer by Liz Lerman (Wesleyan, 2014)

Week Seven

Geography: Art / race / exile by Ralph Lemon (Wesleyan, 2000)

Tree: belief / culture / balance by Ralph Lemon (Wesleyan, 2004)

Come Home Charley Patton by Ralph Lemon (Wesleyan, 2013)

Week Eight

The Art of Making Dances by Doris Humphrey (Princeton Book Company, 1991)

*Note: This week will also be used for synthesizing and processing information.