

**Writing into History:**  
**American Dance Autobiography since the Twentieth Century**

Chava Pearl Lansky

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Thesis director: Professor L. Garafola  
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## Introduction

Dance is an ephemeral art form. Before the advent of video, it was nearly impossible for a dancer to leave behind a body of work to posterity. While notation systems have been created to preserve choreography, they are not capable of capturing a dancer's sense of charisma or individuality. Dance is also typically a wordless form. Audiences can read about dance in the words of critics, but rarely get to hear directly from the artists themselves. The combination of these factors means that dancers often struggle to preserve their legacies and maintain ownership of their own narratives. Many turn to autobiography as a solution. Autobiography provides a format for people who are often the subject of others' writing to take control of their narratives and structure their stories as they desire. Autobiography allows dancers to write themselves into history.

This paper focuses on how nine American dancers since the early twentieth century – Isadora Duncan, Agnes de Mille, Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey, Bill T. Jones, Misty Copeland, Allegra Kent, Jacques d'Amboise, and Yvonne Rainer – use autobiography to write themselves into history. Like the dancers who wrote them, each of these memoirs is unique, and this paper approaches them each from a different angle. Duncan, the “mother of American modern dance,” carefully crafts her story, creating a kind of prototype for the genre. De Mille is equally known as a writer and dancer, and her witty descriptions seem to border on fiction. An interview with one of her former dancers, Gretchen Schumacher, sheds light on de Mille's real life verse written self. The chapter on Graham's memoir benefits from in-depth research in the Martha Graham Collection at the Library of Congress, and reveals the controlling figures at play behind the construction of Graham's autobiography. Ailey, Jones, and Copeland rely heavily on

ghostwriters, and write memoirs in part to combat the tokenism that they have faced as well as their respective media presences. Reading Kent and d'Amboise's memoirs as part of a surge of memoirs by New York City Ballet dancers published after George Balanchine's death shows the power of collective memory, and elucidates the role that gender played in the Balanchine world. Lastly, Rainer's memoir examines the mantle of celebrity. While these memoirs are in no way identical, certain themes such as molding of identity, creation of voice, choice of ghostwriter and whether to use one at all, celebrity, and clarification of media myths run throughout all nine. Though each chapter includes outside sources such as relevant newspaper articles, biographies, documentaries, and other forms of dance scholarship in order to better understand these memoirs, additional background and theory on autobiography prime the reader for a deeper understanding of this elusive genre.

## Theory and Background

In St. Augustine's *Confessions*, what is widely seen as the first Western autobiography ever written, St. Augustine writes, "I say 'memory' and I recognize what I mean by it; but where do I recognize it except in my memory itself?"<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine notes the confusing status of the autobiographical genre as sitting somewhere between fact and fiction. The reader cannot always trust the author, though attempting to understand what the author chose to include as truth can help to uncover their intent.

Theorist Louis A. Renza builds on St. Augustine's question.

Perhaps more than any other literary concept, autobiography traps us into circular explanations of its being. Is it an indeterminate mixture of truth and fiction about the person writing? Is it based essentially in fact rather than self-invention? Or is it a full-fledged 'literary' event whose primary being resides in and through the writing itself: in the 'life' of the signifier as opposed to the life being signified?<sup>2</sup>

This last option presented by Renza of autobiography as an "event" is applicable to dance, a form that forces artists to recreate themselves in the present moment each time they step on stage. Autobiography can then become a type of performance, another way of molding oneself before an audience. Peggy Phelan stresses the importance of the audience as a witness in theater. "Western theatre is itself predicated on the belief that there is an audience, an other willing to be cast in the role of auditor. The 'act' at the heart of theatre making is the leap of faith that someone (that ideal spectator some call 'God') will indeed see, hear, and love those brave enough to admit that this is a movement that keeps us away from our deaths (or at least permanently dark houses)."<sup>3</sup> If

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<sup>1</sup> Louis A Renza, "The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography," *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (1977): 1-26, 1. Quote from St. Augustine's *Confessions*, X. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 31.

a witness is required to substantiate one's existence, it follows that dancers, whose careers are predicated on being observed by audiences, would gravitate toward autobiography, a genre that similarly shares their private selves with witnesses. Many of the dancers in this paper constructed their memoirs in part from their old diaries. This raises the question of why they decided to make those personal narratives public – the answer seems to be that after a life of communicating by dancing before an audience, sharing their thoughts with one is the next step.

Autobiography can provide a new way for dancers to communicate when they are no longer able to dance. Dance historian Victoria Thoms understands Graham's writing her memoir in her nineties as an "attempt to recapture the potency of a bodily form of communicating who she was... [her memoirs] was an attempt, by other means than dance, to maintain this physical self-eloquence."<sup>4</sup> Both Graham and Ailey's memoirs were started at the end of their lives and published posthumously. But though the seven other dancers in this paper write their memoirs at all different points in their lives and careers, their books do serve to immortalize them in history.

An alternate mode of understanding dance autobiography is to see choreography itself as autobiographical. Thoms builds on Shari Benstock's plea to extend the boundaries of autobiography by considering choreography a "body autobiography."<sup>5</sup> She raises the idea of a "danced oeuvre as an alternate form of autobiography,"<sup>6</sup> suggesting that the trail of work that choreographers leave behind has an autobiographical component, even if that was not the intent. Out of the nine subjects in this paper, all but

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<sup>4</sup> Victoria Thoms, "Martha Graham's Haunting Body: Autobiography at the Intersection of Writing and Dancing," *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 1 (2008): 3-16, 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

two identify as both dancers and choreographers. The two non-choreographers are both ballerinas: Misty Copeland and Allegra Kent. Though choreographing gives the other memoirists experience crafting creative projects, memoir is not the only genre that Copeland and Kent have written in. Kent has published two picture books and two how-to books on ballet-inspired fitness, while Copeland, her junior by many years, has currently penned one of each. While these books are not strictly autobiographical, they can also be understood as a kind of “body autobiography,” contributing to their authors’ legacies. Copeland and Kent’s similarities do not end here. Though the ballet world is filled with far more women than men, men inequitably hold nearly all leadership roles, and women in the ballet world have had to fight harder for agency and to have their voices heard.

Feminist author Carolyn Heilbrun believes that women struggle to write truthful autobiographies because “the open admission of the desire for power and control over one’s life” is forbidden for women.<sup>7</sup> Writing autobiography also forces authors to be publicly self-centered, while “anonymity, we have long believed, is the proper condition of woman.”<sup>8</sup> Though Copeland and Kent both excelled beyond the *corps du ballets* of anonymous women, their memoirs do describe their fight to gain autonomy and to be publically self-centered. The other four female subjects in this paper, Duncan, Graham, de Mille, and Rainer, are remembered as radical, and spent their careers breaking down the boundaries of what dance is and what it can be. But even these groundbreaking women subtly back away from writing about the full weight of their own ambition their memoirs, acting as if success was something that just happened to them.

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<sup>7</sup> Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Heilbrun recognizes two tropes in female autobiography: emphasis on childhood, and sexual awakening. Though Heilbrun focuses on women, these themes apply to the male subjects in this paper as well.

There still exists little organized sense of what a woman's biography or autobiography should look like. Where should it begin? With her birth, and the disappointment, or reason for no disappointment, that she was not a boy? Do we then slide her into the Freudian family romance, the Oedipal configuration; if not, how do we view the childhood?... How does the process of becoming, or failing to become, a sex object operate in the woman's life; how does she cope with the fact that her value is determined by how attractive men find her?<sup>9</sup>

Childhood and sexuality play a huge role in these memoirs. Childhood often takes up the first third of the book, with writers going into great anecdotal detail. Jones and Rainer attribute just as much time and importance to their sexual awakenings and experiences, while Duncan and Kent write extensively about their romantic lives though remain more chaste. Some authors such as Copeland, de Mille, and Ailey only mention romantic suitors in passing. But descriptions of personal lives instead of choreographic process or descriptions of dances are predominant in all nine memoirs, leading to the role that celebrity plays for these dancers.

Dance historian Jennifer Fisher writes about dancers creating their celebrity as a type of marketing. Though she focuses primarily on Anna Pavlova use of *The Swan*, her notions of fame apply to many of the memoirists in this paper. "Perhaps the element of fame is always interlocked with market forces, even in the dance world, where artists are affected by what is written about them, whether it appears in influential places, and how much can be gained by selling an image."<sup>10</sup> One of the themes that Fisher notes in how

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 27

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Fisher, "The Swan Brand: Reframing the Legacy of Anna Pavlova," *Dance Research Journal* 44, no. 1 (2012): 51-67, 51



dancers brand themselves is through “An essentializing ‘grand narrative’ [that] tends to persist in biographies of performers, with the future star often described as starting from nowhere, then experiencing a galvanizing moment when the journey toward fame begins, and eventually reaping the rewards of talent and hard work.”<sup>11</sup> The more formulaic memoirs discussed in this paper do take that approach, often dramatizing and romanticizing the circumstances of childhood hardship. Duncan writes of sleeping on a park bench and begging for food; Jones describes falling asleep in the fields while his migrant-worker parents pick fruit. The “galvanizing moment” theme is present as well. For Copeland, that is being discovered in ballet class at the Boys and Girls Club and placed on the path towards stardom. For d’Amboise, being lifted by the power of ballet out of his scrappy childhood and run-ins with gangs on the streets of Washington Heights. Many of these authors seem to disingenuously record the amount of failure that they experienced before reaching fame. De Mille alone stands out in her truthful, and at times unflattering, descriptions of the life of a dancer; nearly all of her memoir chronicles the years when her career inched along, one step forward, two steps back.

Fisher also uses Pavlova to understand the way that dancers use branding to make a name for themselves. “In the world of branding it is all about telling the right story about your product, one that will ‘touch a nerve’ and appeal to a coveted self-image, a person’s ambitions, and, especially, to emotions.”<sup>12</sup> She notes that branding is especially necessary when there is a surplus, and the consumer must make a choice. Though this mode of thinking seems fitting more for material products than for people, it is applicable to these memoirists, particularly Kent and Copeland, the ballerinas who had to fight to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 53.

stand out from the rest of the corps. In her memoir, Kent links herself to flowers, writing about her love of roses. When interviewed in documentaries Kent nearly always speaks while holding a flower in her lap. Copeland and the marketing experts behind her rise to the top have galvanized her dancing the role of the Firebird. The Barbie doll created in Copeland's image is dressed in her *Firebird* costume, which has come to connote the passion, brightness, and individuality that her "brand" represents.

Another way that these authors brand themselves is through the titles of their books. The memoir titles in this paper mostly fall into one of two categories. The first is piece title. Alvin Ailey's memoir is titled *Revelations*, which is also the name of his most famous dance work. Bill T. Jones also named his piece after one of his well-known pieces, *Last Night on Earth*. Mentioned in the section on Balanchine's dancers is Edward Villella's *Prodigal Son*, named for the role in the ballet that clinched his career. The second category of title is a type of statement of being a dancer. This includes Jacques d'Amboise's *I Was a Dancer*, Allegra Kent's *Once a Dancer...*, and Misty Copeland's *Life in Motion*. The memoir titles that these dancers choose further emphasize their brands, either simply with the identity of a dancer, or by using a specific piece to further cultivate its recognition.

Fisher stretches the role that branding to see how the deaths of some famous dancers play into their respective brands. "Like Isadora Duncan's spectacular death by scarf strangulation in a sports car a few years earlier, and the descent of Vaslav Nijinsky into madness before his death many decades later, the way Pavlova died has served to emphasize elements of her character, thus strengthening an artist brand for posterity. For

Duncan, the theme was a reckless free spirit.”<sup>13</sup> In an uncanny way Duncan’s death does seem perfectly in-line with her character, and contributes to her legacy as a “reckless free spirit.” Duncan uses her book to tell a very particularly crafted version of her story, and understanding her memoir helps to set the stage for the next ninety years of dance autobiography.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 58.

**Preamble: Isadora Duncan, *My Life*, 1927**

Isadora Duncan, known as the mother of American modern dance, was among the first American dancers of the twentieth century to write an autobiography, and her memoir sets a precedent that many other dancers have followed. Born in San Francisco in 1878, Duncan led an exceptionally dramatic life from a childhood spent partially in poverty to the uncanny death of all three of her children, to her own fatal accident when her scarf caught in the wheels of her car on the French Riviera in 1927. Duncan died while writing her memoirs; she never got to record the second half of her life, and has thus remained a romantic, elusive figure, ephemeral and ethereal, much like her dances. Today, nearly a century after its publication, numerous editions of her 1927 autobiography, *My Life*,<sup>14</sup> are still in print, and more dance enthusiasts have read her autobiography than ever saw her dance. Duncan transcended her own death by writing her autobiography, leaving her own version of her story for generations to read. In *My Life* Duncan chooses very carefully and critically what to include and how to spin her experiences. This is evident in the way she constructs the “I,” the literary tools of foreshadowing and premonition that she uses, and the dramatic way that she structures the book. Duncan introduces some of the recurring themes in this paper: she writes more about her personal life than she does about dancing, and connects herself to fame any chance she gets.

In *My Life* Duncan paints herself as a larger-than-life figure. In the book’s first paragraph, Duncan writes that when her mother was pregnant with her she was only able

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<sup>14</sup> Isadora Duncan, *My Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Liveright, 1955), 13. *My Life* was originally published in 1927.

to tolerate eating “oysters and champagne—the food of Aphrodite.”<sup>15</sup> Duncan places herself among the goddesses from the very beginning, and later, by connecting her dances to Hellenic culture, she removes herself further from the material world of mere mortals. Duncan even tried to recreate ancient Grecian life. With her family in tow, she had the idea to build a Greek temple atop a hill in Athens; spending all their money, Isadora and her brothers lugged stones day after day, immune to reality, and dreaming of dancing in their temple upon the Athenian hilltop.

Duncan also writes herself as a Cassandra-like seer, a tragic figure whose prophecies are ignored by those around them. She dedicates an entire chapter to a series of premonitions that her children were going to die. Duncan’s son and daughter, Deirdre and Patrick, drowned with their nanny when their automobile rolled into the Seine in 1913. She writes that before their death she had several visions: black crosses, funeral marches playing, child-sized coffins lined up on the street, and French poetry delivered anonymously to her about the death of children. Retrospective premonitions may have been a coping mechanism to deal with the trauma, yet this ability is often attributed to an omniscient or god-like narrator. This is also evidence of the construction of her narrative voice – she writes her memoir more like fiction, complete with foreshadowing and symbolism.

Like a novelist, Duncan romanticizes her childhood. She writes about growing up in poverty, and moving with her family to Europe to try her luck as a dancer. When the Duncans first arrived in London they had no money and slept on park benches for days, begging for food. But Duncan does not write about this time as being particularly

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<sup>15</sup> Duncan, 13.

harrowing. Instead it is seen through a rose-colored lens, painting a picture of a romantic, bohemian life. However, biographies of Duncan reveal that she exaggerated both the poverty and precariousness of her childhood. Even on her own life, she is not a particularly credible source. Another fictional element that Duncan utilizes in her memoir is the suspenseful and dramatic chapter close. Most chapters end with Duncan getting on a train and heading alone to a new city, leaving a lover behind, being called to someone's bedside, or fainting. For example, Chapter 24 ends, "Two days later I heard that L. [her former lover, the father of her son] had left for Egypt."<sup>16</sup> Chapter 26 ends, "The night I reached Viareggio there was a great storm. Eleanora [Duse, the celebrated actress] was living in a little villa far out in the country, but she left me a message at the Grand Hotel asking me to come to her."<sup>17</sup> This high drama can be attributed to Duncan's hopes that her memoir would get picked up as a screenplay for a film.

Newspaper articles from the time show that plans for a film were underway. In 1953, Isadora's elder brother Raymond returned to California to plan a movie of their family's life, based in part on her memoirs. An interview with him from that time concludes with the question of which actress will play Isadora in the film. "Ah," said Duncan, raising a hand in the air, "that will be the question."<sup>18</sup> This is an example of the mythology that surrounded Duncan. Both the reporter and her brother seem to think that no one could imitate Isadora; she purposefully constructed a version of herself that maintained the public's illusions.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>18</sup> "Duncan the Bohemian Arrives to Plan Movie: Long-Haired, Robed and Sandaled Brother of Late Dancer Says He'll Do Film Himself," *Los Angeles Times* (16 January 1953): A1.

Another way that Duncan kept up her larger-than-life mystique is that she wrote extensively about her romances and tragedies. Setting up another theme prevalent into the next century of dance memoir, Duncan writes about what it *means* to be a dancer, but does not really describe any of her dances in detail. Dance, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, was seldom recorded. Though Duncan did leave behind numerous photographs, watercolors, and drawings that suggest the power of her corporeal presence, she uses her book to create a legacy of celebrity rather than a legacy of dances. Duncan saw herself as an artist with a higher calling, an equal of the gods, not a musical comedy or precision-like dancer as one of a world of anonymous dancers in a spectacle ballet. Though Duncan writes broadly about her influences as an artist, including accessing the “central spring” of movement in her body, her multi-faceted connection with nature, and the work of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Walt Whitman, Duncan shies from details of her dance training or choreographic process. She describes herself as a cultural revolutionary; her dances were subversive, performed barefoot in loose fitting tunics, free of corsets, in touch with Hellenic culture. She also had all her children out of wedlock and did not believe in marriage, an unusual point of view at the time.

Duncan also writes extensively about her personal and romantic life, noted in a newspaper review of *My Life* just after the book’s publication.

In other words, it is about Isadora Duncan the woman that she writes most glowingly, and not about Isadora Duncan the artist, and while Isadora Duncan the artist was one of the outstanding successes of her generation, Isadora Duncan the woman was, though she rivaled Casanova in her affairs, not at all successful, for she never achieved either contentment or happiness (a conclusion drawn by herself and not by what she calls ingrained puritanical Americans).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Fanny Butcher, “Books: Isadora Duncan’s Bizarre Picture of Her Life and Art,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (14 January 1928): 11.

Though Butcher's review is dated, it points out the radical nature of Duncan's romantic and reproductive choices, which many viewed as flouting traditional gender norms.

Though she reproaches Duncan for her numerous romantic entanglements, what she says holds true – Duncan writes far more about her failed romantic encounters than about her artistic pursuits. Though later dancers' memoirs delve into personal lives, they tend to also offer more detail about their dances; for example, Agnes de Mille describes the making of her celebrated *Rodeo*, and Yvonne Rainer talks about what went into the creation of her iconic *Trio A*. Although Duncan broke many barriers for women, her chief accomplishments lay in dance, even though she chose to focus her book on her life outside of dance.

In leaving a legacy of fame, Duncan also connects herself to many famous artists and intellectuals of her time. She casually mentions friendships with Auguste Rodin and Edward Gordon Craig, among others. Critic Fanny Butcher writes, “There flit through the pages the names of all of Europe's great – occasionally with a rapier thrust, but too often with a commonplace mention.”<sup>20</sup> Like many dance memoirists, writing gave Duncan the chance to identify herself with celebrity and the *Zeitgeist*.

*My Life* was only supposed to be the first half of Duncan's memoirs. Duncan was writing about her time in Soviet Russia and marriage to the Russian poet Sergei Esenin, when she tragically died. In 1929 Duncan's friend Mary Desti cobbled together a sequel to *My Life* from Isadora's notes, and her own memories of their friendship, entitled *The Untold Story*. Wrote one reviewer: “Miss Desti has done a sincere piece of work, but she was handicapped from the start by the fact that Isadora had written so magically of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



herself. Any attempt of an outsider, be that outsider ever so brilliant, is comparable to the light that the candle gives beside the powerful glow of a ten thousand-watt electric globe. There was but one person possessed of the fire and the fury of Isadora and that was Isadora herself.”<sup>21</sup> These words point to the unique nature of autobiography, as well as the nature of Isadora Duncan. Duncan may have exaggerated aspects of her story, but she was a charismatic and larger-than-life figure, and she was able to take control of her legacy by writing about it. Duncan does show moments of vulnerability in questioning her ability to write about her life. At one point she says, “As I advance in these memoirs, I realise more and more the impossibility of writing one’s life—or, rather, the lives of all the different people I have been...I often ask myself desperately: ‘What reader is going to be able to clothe with flesh the skeleton that I have presented?’ I am trying to write down the truth, but the truth runs away and hides from me.”<sup>22</sup> Duncan set the stage both for American modern dance, and for American dance autobiography. Though *My Life* is over-dramatized and focuses more on personal goings-on than dancing, it helped solidify Duncan’s place in dance history, while making celebrity part of her enduring legacy.

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<sup>21</sup> “More About Isadora Duncan,” *Los Angeles Times* (23 June 1929): 17.

<sup>22</sup> Duncan, 230.

## Chapter I: Agnes de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 1951

Like Isadora Duncan, Agnes de Mille was a groundbreaking figure for American dance. De Mille mentions Duncan's *My Life* in her memoir, *Dance to the Piper*,<sup>23</sup> calling it "in many ways a great book. Perhaps, as some thought, the first statement in our literature of woman as an artist, but it proved dreadfully unnerving to the young. Several virgins of my acquaintance went conscientiously astray in the hopes of becoming great dancer."<sup>24</sup> De Mille recognized the power of Duncan's memoir long before she wrote her own "literature of woman as an artist," and her work builds on Duncan's legacy.

Agnes de Mille was born into a famous theatrical family in New York City in 1905, though she spent most of her childhood in Hollywood, where her father, the playwright William de Mille, worked alongside her uncle, famed film director Cecil B. De Mille. Agnes de Mille came to dancing late in life but through years of perseverance and hard work transformed herself from a "spoiled egocentric wealthy girl"<sup>25</sup> into an established choreographer known for ballet classics such as *Rodeo* and *Fall River Legend*, and Broadway musicals *Oklahoma!*, *Brigadoon*, and *Carousel*. De Mille is equally remembered for her choreography as for her writing. Author of eleven works of nonfiction, De Mille's first venture into writing took form in her 1951 *Dance to the Piper*, which tells the story of her childhood, dance training, and many early attempts at success through colorful descriptions of the characters she met along the way. De Mille also uses this book to write about dance history and trends in the dance world as well as her own theories on ballet, an aspect of dance memoirs scarcely seen elsewhere. Unlike

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<sup>23</sup> Agnes de Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Introduction by Joan Acocella. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

the other memoirists in this paper, de Mille's writing played an equal role in her life to her dancing, and *Dance to the Piper* provides just one example of her skill as a writer and her creation of a new genre of dance writing.

De Mille is a sharp and witty writer, and understanding her personality helps to understand the way that she wrote. An interview with former American Ballet Theatre (ABT) dancer Gretchen Schumacher helps to draw de Mille from the page. Schumacher worked with de Mille at ABT from 1962-1966 and in 1974 toured with de Mille's own company, American Heritage Dance Theater. Schumacher remembers de Mille as "very intelligent with a very good sense of humor. And a very good wit, which are sometimes kind of different things. Very perceptive and interested. Always interested and curious...she wasn't someone who thought that because she had done a lot of great things that she knew everything about everything; she was not arrogant at all."<sup>26</sup> The sharpness of de Mille's wit comes through strongly in her character descriptions and observations in *Dance to the Piper*. Schumacher also acknowledges that de Mille "wasn't out to please everybody or to be liked by everybody. But she was perfectly likeable and pleasant and intelligent and lovely...sort of poetic but absolutely down to earth."<sup>27</sup> This sense of practicality and forthrightness is evident in de Mille's writing, and likely allowed her to take on the role of observer, leading to her cutting descriptions. *Dance to the Piper* is less about de Mille than it is about the people who surrounded her. Unlike other dancers who see writing a memoir as the next step in their careers, writing came naturally to de Mille, and she wrote on all kinds of subjects throughout her choreographic career. Like Thom's

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<sup>26</sup> Gretchen Schumacher, interview with the author, 11 March 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

idea of a “danced oeuvre at an alternate form of autobiography,”<sup>28</sup> an autobiographical impulse is clear in de Mille’s choreography in addition to her writing. De Mille’s dances are very human. For example, she writes about choreographing “how a woman who was nervous would reach up and adjust her scarf, and how a country girl at a dance would reach down and yank her underpants elastic into place.”<sup>29</sup> The character who most resembles de Mille is the cowgirl in her 1942 ballet *Rodeo*.

*Rodeo* tells the story of a cowgirl who desperately wants to fit in with the cowboys and upon feeling rejected puts on a dress, learns to act like a lady, and finds her man through dance at the local hoe-down. De Mille’s first real success came when she performed the lead in *Rodeo* with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1942 on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House. This moment is the culmination of *Dance to the Piper*, reinforcing the Cowgirl’s story as a metaphor for de Mille’s own. De Mille was not conventionally beautiful and struggled with a lack of confidence in her own body. She was an outsider in the ballet world, had started late, and did not quite fit in. Schumacher images de Mille felt like an “ugly duckling” who now was “choreographing for the Ballet Russe.... And at that point...she was engaged to be married, so that could also have influenced her.”<sup>30</sup> It is true that while de Mille was touring with the Ballet Russe and working on *Rodeo* she was engaged to her soon-to-be-husband Walter Prude and includes some of their letters in her memoir when he was serving abroad in the Air Force. For years, she had felt that she would never find romantic love, but now her whole life seemed to be coming together at once. Though de Mille does not overtly make this

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<sup>28</sup> Thoms, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Acocella, Introduction to Agnes de Mille’s *Dance to the Piper*, x.

<sup>30</sup> Schumacher interview.

autobiographical connection in her memoir, she closes the book with a page about *Oklahoma!*, the Western-themed show that built on *Rodeo*. “I kissed her and went west to my bridegroom,” she writes.<sup>31</sup> When de Mille was asked in a 1980 interview about how she had so much knowledge of the west, seeing as she had spent most of her life in the metropolises of Hollywood, New York City, and London, she responded “But I’d been in the West. I’d visited in Colorado, and I’d worked in New Mexico, and I knew cowboys. In Hollywood, we had a lot of cowboys at the studio and so on. Everybody in Hollywood knew westerns. I’d always been interested in American folk [dance], or any folk for that matter. And whenever there was any I could study, I learned it.”<sup>32</sup> This makes it clear that there was an autobiographical impulse in de Mille’s choreography, particularly *Rodeo* and *Oklahoma!*, and the way that she closes her book cleverly ties together the content and format of her memoir.

Though de Mille’s memoir is largely made up of observations of the people surrounding her, when she writes about herself it is mostly negative and self-deprecating. Critic Joan Acocella writes in her introduction to a recent edition of *Dance to the Piper* that if de Mille “seems to spend an inordinate amount of time telling us that she was ugly, artistic disappointment may be part of the reason.”<sup>33</sup> But research shows that though de Mille writes negatively about her own body, artistic disappointment did not play a role in her dissatisfaction, and writing in no way was second best to her career as a dancer. Much of her self-deprecation focuses on her body. De Mille started dancing at age thirteen, as she was reaching puberty, and could never quite achieve the ballet body that she desired.

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<sup>31</sup> De Mille, 331.

<sup>32</sup> Janice Berman, “The LI Interview: Agnes de Mille,” *Newsday*, 30 March 1980, 2LI.

<sup>33</sup> Acocella, xii.

“I seemed to be all rusty wire and safety pines. My torso was long with unusually broad hips, my legs and arms abnormally short, my hands and feet broad and short. I was besides fat.... I was built like a mustang, stocky, mettlesome and sturdy.”<sup>34</sup> On reaching puberty she writes, “I found myself suddenly imprisoned in someone else’s body, heavy, deep-bosomed, large-hipped. My skin went muddy and on my face there developed seemingly overnight a large hooked nose.... From that unmarked day when as a narcissistic youngster I looked in a mirror and realized I was not going to be a beautiful woman, I gave up caring how I looked—or thought I did. Except in costume.”<sup>35</sup> Before de Mille found success in choreographing on others, she tried very hard to become a solo dance artist, but failed again and again. Her lack of confidence in her appearance combined with her failure to make it as a dancer imply that she turned to writing as a second choice, a way to express herself successfully in a different medium. But Schumacher insists that writing and dance were different but equal parts of de Mille’s life.

Though de Mille’s playwright father encouraged her to write,<sup>36</sup> she did not start until she was pregnant with her son. “For years I hid what I wrote. Begun during my pregnancy as a pastime, the notes were continued whenever I had fifteen minutes to spare, on buses, subways, in dressing rooms, in drugstores, at times in the waiting room of the Children’s Hospital. The manuscript consisted of letter paper, wrapping paper, programs, envelopes, paper napkins—in short, whatever would take the imprint of a pencil.”<sup>37</sup> From there de Mille took off, with *Dance to the Piper* as the first of eleven

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>36</sup> Berman, 2LI.

<sup>37</sup> De Mille, 5.

books. De Mille is often framed as being a better writer than choreographer. Acocella writes, “Of the choreographer Agnes de Mille it has been said that she was a better writer than she was a choreographer. That’s not the way she planned it.”<sup>38</sup> But Schumacher feels “that writing and choreographing were things that she did. It wasn’t that one was...secondary to the other... they were two different spheres of her mind that were equal.”<sup>39</sup> De Mille’s huge success in both choreography and writing certainly backs up Schumacher’s claim that de Mille “was not compensating for her lack of achievement as a dancer. Certainly, she had huge achievement as a choreographer. And she was very well thought of in the rest of the cultural world.”<sup>40</sup> If this is the case, then her tone can be understood as belonging to a time when self-deprecation was commonplace, and a conventional appearance was very important. Schumacher believes that de Mille had two equal gifts, and was indeed “perhaps the best dancer ever to write and the best writer ever to dance.”<sup>41</sup>

More than just a dance writer, de Mille was also a self-made dance scholar who lectured and wrote about dance history throughout her career. Schumacher remembers that on tour “in many places she [De Mille] would give a lecture, and it wasn’t about her, it was about dance, and it went on about square dance, dance in general, and dance in America in particular. It was a subject that was very interesting to her. And she had an expressive way of doing it.”<sup>42</sup> These lectures in small towns throughout America established her reputation as a speaker, which “grew through the years as she spoke

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<sup>38</sup> Acocella, vii.

<sup>39</sup> Schumacher interview.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Janice Berman, “De Mille and Graham... Two of the Most Famous Names in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Dance. Now Agnes de Mille Tells All about her Husband and Colleague.” *Newsday*, 29 August 1991, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Schumacher interview.

across the entire nation on the part of government subsidy for the arts, resulting in her appointment by President [John F.] Kennedy to be a member of the National Advisory Committee on the Arts, the forerunner of the National Endowment for the Arts, to which she was appointed as a member of its National Council by President [Lyndon B.] Johnson when it was activated during his administration.”<sup>43</sup> Parts of *Dance to the Piper* are made up of her ideas of dance history from the Renaissance to her milieu, the mid-twentieth century. This complicates the genre of autobiography – *Dance to the Piper* is a personal account of the “great development of which she was part, the establishment of dance as a theater art in America in the early twentieth century.”<sup>44</sup>

In addition to history, de Mille includes her own theories on dance in her memoir, most notably on the relationship between ballet and sex, to which she dedicates a full chapter. De Mille understands ballet as a substitute for sex for young girls, as “it is the one physical performance possible to women that does not carry with it either moral responsibility or physical hazard. It constitutes a true recapturing of pagan freedom and childish play. It can be even a complete although unconscious substitute for physical love, and in the lives of the greatest dancers it usually assumes this function.”<sup>45</sup> Though ballet “is the epitome of all the elements we consider most attractive,”<sup>46</sup> a dancer is the “symbol of all that is most beautiful and powerful in physical life...but never at any moment is she threatened” by her audience.<sup>47</sup> An interest in the relationship between

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<sup>43</sup> “Agnes de Mille,” *Ballet Theatre Foundation, Inc.*

<[http://www.abt.org/education/archive/choreographers/de\\_mille.html](http://www.abt.org/education/archive/choreographers/de_mille.html)>

<sup>44</sup> Acocella, vii.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.



women and ballet is fitting for de Mille, whose position in the ballet world was rare for a woman of her time, and is, unfortunately, no less rare today.

De Mille was one of few female choreographers in the ballet world at the time. Schumacher “doesn’t remember any other women [choreographers at ABT] at the time” though she does recall that de Mille “certainly was able to stand up for herself and be demanding and influence what was going on.”<sup>48</sup> De Mille herself writes in *Dance to the Piper* that being such a novelty, she had something of an advantage, though her statement may not hold true today. “Choreography is probably the only field where women have run up against no male resentment, and I think it is no accident that the great dance revolutionaries have been largely women.”<sup>49</sup> In *Dance to the Piper* de Mille places herself at the forefront of her own ballet innovations opposite George Balanchine. Where de Mille focused on narrative, folk steps, and humor, Balanchine focused on the abstract. De Mille’s interest in women in ballet certainly comes from the unique role she played as both a participant and keen observer of the ballet world.

The magic of de Mille’s writing lies in her descriptions. In *Dance to the Piper* de Mille writes full chapters focused on different characters in her life, notably her mother, Anna de Mille, Martha Graham, Anna Pavlova, and Marie Rambert. These chapters read like vignettes, pithy and cutting. Her descriptions can feel fictional and overly-dramatized, but Schumacher believes that de Mille “was absolutely telling the truth” because “the voice that she spoke with was the same that she wrote with.”<sup>50</sup> De Mille’s closeness to some of the great figures of twentieth-century dance history provides a more

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<sup>48</sup> Schumacher interview.

<sup>49</sup> De Mille, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Schumacher interview.

human perspective than one usually gets in a biography. One of her gifts lies in physical descriptions. She writes of Graham's body, "Her arms are long and inclined to be both brawny and scrawny; the hands heartbreaking, contorted, work-worn, the hands of a washerwoman. All the drudgery and bitterness of her life have gone into her hands. These are the extremities, roped with veins and knotted in the joints, that seem to stream light when she lights them in dance."<sup>51</sup> In describing Graham's hands, de Mille touches on the great dancer's particular hard-working personality and exceptional performance ability. De Mille and Graham were friends, and it's poignant to read this description of Graham from someone who knew her in all aspects of her life.

De Mille is not always flattering, but her honesty is full of humor. Writing of the damp and cold of Marie Rambert's studio in London where de Mille trained in the 1930s, she writes, "The practice clothes hung three deep on hooks all around the walls and they did not dry of body sweat from one day to the next...I never put on my pants without looking for mushrooms in the seams."<sup>52</sup> De Mille does not glorify the life of a dancer, and does not ask for sympathy. She writes truthfully, provoking the reader to empathize and feel entertained. Toward the end of *Dance to the Piper* De Mille writes about touring with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo while creating *Rodeo*. This is the highlight of the book, a full chapter on the work and life habits of a company touring together under questionable conditions, travelling in Pullman cars across America.

"Raddled with sexual insecurity, financial instability, ambition, jealousy, and terror, they are herded from one engagement to another locked within the frenzied confines of their group for ten months at a stretch. They never stop anywhere en route long enough to make outside contacts. Intrigue assumes Renaissance proportions. Romance is a kind of round-robin tournament, and psychosis the hallmark of every experience. Most of the

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<sup>51</sup> De Mille, 152.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 181.

men are homosexual. Most of the women are sex-starved. Occasionally there is a nervous breakdown and a girl is unloaded at some station and left behind in a Midwestern hospital. Occasionally someone has a temper tantrum and beats up his girlfriend or his wife, forcing her to seek succor in adjacent bedrooms. Next morning they are all doing *pliés* in a row in perfect decorum.”<sup>53</sup>

The final line of this passage summarizes the whole ethos of the world that de Mille chronicles. Another particularly plaintive line in describing the Ballet Russe, “Behind every great star there is usually a sad quiet woman mending or knitting.”<sup>54</sup> Most who attempt to write about the dance world itself end up fetishizing it, such as modern examples like the film *Black Swan* and the reality television show *Dance Moms*. But de Mille’s ability to write as an insider and really winnow down the essence of the very particular and peculiar field that is dance – and especially ballet – remains unmatched.

Agnes de Mille was not only a groundbreaking choreographer, but also “one of the finest and most eloquent writers on dance the world has known.”<sup>55</sup> Her memoirs provide an enduring picture of both her own life and the dance world of the early twentieth century, in which she had grown up and found her calling. But de Mille’s dance writing extends beyond the autobiographical. One of her eleven books is a 1991 biography of Martha Graham. Graham and de Mille both used memoir to lay claim to their identities, but while de Mille wrote memoirs as an equal means of expression to making dances, Graham’s memoir came about with some difficulty and plays a more complex role in her legacy.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>55</sup> Clive Barnes, “Remembering Agnes: The De Mille Legacy.” *Dance Magazine*, 1 January 1994, 66.

## Chapter II: Martha Graham, *Blood Memory*, 1991

Martha Graham is a household name. Her pioneering career as a dancer and choreographer spanned nearly the entirety of the twentieth century. Despite numerous challenges Graham's company still exists today, but her legacy far exceeds the concert stage. Her 1991 memoir *Blood Memory*,<sup>56</sup> published just a few months after her death, helps to sustain her memory. Scholars, critics, and dance enthusiasts have turned to her memoir for a glimpse of what made her special, yet Graham the memoirist is not a reliable narrator. At the time the book was written Graham was ill, and "could only speak for an hour a day... before she grew weak."<sup>57</sup> Archives and testimonies suggest that Graham did not write the book herself: rather, it was cobbled together from interviews, journal entries, and notes by Graham's lawyer/companion Ron Protas and Graham's editor at Doubleday, former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Though photographs of Graham late in her life show her draped in furs and jewels, hand in hand with celebrities such as Betty Ford, Madonna, Elizabeth Taylor, and many others, Graham's glamorous appearance is a façade. She struggled financially to keep both herself and her company up and running, and her memoir was one of many prospective projects to help with cash flow and publicity. Understanding the creation of *Blood Memory* and the troubling relationship between Graham and Protas shows the complexity and power of autobiography to affect a dancer's legacy – Graham may not have had control over the book, yet it is revered at face value, and misunderstood as Graham's final word.

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<sup>56</sup> Martha Graham, *Blood Memory* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

<sup>57</sup> Victoria Phillips. "Martha Graham's Gilded Cage: *Blood Memory—An Autobiography* (1991)" *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 2 (2013): 65.

Work on Graham's memoir began in 1956, over thirty years before *Blood Memory* was published, when Graham signed a contract with Random House.<sup>58</sup> Writing did not come easily to Graham, and many years passed without her producing a manuscript. Though she could have hired someone help, "many agreed that 'Graham was too vain to use a ghostwriter.'"<sup>59</sup> Graham's editor Hiram Haydn encouraged her to record herself speaking on tape, and Graham gave him access to her personal notebooks. On reading them for the first-time, Haydn reflected, "It was a long and rapt evening. I stopped only twice—once to turn to Leonardo's notebooks, once to those of Dostoevsky. Despite the differences of their subjects, I saw an obvious analogy: the artist at work, the creative process intimately revealed."<sup>60</sup> Harcourt published Graham's *Notebooks* in 1973 under Haydn's direction, though she gave him little credit. In May 1979 Graham regained interest in her autobiography project, and "expressed her desire to write an autobiography as a corrective to unauthorized biographies."<sup>61</sup> The 1991 *Blood Memory* has been criticized for including very little of the creative process as Haydn described it. This was principally due to the entrance of a new project director: Ron Protas.

Protas had been a law student at Columbia, and claimed to have experience in photography and publicity. In the 1970s Protas began "to hang around the Graham company."<sup>62</sup> At first Graham "found him something of a nuisance and did not wish to talk to him."<sup>63</sup> Protas had no theatrical experience or dance background, but seemed intent on securing a position with the company. At this point, Graham fell ill. Protas was

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>62</sup> Agnes De Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham* (New York: Random House, 1991), 382.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

a constant presence while Graham was in the hospital, there whenever she needed someone. Though many colleagues and friends were present, Graham remembered “only Ron Protas’s crucial service; she grew to feel very poignantly that the rest of her company had deserted her and that Ron was the only one who had stood by her in her hour of need.”<sup>64</sup> Protas was with her as she convalesced, and slowly edged his way into every aspect of her personal and professional life, but at the expense of her previous relationships. He “made it his business to become indispensable to Martha, life-giving, life-sustaining, to stand between her and every other human being, to be everything to her—her nurse, her dresser, her housekeeper...her business manager, her advisor, her counselor, her advocate.”<sup>65</sup> Graham had relied on men before, notably composer Louis Horst and her ex-husband, dancer Erick Hawkins, but Protas exceeded both their roles in Graham’s life. Graham felt her sense of control slipping away and grew increasingly paranoid, a state only fueled by Protas. De Mille writes in her biography of Graham that “Protas then set about slowly and deliberately separating her and her school from everyone else who had any power.”<sup>66</sup> With Graham’s support, Protas fired the company directors and board members, and became involved with casting decisions, finances, grant applications, and the work of establishing Graham’s legacy; he also picked up work on her memoir. In the 1970s a publisher then involved with Graham’s project wrote, “I see no way to rescue the Martha Graham autobiography... without Ron Protas’s help.”<sup>67</sup> Protas undertook a new round of interviews with Graham, who was enjoying a social renaissance after years battling alcoholism and illness. How the project got to Jacqueline

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Phillips, 68.

Kennedy Onassis and Doubleday is not clear, but by 1989 the book re-emerged with Protas and Onassis at the helm.<sup>68</sup>

Notes between Graham and Protas from this period indicate that writing a memoir was only one of many ideas for sustaining Graham's legacy. The Martha Graham Company was struggling financially. The combination of financial need, Graham's creative nature, and a deepening rift with the company meant that Graham was looking for new ways to channel her energy outside of choreography. In a letter dated May 16, 1990 from Ron Protas to dance critic Anna Kisselgoff, Protas lays out their many ideas for the future. In the introduction, he writes that Martha is "reinventing herself" like a "snake shedding its skin," with an "eye to the next 60 years," although at the time she was already well into her nineties.<sup>69</sup> Protas was looking to "preserve Martha's geist and the quality of her work" and "to have the funds to maintain that level and to avoid that one sin in the arts that Martha always recoils at—mediocrity."<sup>70</sup>

Over the next three pages Protas outlines their idea for a "Second Home" in Santa Barbara (where Graham had lived during her teens), a partial base for the company and a location for "school and community outreach programs."<sup>71</sup> Next he suggests establishing the Martha Graham archives, potentially in conjunction with a west coast Isamu Noguchi Museum.<sup>72</sup> Additional papers include ideas such as "Martha the Musical." Protas also wanted to license and charge royalties for all of Graham's works and pedagogic techniques. De Mille writes that this would be nearly impossible as "everyone who had

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ron Protas, letter to Anna Kisselgoff, May 16, 1990, Box 233, Folder 8, Martha Graham Collection, Library of Congress Music Division hereafter MGC-LOC.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> The Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens had already opened in 1985.

taken classes from Martha for the last fifty years had gone away and taught her exercises and style.”<sup>73</sup> The list goes on to more business minded pursuits: corporate sponsorships, expansion of management, leasing of building, culminating in a Martha Graham documentary film and a feature film based on her life. He writes, “there has already been interest from Hollywood in producing a movie on Martha’s life.”<sup>74</sup> Graham’s archives include outlines for such a film, which was to begin with a series of train rides: Graham and her father en route to her first Denishawn concert; Graham discussing her career with “Miss Ruth”; Graham discovering the frontier. The film would end with Batsheva Rothschild inviting Graham to Israel to establish the “first modern Israeli dance company,” complete with scenes of “soldiers, Arabs.”<sup>75</sup> The outline concludes, “The whole movie will lead up to this point, which is not the end of her life, but leading her forward to the life she will continue for 40 more years.”<sup>76</sup> This simplified version of some of the key events in Graham’s life is designed to dramatize her story and create mass interest. The relationship between autobiography and film comes up repeatedly in the memoirs in this paper. The existence of an autobiography makes it easier for dancers’ stories to be turned into film, broadening the scope of their fame.<sup>77</sup>

The final idea listed is the Martha Graham autobiography, then already in the works. Protas writes about their progress in the plural: “We have already completed 100 pages and our goal is a next spring publication date.”<sup>78</sup> Protas’ use of the plural shows the

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<sup>73</sup> De Mille, 410.

<sup>74</sup> Ron Protas, letter to Anna Kisselgoff, May 16 1990, Box 233, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

<sup>75</sup> Graham dancer Linda Hodes danced for the company from 1953-1964 and went on to direct the new Batsheva Dance Company in Israel, so in a sense this part of Graham’s dream did come to fruition.

<sup>76</sup> “How to Begin Movie,” Box 227, Folder 5, MGC-LOC.

<sup>77</sup> This theme is a recurring one, beginning with Isadora Duncan who wrote her book in the hope that it would be turned into a feature film. Misty Copeland and Yvonne Rainer were the subjects of documentaries released shortly after the publication of their memoirs.

<sup>78</sup> Ron Protas, letter to Anna Kisselgoff, May 16, 1990, Box 233, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.



way that he saw the book as a joint project. Much of the drive behind these proposed ideas was financial need. By this point Protas was at the helm of the company, and Graham had placed her full trust in him. A memo sent to Protas on June 14, 1991 (just months after Graham's death) shows that the finished book earned \$90,000 in royalties.<sup>79</sup> This money was sorely needed. But Graham was also vain, and terrified that her company no longer needed her. Writing a memoir in the final months of her life was one last attempt to achieve immortality.

The success of *Blood Memory* was due in part to the clout and expertise of its editor, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Onassis entered the world of publishing in 1975, and the works she edited at Doubleday show her interest in dance. She brought out *Blood Memory* in the same year as Francis Mason's *I Remember Balanchine*, and said that one of her goals "was to make a serious contribution to dance literature."<sup>80</sup> Mason was a member of the Martha Graham Company's board and a close friend of Graham's. Archives show that all of Onassis' communication with Graham went through Protas, including the logistical aspects of the publishing process. A letter from Onassis' assistant Deborah Artman to Protas in February 1991 asks Protas to "fill out for Martha the attached Author Questionnaire form."<sup>81</sup> Protas is spanning a blurry line between Graham's assistant and the book's author. A letter from Protas to Onassis includes seven draft pages in Graham's voice with notes to Jackie in the margins. Following a paragraph in which Graham writes about her alcoholism, Protas writes in capital letters, "Jackie I will have to go over this with Martha again, to see what she wants in but she said I could

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<sup>79</sup> Michels to Ron Protas, Memorandum, June 14, 1991, Box 233, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

<sup>80</sup> Greg Lawrence, *Jackie as Editor: The Literary Life of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011), 214.

<sup>81</sup> Deborah Artman to Ron Protas, Doubleday Letter, February 1990, Box 233, Folder 9, MGC-LOC.

share this with you and so I do.”<sup>82</sup> This is one of many instances where Graham’s decisions regarding the book must go through Protas. In another line Protas writes, “Jackie there is a line about sex on a scrap of paper which I still cannot find. But basically it is sex as an animating thing. I will find I promise.”<sup>83</sup> This correspondence also illuminates the piecemeal way that the book was stitched together. After a paragraph on Graham’s dance technique Protas writes, “Jackie this is a mixture of Martha and me talking and an interview Martha did down in Charleston.”<sup>84</sup> Under the guidance of Onassis, Protas combined informal interviews he had conducted with Graham, excerpts from published interviews Graham had given, and Graham’s own rambling notes to compose her autobiography.

Though it seems that Protas considered himself invaluable in the writing process and oversaw communication between author and editor, Onassis did not see him that way. Francis Mason provides his take on the situation.

That book indeed Jackie worked on hard. Martha’s colleague at her dance company, Ron Protas, a jackass, manipulated and did everything but sleep with her. Protas was in the middle between Jackie and Martha. It was her last months, last year of her life, and she got that book done. Protas was always manipulating her. It got nasty in one or another, and Jackie had a hard time, getting that done the way she wanted it done.<sup>85</sup>

As Martha’s health failed, publisher Bruce Tracy had rushed the book into print.<sup>86</sup>

Whether the sped-up publication, Protas’ interference, or the unconventional construction of the book is at fault, *Blood Memory* did not turn out to include Graham’s “aesthetic insights and operational philosophy” or become “a manifesto... what likely Jackie was

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<sup>82</sup> Jackie Kennedy Onassis, letter to Ron Protas, Box 227, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Lawrence, 214.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 215.

hoping for.”<sup>87</sup> Had Protas exerted less control, perhaps Onassis’ vision would have been realized.

Protas continued to control Graham’s legacy after her death. A letter from the trust of the photographer Imogen Cunningham to Protas just one month after Graham died discusses Protas’ idea to publish a second book of Cunningham’s photographs of Graham with “a few casual observations” that Graham had written.<sup>88</sup> The members of the trust wrote that they have worked with “Mrs. Onassis in the past and know her well. As you say, Doubleday makes good sense.”<sup>89</sup> Protas planned on using his pre-existing connection with Onassis to squeeze a second book out of their relationship.

Though Onassis played a role in the formation of *Blood Memory*, archival material shows that Protas pulled the book together piecemeal from Graham’s notes, interviews, and conversations. *Blood Memory* opens with a very short philosophical manifesto, which quickly moves into childhood anecdotes. These run somewhat chronologically with biographical and familial information interspersed with stories that seem strange and out of place. One of these is about elephants. Graham recounts many stories about encounters with elephants, one at a childhood circus and one later in life in Ceylon. Archives show the elephant anecdote was developed from a series of informal interviews between Graham and Protas in which Protas asked leading questions based on previous conversations to record her memories in her words. The elephant questioning begins, “RP—Your poor mother you drove her close to the brink. Didn’t you go to the zoo once and she found you with the elephant?”<sup>90</sup> Graham’s response is just a few lines

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Imogen Cunningham, letter to Ron Protas, May 3, 1991, Box 233, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ron Protas, interview with Martha Graham, Box 227, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

long, though other papers show a full page on elephants, which comes out of Graham's musings on reincarnation. However, the story that ends up in the book is watered down, and frames her interaction as a first childhood encounter with show business. The published story opens, "I was completely overwhelmed by the activity, all of the lives around above me, the impossibilities of the various actions—barker, acrobat, clown."<sup>91</sup> This version is far more sentimental than the original, and includes a line which does not exist in Graham's notes: "His large, slow, wet eyes looked down to where I was—his very wink was like slowly falling curtains."<sup>92</sup> In *Blood Memory* the anecdote finishes: "But in that brief moment I made contact with something alive but not human. Something, in its own way, mysterious and worldly."<sup>93</sup> The elephant example shows the way that Graham's original non-sequential ramblings on elephants and reincarnation were turned into a neat anecdote with a moral in the published book. Based on what is known about Protas' involvement in the book one can imagine that Graham had told him this story, and he had an idea about how to frame it—all he needed was Graham to retell it so that he could capture it in writing and craft her words to fit his vision.

Another example of Protas' heavy-handed coaxing is in the book's title. Protas says to Graham in an interview, "I've never gotten you to record what your belief is about blood memory. Do you feel you can describe it to me now?"<sup>94</sup> Graham responds with some of the language that eventually appears in the book, that the idea goes "back thousands of years" and has to do with creating "one individual."<sup>95</sup> In the book these

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<sup>91</sup> Graham, 28.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ron Protas, interview with Martha Graham, Box 227, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

ideas are rewritten, “We carry thousands of years of that blood and its memory.”<sup>96</sup> The rest of the passage extrapolates on Graham’s notes and changes her language. These examples show the extent to which Protas was involved in the editing and shaping of the book.

While informal interviews between Graham and Protas provide much of *Blood Memory*’s content, the book also contains material from early Graham interviews. For instances, sections of Bianca Jagger’s interview with Graham in March 1990 are included almost verbatim in *Blood Memory*. An excerpt from that interview is about Helen Keller and her visit to Graham’s studio. In the interview Graham recounts Keller asking, “What is jumping?” In response, Graham “put Merce Cunningham at the barre and had him jump in the first position, into the air and down, in a very formal way. Helen threw her arms in the air and laughed, and said, ‘It’s just what I thought.’”<sup>97</sup> *Blood Memory* contains a nearly identical passage: “Merce jumped in the air in first position while Helen’s hands stayed on his body... You could see the enthusiasm rise in her face as she threw her arms up in the air and exclaimed, ‘How like thought. How like the mind it is.’”<sup>98</sup> This method of insertion shows the limited role that Graham played in the authorship of her autobiography; though these are technically her words (or at least close to them), they were written in another context and simply inserted into *Blood Memory*. Protas had asserted his control in Jagger’s original interview as well. A letter to Jagger’s assistant Ingrid Sischy urges Jagger to remove certain sections and change some of the wording.

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<sup>96</sup> Graham, 10.

<sup>97</sup> Bianca Jagger, interview with Martha Graham, May 30, 1990, Box 233, Folder 7, MGC-LOC.

<sup>98</sup> Graham, 149.

At one point, he tells Sischy to “substitute Martha’s name for my answer.”<sup>99</sup> Protas had responded to some of the questions directed at Graham in the interview, but wanted it to look as if only Graham was speaking.<sup>100</sup> Protas’ involvement in shaping Graham’s legacy runs so deep that as “the heir to the estate of Martha Graham”<sup>101</sup> Protas had control over which of Graham’s materials were sent to the Library of Congress to be made publically available for research.

The first two chapters of Graham’s autobiography, originally written for editor Hiram Haydn, also made their way into the final book. A draft of “Chapter Two” is available in the Graham archives. Though this material doesn’t appear in *Blood Memory* in the same form, it was used for the well-known documentary on Graham titled *A Dancer’s World*, broadcast by the Metropolitan Pittsburgh Education Television Station.<sup>102</sup> Graham’s dressing room script while preparing her makeup before a performance is verbatim the same as “Chapter Two.”<sup>103</sup> The only difference is the specifics of preparing to dance the character Jocasta in the ballet *Night Journey* in the film, which is not relevant on paper. This is yet another example of the canon of Graham material that existed and the multiplicity of ways it was copied and pasted to create Graham’s autobiography.

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<sup>99</sup> “1<sup>st</sup> Run Interview with Bianca Jagger Draft,” letter from Ron Protas to Ingrid Sischy, March 27, 1990, Box 233, Folder 7, MGC-LOC.

<sup>100</sup> Referring to a section in the interview about Halston, Graham’s costume designer who had just passed away, Jagger asks how many works had Halston designed the costumes for, and Protas responds “About twelve, I think. The first was for *Lucifer*, with Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn.” Protas’s notes to Jagger show that he asked this response to be ascribed to Graham.

<sup>101</sup> “Letter from Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress to Ron Protas,” July 3, 1991, Box 233, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

<sup>102</sup> *A Dancer’s Life: Act One*, Film, featuring the Martha Graham Company. (Directed by Peter Glushanok, Janus Films, WQED The Metropolitan Pittsburgh Educational Television Station).

<sup>103</sup> “Chapter Two,” Box 227, Folder 8, MGC-LOC.

Protas, Onassis, and the rest of the players involved in the creation of *Blood Memory* worked to curate a certain image of Graham for the public. Notes on early drafts lament that there is “Not enough of Martha’s human side, her good nature, her temper, her passion, her liberation.”<sup>104</sup> This is followed by a list of “Humor Examples” to include. A curious list titled “Character Descriptions” includes Graham’s primary characteristics: “Charming, Intelligent, Good-looking, Bisexual, Selfish, Deceitful.”<sup>105</sup> Though it is unclear who penned this list, these traits do not all exist in the picture of Martha painted in *Blood Memory*. It shows that conflict existed over which versions of Graham should be included in her memoir.

An aspect of her persona very evident in *Blood Memory* is her connection to celebrity. The book includes references to several famous actors, politicians, and socialites, and their personal relationships with Graham. An entire paragraph of Doubleday’s press release for *Blood Memory* is dedicated to the “many great artists and innovators included in her memoir” including many dancer and composers as well as “former students including: Betty Ford, Woody Allen, Liza Minelli, Bette Davis, Gregory Peck, Joanna Woodward and Madonna.”<sup>106</sup> It appears Graham and Protas were ensuring that if not remembered for her own achievements, at least Graham would be remembered as famous by proxy. As Duncan established in her memoir, name-dropping and links to fame are present in most the autobiographies in this paper as a means of solidifying a dancer’s sense of immortality and legacy.

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<sup>104</sup> “Notes on Draft,” Box 227, Folder 5, MGC-LOC.

<sup>105</sup> “Character Descriptions,” September 8, 1991, Box 227, Folder 5, MGC-LOC.

<sup>106</sup> “Doubleday to Publish Martha Graham’s Memoir,” Box 227, Folder 6, MGC-LOC.

If *Blood Memory* is composed of interviews, notes, conversations and more, assembled by Ron Protas and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, is it still written by Martha Graham? This raises the question of authorship, a troubling aspect of autobiography. Other memoirs analyzed in this paper used a ghostwriter, but Protas' involvement in *Blood Memory* is unique, and of course it was published posthumously. Graham and Protas were so eager to leave behind a memoir that they pulled the book together quite shoddily. But the book was, and continues to be, successful, and plays a huge role in Graham's legacy. Is the simple act of publishing a memoir more important than its content? Graham, like so many dancers, was desperate to leave a part of herself behind. But in doing so, she sacrificed part of her integrity as an independent woman. In gaining comfort, companionship, and guidance from Protas she also allowed him to take over her life. After Graham's death Protas sued the Martha Graham Dance Company over a complex claim that as Graham's heir he owned the rights to her dances, nearly causing the entire organization to collapse. It took years for the company to reestablish a sense of stability. In 2000, the company board voted Protas out as director.<sup>107</sup>

On April 18, 2016, the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Graham's first public performance with a group of her own dancers, the Martha Graham Dance Company staged a full, six-and-a-half-hour reading of *Blood Memory* at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. *The New York Times* wrote, "So-called marathon readings of famous—and famously long—books like 'Moby-Dick' and 'Ulysses' have become familiar occurrences in the literary world. Now the dance world is getting in on the act."<sup>108</sup> This

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<sup>107</sup> Jennifer Dunning, "Martha Graham Board Seeks to Remove Director," *The New York Times*, 25 March 2000.

<sup>108</sup> John Williams. "Live Reading of Martha Graham Memoir (All of It)," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2016.



framing draws a comparison between Graham's autobiography and masterpieces such as *Moby Dick* and *Ulysses*, pointing to the important role *Blood Memory* plays in the canon of dance literature. The Martha Graham Company regularly marks anniversaries through special performance seasons, but its commitment to reading *Blood Memory* shows the importance of Graham's book in revealing the woman behind the dances. The public reading split the book into sections read by a remarkable lineup of modern-day female dance celebrities: modern dance legend Carmen de Lavallade, MacArthur award-winning tap sensation Michelle Dorrance, *So You Think You Can Dance* commercial choreographer Sonya Tayeh, New York City Ballet's Wendy Whelan and Tiler Peck, and more. Though at first glance this group of dancers has little in common, they all inhabit a post-Graham world, and perhaps feel influenced by Graham's impact on dance. This event was not only a testament to Graham's legacy, but to the legacy of her impact, and her strategic move of self-canonization.

### Chapter III: Alvin Ailey, Bill T. Jones, and Misty Copeland

Though Alvin Ailey, Bill T. Jones, and Misty Copeland span many decades and different sectors of the New York City dance world, they are all lauded as boundary-breaking black dancers. All three produced autobiographies that they used as platforms to tell their stories of discrimination and tokenism. All three, moreover, employed ghostwriters in writing their memoirs, and their choice of ghostwriter shows intentionality in the way their stories are framed. Though childhood hardship is a theme that runs throughout all three books, the hardship these dancers faced intersects with issues of race, sexuality, and body. They have all also spent considerable time in the public eye. Writing memoirs gave these dancers a chance to share their histories with an audience beyond the dance world. Ailey's *Revelations*<sup>109</sup> is very private. Published nearly ten years after his death it reads like a tribute from his friends and family, designed to save face and protect his legacy. Jones' *Last Night on Earth*<sup>110</sup> is overwhelmingly voyeuristic, capitalizing on the salacious details of his life and piggybacking on publicity to enhance his fame. Copeland's *Life in Motion*<sup>111</sup> is a mix of these two – her memoir is not designed to promote a clear message, but rather to add another piece to her rising celebrity status, which includes endorsement deals, a documentary, and a personalized Barbie doll. Though dealing with similar issues, each of these books was written for a different reason. But a comparison of them shows the power of memoir to reclaim one's story.

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<sup>109</sup> Alvin Ailey, with A. Peter Bailey, *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1997).

<sup>110</sup> Bill T. Jones, *Last Night on Earth* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995).

<sup>111</sup> Misty Copeland, *Life in Motion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

In his book *The Male Dancer*, Ramsay Burt analyzes the tokenism and stereotyping that both Ailey and Jones describe in their memoirs. Burt writes that black performance “reinforces the stereotype of the over-sexed black stud, and it also relates to African American History... black slaves as commodities being forced to dance on the auction block.”<sup>112</sup> This idea contributes to how the two choreograph for themselves and choose to present themselves on stage. It also extends to these men’s relationships to fame and privacy, and the way they deal with being in the public eye off the stage. Burt’s theory of tokenism comes from a conversation with black filmmakers Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer. He writes, “Each film is burdened with inordinate pressure to be ‘representative’ and to act, like a delegate does, as a statement that ‘speaks’ for the black communities as a whole.... This of course underlines the problem of tokenism: the very idea that a single film could ‘speak for’ an entire community of interests reinforces the perceived secondariness of that community.”<sup>113</sup> Burt then discusses the cons of visibility. Dancers like Jones, Ailey, and Copeland, though his book focuses on men, cannot slip by “unmarked” like white dancers. These theories serve to set up the pressures that Ailey, Jones, and Copeland face to represent an entire community. But as is clear in their memoirs, all three internalize those pressures very differently in their work and in their lives. While Jones and Copeland embrace what makes them different, Ailey tries to stay as “unmarked” as possible.

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<sup>112</sup> Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 52.

<sup>113</sup> Burt, 53.

**Alvin Ailey, *Revelations*, 1997**

Alvin Ailey's 1997 *Revelations* is credited as being written "with" A. Peter Bailey, an editor at *Ebony Magazine* who met Ailey in the late 1980s while interviewing him. Bailey writes that he was surprised when Ailey chose him as his ghostwriter. "Alvin never really explained why he chose me over New York City's well-known dance writers, but during our conversations, I began to understand why he might want a black writer. There were things he dealt with in talking about his childhood years that a black writer would probably understand without his having to provide a lot of explanation."<sup>114</sup> Ailey was known for his privacy, and perhaps liked Bailey's distance from the New York City dance world, and the freedom it gave Ailey to construct his own narrative. For example, in Bailey's introduction to *Revelations* he writes that Ailey was unsure how he should deal in his memoir with his "famous breakdown, the one that, in 1980, was announced with screaming headlines in New York City newspapers and in quieter articles in papers throughout the country."<sup>115</sup> Ailey's choice to write in an autobiographical form, like his choice of a ghostwriter, allowed him to leave behind the personal legacy that he wanted.

However, the timeline didn't quite allow for that, as Ailey died in 1989 while working on the book with Bailey. By the end of his life their conversations were sporadic. Bailey conducted several interviews with Ailey's friends and family – the final section of *Revelations* is comprised of those testimonies – and it seems that Bailey independently constructed much of the writing from those testimonies, evident in the verbatim repetition in the narrative. In a section on his childhood, Ailey writes about his

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<sup>114</sup> Ailey, 11.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

mother's boyfriend, Amos Alexander, with whom he and his mother had lived for a few years. Ailey writes that Mr. Alexander had an "old Victrola, the kind with the white dog on top, and lots of records."<sup>116</sup> A remembrance at the end of the book given by Ailey's mother, Lula Cooper, reads almost identically: "He had all kinds of records that Alvin loved to play on Amos's old-time Victrola with the white dog on top looking in the horn."<sup>117</sup> Cooper relates many other childhood anecdotes that are almost identical to those in Ailey's recollections of his childhood. Such overlaps suggest that Bailey cobbled the book together from interviews with Ailey, and with those close to him, in the years after his death. Perhaps Ailey's original plan was to do more of the writing himself before he fell ill – it is impossible to know. The use of a ghostwriter is also evident in the structure of the memoir, though the book does not shy away from admitting that: Bailey writes a lengthy introduction and epilogue, and his name boldly appears on the front cover.

Whether or not the anecdotes come directly from him, the way that Ailey's childhood and personal life is framed in *Revelations* is connected to how he saw his role as a black choreographer. In comparing how Ailey protected himself from tokenism as compared to Bill T. Jones and Misty Copeland, one needs to keep in mind the historical and geographic world in which Ailey grew up. Ailey was born in in 1931 to a single mother in a heavily segregated area of south Texas. In the first few pages of *Revelations* Ailey writes in a matter of fact way about some of the trauma that accompanied his early life, including awareness that the Ku Klux Klan was present in his childhood town, that his mother was raped by four white men when he was five, and that as a young boy he

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 169.

would accompany his mother to the cotton fields where she worked.<sup>118</sup> He also writes about his complex relationship with his mother. “Here she was, a twenty-six-year-old woman with a young boy and no place to call home... she did some things that were really rough on me and gave me an inferiority complex *forever*. She used to drink a lot, and she would scream and holler and beat me.”<sup>119</sup> When Ailey was twelve, he moved with his mother to Los Angeles, where he lived until settling in New York as a dancer in his twenties. He writes that as an adolescent in Los Angeles he was in a gang, which he chose to leave on his own volition. Ailey repeatedly writes about feeling that he was out of place and did not belong.

Ailey’s childhood memories make up roughly the first thirty pages of his book, and he does not dwell on the drama or trauma of this time. Many of the other memoirs in this paper include childhood hardship as a means to show the perseverance of the writer, and to tell a sentimental rags-to-riches story. But Ailey grew up in an era when threats and acts of racial violence were very real. He was taught to keep his feelings to himself, and not to anguish self-indulgently over what made him different. This makes *Revelations* an unsentimental story. It does not vie for the reader’s sympathy, but rather dryly lays out the facts of Ailey’s early years to provide context for the rest of life.

Ailey’s upbringing is reflected in his choreography and contributes to its deeply human resonance. He writes about the gospel music in his most celebrated dance, *Revelations*, “The songs also represent a coming together of many things in my head – of youthful energy and enthusiasm, of my concern about projecting the black image properly. They reflect my own feelings about being pressed into the ground of Texas;

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 25.

they re-create the music I heard from ladies in Texas who sold apples while singing spirituals, memories of songs my mother would hum around the house.”<sup>120</sup> Ailey tried to make dances that “ordinary people can understand,” and believed that dance should be “a popular form, wrenched from the hands of the elite.”<sup>121</sup> He tried hard to get more black people into the audience, and sought to create dances that were simultaneously cathartic and celebratory of the black experience. Though Ailey expressed himself through his choreography, he was an extremely private person, and struggled with being dragged into the limelight as a hero for the black community.

From the introduction, Ailey is described as deeply private. He never welcomed friends or colleagues into his home, and kept details of his personal life close to the chest. Carmen de Lavallade, Ailey’s longtime dancer, collaborator, and closest friend since childhood, relates an anecdote from Ailey’s memorial service. “The pastor got up to talk about Alvin and then got into his childhood. All of a sudden there was this loud noise. It was like somebody had pulled a plug out of the microphone. The pastor was talking, but no one could really hear him. As soon as he stopped talking about Alvin’s childhood, the microphone went on again.”<sup>122</sup> Afterward de Lavallade and Ailey’s friends joked that Ailey had pulled the plug himself to preserve his privacy even after his death. Ailey’s value for privacy influences his book in many ways: it explains why he might have chosen Bailey as his ghostwriter, a writer without inside knowledge of the dance world, and it explains why Ailey wanted to write a book in autobiographical form to shape what was put out into the world about his personal life. This is evident in the description of his

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 12.

1980 breakdown. The year before, a close friend of Ailey's had passed away, leading him into heavy drug use, illegal activities, and eventual admission into a psychiatric hospital where he was diagnosed with manic-depression. Ailey writes very candidly about this period and what followed. "That post-hospital period was very traumatic. When I got out, I was upset and frightened because there had been a lot of publicity in the papers."<sup>123</sup> This matter of fact way of expressing how he felt is characteristic of Ailey's voice in *Revelations*. He does not play the victim, but instead writes frankly and drily, setting the facts straight. It is possible that Ailey, or Bailey after his death, knew that Jennifer Dunning was working on a biography of Ailey, and raced to get his own version of the story out in time, including just enough of the personal to attract readers but taking one last stab at preserving his privacy.<sup>124</sup>

This privacy comes up again when Bailey writes that Ailey died from a "rare blood disease,"<sup>125</sup> a common way at the time of referring to AIDS without acknowledging it. In contrast to Bill T. Jones, Ailey keeps his sexual life close to the vest; perhaps he was ashamed of his homosexuality or never fully escaped the Christian world of his youth. Also, he may have been concerned that donors would pull their support from his company. Ailey's privacy can be attributed to the era and culture that he was raised in; he did not feel openly proud of the identities that made him different.

The main goal of Ailey's memoir may have been to protect his privacy and set his story straight, but his book also serves to commemorate the teachers and dancers without whom his career would not have been possible. There is a tendency when examining the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>124</sup> Dance writer Jennifer Dunning's biography, *Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance*, was published in 1996.

<sup>125</sup> Ailey, 148.



careers of “genius” choreographers to regard them entirely self-created. But, in fact, Ailey started dancing and choreographing thanks to the Los Angeles-based teacher and choreographer Lester Horton, whom Ailey believed had not received nearly enough credit for his generosity, creativity, and the numerous well-known dancers he had trained. In *Revelations* Ailey also fights against the assumption that his world was entirely black. In fact, he lived in a partially integrated world, from his work with Lester Horton to the New York modern dance scene. In its early days, his company had an integrated repertory, challenging the nationalist ethos. In writing *Revelations* with Peter Bailey, Ailey, the reluctant celebrity, got the chance to write himself into history before the world configured him as its own kind of hero after his death. But if Ailey’s memoir reads like a documentary complete with testimonies from the people in his life, then Bill T. Jones’ memoir, *Last Night on Earth*, reads like a melodrama.

**Bill T. Jones, *Last Night on Earth*, 1995**

Though published just two years earlier, Jones' memoir is wildly different from Ailey's, although Jones, too, is upfront about his use of a ghostwriter. Jones' choice of Peggy Gillespie as his ghostwriter speaks to the focus of his memoir. Gillespie's biography on the last page of the book describes her as a freelance writer living in Western Massachusetts who writes primarily about stress reduction, multiracial families, and lesbian and gay families.<sup>126</sup> Like Bailey, Gillespie was not a dance writer and not part of the New York City dance scene. This choice allowed Jones to create an unmitigated narrative about his involvement in the New York dance world, and steer the focus of the book to his personal life and sexuality. In the Foreword of *Last Night on Earth* Jones writes about his relationship with Gillespie, citing their "temperamental compatibility," which allowed Gillespie to conduct lengthy interviews with Jones that were then reworked into text.<sup>127</sup> Most chapters of the book begin with a poetic vignette or anecdote in italics, sections that may have been written by Jones himself (some are even cited as journal entries). Regardless of their authorship, they seem to be included to draw the reader into each chapter with the allure of metaphorical language that softens the dryness of reading over seventy pages about someone's childhood. Jones' choice of ghostwriter and the structure of his memoir suggest that he wanted to be remembered for the intersecting qualities of his race and sexual orientation and for his dramatic and poetic approach to life: the sections on dance are far more straightforward and far less titillating.

Born two decades apart, Ailey and Jones grew up in very different eras and locations, influencing the way each embodied his blackness. Jones spent his childhood in

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<sup>126</sup> Jones, *Last Night on Earth*, "About the Authors."

<sup>127</sup> Jones., ix.

an integrated community in upstate New York in the 1960s and started dancing while a student at SUNY Binghamton. While many of Ailey's dances are inspired by the black culture of south Texas, and his company is made up of mostly black dancers, Jones' dances are more about his own personal story than about representing a community. Though he writes about the racism that he experienced as a child in a majority white environment and later in life with his partner Arnie Zane's Jewish and Italian-American parents, it is romanticized and described through a sepia-tinted lens. An example of such writing occurs when Jones describes one of the East Coast orchards where Jones' migrant parents picked fruit. "They offered a world where an eight-year-old boy, on his way to find a discreet spot to pee, could meet enchantment imagining fairy godmothers, wood spirits, and gnomes. There were no demons, no dark things in the orchard."<sup>128</sup> Jones describes a world of fantasy, not fear, very different from the way that Ailey offhandedly refers to accompanying his mother while she picked cotton in deep Texas.

In comparing himself to the white children he meets in elementary school, Jones focuses on the differences in their bodies. "And they were all soft. Even at age five, my own body seemed hard next to Terry's."<sup>129</sup> The theme of bodies runs throughout the book. But though Jones' black identity is very present for him, he does not tap into the history of black dancers the way that Ailey and Copeland do. Throughout his career Jones has made waves by "proudly insist[ing] that he was an artist first, a black man second."<sup>130</sup> Jones states that "came into the dance world...as an avant-gardist," more influenced by Yvonne Rainer than the black nationalist movement.<sup>131</sup> Though Jones is

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>130</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Body Politic," *New Yorker*, 28 November 1994, 117.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

among the best-known black choreographers in modern dance history, in his book, like in much of his life, he shies away from using his identity and stature to act as a representative of the black community in the way that Ailey did. This is seen also in the way that Jones misses the opportunity to write in his book about the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the dance world of the 1980s. Instead, apart from a few mentions of dancers in his company who died from AIDS (for example, Damien Acquavella of his well-known *D-Man in the Waters*), his discussion focuses solely on the death of his partner, Arnie Zane. Jones is more interested in his own personal art and experience than in acting as the representative of a group.

Jones' chapter "Absence" is about Zane's diagnosis with AIDS and quick decline. Though this chapter is touching and heartfelt, Jones does not write about the tragedy in the context of the greater AIDS epidemic. Though he writes briefly about some of the treatments and surgeries that Zane endured, he does not link his and Zane's experience to the greater trauma of the dance world. The closest that he gets is discussing his own public admission that he is HIV positive. He writes about being interviewed for a cover story for *The Advocate*, a mainstream gay publication, and mentioning during "this comfortable conversation" that he was HIV positive. After discussing this with his friends, he realized that he had been "outed" and called the writer, who refused to retract the statement.<sup>132</sup> He writes that from then on, every review about him read "Bill T. Jones, tall, black, HIV positive."<sup>133</sup> Whether he let this information slip on purpose or not, his admission falls in line with the voyeuristic nature of his book: he doesn't seem to hold back any personal details. The presence of HIV in his life could have given him the

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

chance to discuss what this era felt like, but instead he writes only of his own experiences.

His outlet for dealing with Zane's death and his own diagnosis came in his 1994 dance work *Still/Here*. For its creation, which Jones discusses at length in his memoir, he traveled around the country doing workshops with terminally ill people, collecting their movements and words to mold into a dance piece for his company. The *New Yorker* dance critic Arlene Croce wrote a long, damning review of the work, "Discussing the Undiscussable" without seeing it. "By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reaches of criticism. I think of him as literally undiscussable—the most extreme case among the distressingly many now representing themselves to the public not as artists but as victims and martyrs."<sup>134</sup> Though Jones writes extensively about *Still/Here* in his memoir, he excludes mention of this review entirely. Yet what Croce is saying rings true in the way that Jones' book is constructed. By allowing the reader into the far reaches of his personal life and relating his numerous hardships, Jones is setting himself beyond reproach.

Though in many ways Jones seems to thrive on the identities that make him stand out, like Ailey he writes about his struggles with tokenism and feeling like a "marginal, special black" while performing.<sup>135</sup> He's also resentful of the way that the viewer sees the black male body on stage. He imagines the spectators saying, "you're a black man – take off your shirt...Oh, I bet you have a dick down to your knees."<sup>136</sup> Black historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes in his 1994 *New Yorker* profile of Jones that "The black body has,

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<sup>134</sup> Arlene Croce, "Discussing the Undiscussable," *The New Yorker*, 26 December 1994, 54.

<sup>135</sup> Burt, 52.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

of course, been demonized in Western culture: represented as ogreish, coarse, and highly, menacingly sexualized. But the black body has also been valorized, represented, perceived as darkly alluring—still highly, menacingly sexualized, but, well, in a *good* way. And this, historically, is its ambiguous dual role in the Western imagination.”<sup>137</sup> Jones embraces this dual role, mixing up voyeurism, sexuality, and race. Gates writes that Jones “does not disavow the gaze of white fascination: he works with it, plays with it, *uses* it... To him there’s an important difference between exploiting yourself and being exploited by another. So it’s not that Jones doesn’t want to be objectified; it’s just that he wants to be the one to do it.”<sup>138</sup> Jones’ memoir is no exception; as in his dances and performances, in *Last Night on Earth* Jones objectifies his own body.

Jones’ book is filled with detailed descriptions of bodies and sex. For example, he writes about his sexual awakening as a child, “mooching” against his siblings and experimenting with a friend, “moving against her softness with my pants around my ankles.”<sup>139</sup> He describes visiting his older brother Azel and glimpsing him sleeping while “His penis was fully exposed through a large rip in his pajamas.... And I suppose many would say his penis was the black man’s penis of the imagination, sleeping as he slept.”<sup>140</sup> Leaving his childhood experiments, Jones also writes extensively about the gay baths of New York City in the 1980s, providing them with a kind of homage and even admitting that he had “romantic notions about the baths.”<sup>141</sup> He writes, “When I think of the baths, I don’t see my dick leading me down the halls and in and out of the cubicles.

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<sup>137</sup> Gates, 120.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>139</sup> Jones, 70.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

My dick is not my enemy. Its gentle probe is a part of myself that entered another person for a chance to pull that person closer, a chance to make a promise.”<sup>142</sup> As if writing at length about his genitalia is not enough, Jones then segues into a comparison of the experience of being at a bathhouse to that of the dance form contact improvisation, writing that he sees both as “some higher expression of our humanity, of our participation in human history as it is told through sex.”<sup>143</sup> While very physical, contact improvisation historically negates the erotic aspect of physicality, and it is all but unheard of to hear it analyzed in these terms.

Jones’ seeming obsession with bodies and sex complicates the idea of voyeurism. In an interview with Gates, Jones brings up a relationship that he had as a teenager with an older local man who insisted on watching while Jones and his girlfriend had sex. Gates writes, “it’s a scenario of voyeurism that raises questions: about the man who insisted on the arrangement, about young Billy who accommodated himself to it. But this collision of intimacy and display—this introduction sex as, in the first instance, a spectator sport—seems to coincide almost too aptly with the artist’s insistence on transgressing the boundaries of public and private through the medium of performance.”<sup>144</sup> And this voyeurism comes up in Jones’ art again and again. At a fundraiser for his company in the Hamptons, Jones’ performed for the guests, though his piece became “exceedingly site-specific” when he kissed audience members on the mouth, and then dropped his pants and exposed himself to two children who were accompanying their prospective board

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Gates, 115.

member parents.<sup>145</sup> Jones defends his actions as “a way of ‘specifically making reference to the power of my body, and the taboo that it represents.’”<sup>146</sup>

Nudity also plays a role in Jones’ seminal work, *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land* (1990), where his company members and fifty local people are all nude onstage, which in the words of Jones “became a metaphor for our true commonality.”<sup>147</sup> Jones dedicates a chapter of his memoir to *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that begins with Jones’ personal history and chronology including big moments in his family’s life intertwined with African American history starting in the sixteenth century. This is the one chapter in *Last Night on Earth* where Jones describes using black history and culture as inspiration for his choreography.

“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was three and one-half hours long, and it toured for almost two years. It was denounced by the Vatican. It was deemed sprawling and full of platitudes, applauded for its reliance on community, the process by which it was created, its humanity, and its scope. It was the largest work I ever made and a work that came out of my desire to sum up everything I believed. It was impossible for it to succeed, but it did not fail.”<sup>148</sup>

Though Jones is not considered to be a creator of black dances like Ailey or an icon for black dancers like Copeland, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is an example of the way that his identity as a black man influences his choreography. As Gates states, “Jones’s relation to black culture is as complicated as his relation to the main currents of modern dance. Yet among many black artists and intellectuals, Jones commands enormous respect; he is often taken to represent a new wave of black creativity.”<sup>149</sup> Though Jones does not make

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Jones, 223.

<sup>149</sup> Gates, 124.



this clear in his memoir, in the 1990s Jones became part of the “black intelligentsia,” and acted as the token dancer in a new wave of black public intellectuals.

A 1995 *New Yorker* article outlines the rise of a new group of public black intellectuals including not only college professors but also activists, cultural critics, poets, and more.<sup>150</sup> Key on this list is Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who clearly had a close relationship with Jones and wrote about him in the media through the lens of culture instead of dance. Gates included a chapter on Jones in his book *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*,<sup>151</sup> which highlights the fact that Jones was the sole dancer. Jones maintains that role in this group, which notably includes Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Cornel West, and Maya Angelou. A 1995 film called *Black Is...Black Ain't* contains interviews by “Black thinkers like Cornel West, Angela Davis, Michele Wallace, Bell Hooks... [and] The dancer Bill T. Jones.”<sup>152</sup> This gave Jones a certain cachet and intellectual presence. *Last Night on Earth* was already in progress during Jones’ entrée into this world, and he does not focus on this new role in his book. Yet Jones came to represent this movement. “In short, he’s become something of a poster boy for the Zeitgeist, a redoubtable achievement for someone working in the semi-sequestered, self-consciously avant-garde world of modern dance.”<sup>153</sup>

Still, though Jones’ memoir tends towards the flowery and salacious, it helps to establish his legacy and celebrity, and manipulates voyeurism to his advantage. Dance critics have questioned Jones’ success, stating that he “hit his stride when the dance boom

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<sup>150</sup> Michael Bérubé, “Public Academy,” *New Yorker*, 9 January 1995, 75.

<sup>151</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 2011).

<sup>152</sup> Stephen Holden, “Black Identity, Examined in an Artist’s Last Days,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1995.

<sup>153</sup> Gates, “The Body Politic,” 114.

was over—a lot of the talent was really decimated by AIDS. That’s why he and Mark Morris have the stage to themselves. And among black artists today who work in this vein he’s far and away the strongest. Still, the reason he’s getting so many awards so soon is that people aren’t gambling on his surviving: they’re giving it to him now.”<sup>154</sup> But whether Jones’ memoir is intended to push back against criticism and declare his success, or act as its own piece of art, Jones’ *Last Night on Earth* is written in an emotionally manipulative way that allows Jones to write himself into history as a celebrity. In comparison, Misty Copeland had celebrity thrust upon her and writes a memoir to further engage her fans.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 124.

### Misty Copeland, *Life in Motion*, 2014

Though Jones is still creating new works, both he and Ailey wrote their memoirs looking back at a wide spread of their careers and accomplishments. Misty Copeland's autobiography is different. She wrote it at the age of thirty-two, right before she was promoted to principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre. Her career was far from over. Copeland is lauded as "one of the biggest crossover stars in ballet," appealing to the general public and balletomanes alike.<sup>155</sup> Her fame may seem like it appeared overnight, but in fact it was due to her savvy manager, Gilda Squire, who worked "tirelessly" for "three months to get things off the ground."<sup>156</sup> Squire started promoting Copeland after the film *Black Swan* brought ballet into popular culture. After many talk show appearances, Copeland got a series of book deals. The first was a picture book, *Firebird*,<sup>157</sup> and the second was her memoir, *Life in Motion*, which she wrote with ghostwriter Charisse Jones. Copeland's most recent book, *Ballerina Body*,<sup>158</sup> is "a health and fitness guide" released in 2017.<sup>159</sup> Charisse Jones has written for several publications on trends in the travel industry and social justice issues. She currently writes for the newspaper *USA Today*, which focuses on general news as well as popular culture. Like the ghostwriters employed by Alvin Ailey and Bill T. Jones, Charisse Jones is not a dance writer. This explains why, as critiques of the book mention, it contains almost nothing about ballet. Jones' experience writing for the general public allows the book to move along quickly and easily. But this also gives it a shallow feel; the Misty Copeland

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<sup>155</sup> Ruth La Ferla, "The Rise and Rise of Misty Copeland," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2015.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Misty Copeland, *Firebird* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons Books for Young Readers, 2014).

<sup>158</sup> Misty Copeland, *Ballerina Body* (New York: Grand Central Life & Style, 2017).

<sup>159</sup> La Ferla.

story appeals to young readers and seniors alike, because it is more about perseverance than about ballet. ABT Artistic Director Kevin McKenzie states it is “a fascinating human triumph, less about being the first African-American dancer to become a principal with the company and more about the adversity she went through to obtain her dreams.”<sup>160</sup> And the book is set up that way: it glazes over an eating disorder and ballet as an art form to tell the story of overcoming adversity that her fans are expecting.

Copeland deals with tokenism in a complex way. On one hand, she embraces it. She experienced discrimination to get where she is today, and the public’s acknowledgment of her unique status as a black ballerina enabled her to soar to greater heights. But she has doubts as well. She writes, “will I forever be ‘the black ballerina,’ an oddity who doesn’t quite compare?”<sup>161</sup> The Prologue to her autobiography leads the reader through the day she originated the lead in *Firebird*, the moment her career really took off. In between each paragraph she writes, “*This is for the little brown girls.*” Copeland sees herself as a role model and uses that power both to advance her own career and to encourage racial diversity in ballet and inspire young black dancers to believe in themselves. On the other hand, she admirably recognizes in her memoir that she’s not the first black ballerina. She writes that part of her “purpose as an African American ballerina is to share Raven’s [Wilkinson] story and educate people on our history within the ballet world. Not just Raven, but Aesha Ash, Alicia Graf Mack, Lauren Anderson, Tai Jimenez, and the myriad other black swans who have enriched the world of ballet but who have often not gotten their due.”<sup>162</sup> Part of the narrative surrounding her is that she’s

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Copeland, *Life in Motion*, 262.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 228.

the “first,” and she uses her book in part to acknowledge those who came before her. This is evident in the minimal attention she gives to Dance Theatre of Harlem, a historically black ballet company where ironically, both Alicia Graf Mack and Tai Jimenez got their start.

*Life in Motion* tells a story of perseverance. Copeland writes about a tumultuous childhood as her mother moved from one husband to another and took her many children along with her. She writes about navigating an alcoholic stepfather and occasionally living with her family in a motel, eating food from a vending machine for dinner. She details legal battles between her mother and her ballet teacher over custody, dealing with being rejected from ballet programs presumably on the grounds of her race, and overcoming injury, all to leap through the ranks of ABT, perform with the musical artist Prince at Madison Square Garden, and make guest appearances in Broadway shows. But despite the almost generic story of overcoming obstacles that her memoir lays out, Copeland’s *Life in Motion* contributes to her celebrity status. In addition to writing three books, Copeland was the subject of a documentary, and has become a fashion icon in magazines and a regular on talk shows. Her ad campaign for the athletic wear brand Under Armour “drew four million views on YouTube within a week of its...release.”<sup>163</sup> Copeland has her own dancewear line, and 1.4 million followers on Instagram, the popular social media site.<sup>164</sup> Fans can even take home a personalized Misty Copeland Barbie doll. Her success also benefits ABT, a company known for a repertory featuring its ballerinas. Her crossover appeal sells tickets for the company, which raises questions about the speed with which she was promoted.

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<sup>163</sup> La Ferla.

<sup>164</sup> As of April 26, 2017.

It is curious that in an age of social media where followers can consume bite-size clips of Copeland's musings and the goings-on of her quotidian life on the internet multiple times a day, memoir is still an important part of her media blitz. Memoir provides an unrivaled way to feel close to the author and hear their story first hand. But if Ailey, Jones, and many of the other authors in this paper were already famous and wrote a version of their stories to promote some part of their legacies, then Copeland's memoir is an integral part of the initial creation of her legacy. Her fame and success came together at the same time. The promotion to principal dancer, the dream she highlights in her memoir, came to fruition shortly after her book's publication.

When asking the question, "how do dancers use autobiography to write themselves into history?" Alvin Ailey, Bill T. Jones, and Misty Copeland all provide different but very pointed answers. All three use ghostwriters, deal with being tokenized as black dancers, and grapple with the role of fame in their lives. Ailey's *Revelations* works to protect his privacy and set his story straight. Jones' *Last Night on Earth* gives him a platform to discuss, albeit narcissistically, his intersecting identities. And Copeland's *Life in Motion* helps establish her fame, success, and position as a role model. The directed messages that these three books send point to the power that memoir has for dancers to frame their legacies.

**Chapter IV:**  
**Jacques d'Amboise, *I Was a Dancer*, 2011, and Allegra Kent, *Once a Dancer...*, 1996**

George Balanchine is a totemic figure in the forging of a new American form of ballet in the twentieth century. Though prolific, Balanchine had a complicated way of relating to his dancers, and chose favorites to become stars. He treated his female dancers as muses and had very different expectations for them than for the men. After Balanchine's death in 1983 a flurry of autobiographies were published by his dancers. They allowed these dancers to convey to the world what it was like to dance for Balanchine, establish their celebrity outside of the New York City Ballet (NYCB), and share details about Balanchine that had remained private before his death. The most original and remarkable of these books are Allegra Kent's 1997 *Once a Dancer...*<sup>165</sup> and Jacques d'Amboise's 2011 *I Was a Dancer*.<sup>166</sup> Kent and d'Amboise were both favorites of Balanchine, but though they worked closely together their experiences in the company were very different. Unlike many NYCB memoirists, neither Kent nor d'Amboise employed ghostwriters, and their respective voices are very clear in their writing. Comparing their memoirs provides a telling picture of Balanchine's relationships with male versus female dancers, and shows the power of memoir to chronicle not only individual lives but also the life of a group of people all deeply marked by the same figure.

Balanchine founded New York City Ballet in partnership with Lincoln Kirstein in 1948. Both d'Amboise and Kent joined NYCB when they were fifteen years old, d'Amboise in 1949, and Kent in 1953. Both dancers had exceptionally long careers –

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<sup>165</sup> Allegra Kent, *Once a Dancer...* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

<sup>166</sup> Jacques d'Amboise, *I Was a Dancer* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

Kent was officially let go from the company just a week before Balanchine's death. Though many other Balanchine dancers published memoirs after his death including Merrill Ashley,<sup>167</sup> Gelsey Kirkland,<sup>168</sup> Robert La Fosse,<sup>169</sup> Suzanne Farrell,<sup>170</sup> Edward Villella,<sup>171</sup> and Maria Tallchief,<sup>172</sup> d'Amboise and Kent share similarities notable in the nearly identical titles of their books: *Once a Dancer...* (hers), *I Was a Dancer* (his). The slight difference in titles speaks to how their careers ended. The ellipses at the end of Kent's title seems to imply "Once a Dancer... always a dancer," which rings true for Kent, who had a very hard time finding a career path outside of performing. D'Amboise, on the other hand, had a very successful post-NYCB career as a choreographer and the founder and director of National Dance Institute (NDI), teaching dance to children in public schools all over New York City and even abroad. His life as a dancer was only a piece of his legacy, and his book touches on his success with NDI as well as in NYCB.

The chief similarity between d'Amboise and Kent is the extent to which they owe their success to Balanchine. Both came from humble beginnings, and neither the young Joseph Ahearn nor Iris Cohen, as these two dancers were born, could have imagined the future that lay in store for them. Balanchine acknowledged his appreciation of their gifts by creating and reviving extraordinary ballets for them. For d'Amboise the critical work *Apollo*, for Kent, *La Sonnambula*. Kent recalls the meaning of being featured by Balanchine. "He created something for me, he sees something for me, he trusts me, he

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<sup>167</sup> Merrill Ashley, with Larry Kaplan, *Dancing for Balanchine*. (New York: Dutton, 1984).

<sup>168</sup> Gelsey Kirkland, with Greg Lawrence, *Dancing on My Grave*. (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

<sup>169</sup> Robert La Fosse, with Andrew Mark Wentink, *Nothing to Hide*. (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1987).

<sup>170</sup> Suzanne Farrell, with Toni Bentley, *Holding On to the Air*. (New York: Summit Books, 1990).

<sup>171</sup> Edward Villella, with Larry Kaplan, *Prodigal Son*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

<sup>172</sup> Maria Tallchief, with Larry Kaplan, *Maria Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina*. (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997).



sees that I am talented.”<sup>173</sup> Both dancers gave Balanchine their all – beautiful performances, unbridled energy, and life-long devotion; he in turn, gave them both a life.

Kent and d’Amboise describe their first encounters with Balanchine very differently. Kent’s initial reaction was that “He was good-looking and, for his age—forty-eight—very trim; his cheekbones elegantly defined his handsome face.”<sup>174</sup> But memories of him are not as clear to her as those of her female teachers at home in California, or during her early years at the School of American Ballet. “The difference: he was a man and they were women. I was allowed to love them safely and with complete sanction from my mother. A great male teacher was not within this realm.”<sup>175</sup> While Kent’s initial description is already wrought with gender tension, d’Amboise first writes about Balanchine in an almost comical way, critiquing him slightly for his eccentricities and accent. “I couldn’t take my eyes off Balanchine’s nose. He was plagued by a nervous twitch, sniffing continuously, his mouth playing second fiddle to the nose. Cigarettes moved from fingers to mouth to ashtray, nonstop. He was this nice man with dark hair. His words were hard to understand, but he conveyed whatever movement he wanted by demonstrating.”<sup>176</sup> D’Amboise, like other male NYCB memoirists, feels free to criticize Balanchine far more readily than their female counterparts. This is because Balanchine had real friendships with the men, particularly d’Amboise, while he saw the women as potential romantic partners and inspirational muses. After a few years in the company Kent still felt distance from Balanchine. “Although we were working closely together,

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<sup>173</sup> *Dancing for Mr. B. – Six Balanchine Ballerinas*. Directed by Anne Belle and Deborah Dickson. 1 hr. 26 min. 1989. DVD.

<sup>174</sup> Kent, 42.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>176</sup> D’Amboise, 42.

Balanchine and I never had a truly personal conversation when I was young.”<sup>177</sup> Kent writes, “The way Mr. B. communicated with me was almost the way a human relates to wildlife. Some people are good with untamed animals. They don’t startle the creatures.”<sup>178</sup> As Kent suggests, she was eccentric, and her strange upbringing had not left her with stellar social skills; it is possible that Balanchine responded more easily to d’Amboise’s outgoing nature. But as both dancers grew older and their personal and romantic lives flourished, the difference in Balanchine’s behavior became more obvious.

A few years into the company, d’Amboise began dating fellow NYCB member Carolyn George; they eventually married on New Year’s Day 1956. Their courtship grew during Balanchine’s fourth marriage to a ballerina, this time to the young Tanaquil Le Clercq, and “the Balanchines,” as d’Amboise refers to them, included d’Amboise and George in their family life, inviting them over for dinners of steak, potatoes, ice cream, and wine, followed by rounds of canasta. D’Amboise recalls that the next day their conversations would continue in rehearsal, with little change in relationships. “She’d (Le Clercq) draw away from me, dramatically, as I partnered her. ‘Do I detect a little purple staining the whites of your ballet shoes? Jacques, I can’t believe it! You’re sweating wine.’”<sup>179</sup> This is one of many examples of the ease at which d’Amboise could meld his personal and professional lives. His friendship with Balanchine and Le Clercq ran deep; d’Amboise and George even scheduled their wedding for the day after Balanchine and Le Clercq’s anniversary, so that the two couples could share their celebrations. “Over the next decade, Tanny, Balanchine, Carrie, and I celebrated every New Year’s Eve

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<sup>177</sup> Kent, 77.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>179</sup> D’Amboise, 168.

together.”<sup>180</sup> When d’Amboise and George gave birth to their first child they named him George for his mother’s maiden name, but Balanchine insisted it was a tribute to his own first name. Balanchine celebrated d’Amboise’s personal life – he was likely grateful to have a heterosexual male peer in the ballet world to spend time with. Balanchine eventually became an adopted member of d’Amboise’s family. Though Balanchine’s family life was erratic, he clearly appreciated moments of traditional security and comfort. Ballerina Karin von Aroldingen, whom d’Amboise refers to as Balanchine’s best friend in the company, and her husband and children similarly became a surrogate family for Balanchine.<sup>181</sup> He and Von Aroldingen even purchased summer homes in Long Island near each other. Balanchine had no problem with d’Amboise and George having four children. Although they both danced for him, d’Amboise was his star, George just another corps dancer, which shifted the dynamic from his usual relationships with his ballerinas. This was certainly not the case for Kent, who chronicles Balanchine’s reaction to the same personal milestones very differently.

At first, Kent was focused entirely on ballet, and Balanchine played a central role in her life. In response to her mother encouraging her to date she writes, “I knew I’d have dates one day, but right now ballet was my life. And the one man in it was Mr. B.”<sup>182</sup> Though Kent was born Jewish, her mother became a Christian Scientist and raised her children in her adopted faith. Kent’s parents separated early on, and her childhood was very unstable. She was moved all over the country, sent to a boarding school at a young age, and never knew when she would get a glimpse of her father, a traveling salesman. In

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>181</sup> D’Amboise, 346.

<sup>182</sup> Kent, 93.

Balanchine Kent seemed to find a combination of father and husband, an ever-present male figure offering confirmation and support. Kent believes that Balanchine recognized in her “psychological raw material that could be molded and remolded into images of sensuality—unrealized and restrained, but there, just under the surface.” This was evident in that “the ballets Mr. B. did for me evolved from my suppressed inner life as much as from my dancing talent.”<sup>183</sup> The “suppressed inner life” that Kent refers to stems from her roots in Christian Science, which led her to suppress her feelings including pain. Kent’s belief in Christian Science led her to make self-destructive decisions. On many occasions Kent writes about refusing medication, following her mother blindly when she instructed her to leave the company, try out university, or change her face through multiple cosmetic surgeries.

One of the reasons that Kent liked ballet was the distance it gave her a life apart from her mother without having to be fully autonomous. “Another reason it [ballet] was fantastic, I didn’t have to open my mouth. I could keep my mouth shut and not reveal everything to my mother.”<sup>184</sup> One of Kent’s most lauded roles in a Balanchine ballet was in *Seven Deadly Sins*, where Austrian actress Lotte Lenya sang the role of Anna 1 and Kent danced it as Anna 2. Lenya and Kent were one person in two bodies, with Kent as “the one who didn’t speak, I was that half of the alter ego, the silent one. So my only way of expression, unless I’d bust out of my skin, was through acting up, and dancing, and jumping.”<sup>185</sup> Kent remembers relating to the role because she felt “like my mother and I had some of that confusion also, over whose career was it.”<sup>186</sup> But though Kent’s time in

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>184</sup> *Dancing for Mr. B.*

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

the studio was her own, she still did not take full control of her life, a feature Balanchine likely noticed when giving her the role in *Seven Deadly Sins* where, as Kent puts it, “Lotte had power over me, and told me what to do.”<sup>187</sup> In her memoir Kent is open about her naiveté, particularly during her early years in the company, which made her vulnerable to Balanchine’s power.

Many of Balanchine’s muses became his lovers, and Kent lived with confusion over the extent of what Balanchine wanted from her. “There was, of course, always the question of what Mr. B. ultimately wanted from me. I believe that neither of us really knew, but when he was creating this part, I felt he was in love with me, because it was such a gift. Different kinds of love were bound together in him, and I realized that, although I may not have wished to say it to anybody.”<sup>188</sup> Whether Balanchine was romantically in love with Kent or just loved her for her dancing, Kent kept her personal life entirely private from Balanchine.

In 1959 Kent spontaneously married a celebrity fashion photographer, Bert Stern. She had a small ceremony with just a few guests. Though Stern invited his friends, Kent “invited no one from the dance world—none of the dancers, or my teachers, not even Mr. B. Perhaps I was hoping I could keep my two lives separate.”<sup>189</sup> Kent casually told Balanchine of her marriage when she returned to work. “On my first day back to work after the wedding, Mr. B. kept unguardedly casting his glance over me. I knew Mr. Balanchine’s attitude toward marriages that were not his own...As we began work at the barre, his eyes traveled over my body. This was a mystery and he was searching for

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Kent., 77.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 123.

clues.”<sup>190</sup> Kent’s relationship with Stern quickly disintegrated, though she stayed with him on and off for nearly a decade, giving birth to their three children. Though Kent writes in her memoir that she kept the two men in her life totally separate, it seems that Stern had more involvement with the company than Kent lets on in her memoir. Some of the photos in *Once a Dancer...*, which seem to come from a company photo shoot, are credited to Stern, and he also filmed Balanchine’s *Don Quixote*.<sup>191</sup> Balanchine must have had enough of a relationship with Stern that he allowed him to be involved with the company behind the scenes. Nevertheless, Kent writes about how her distrust of men complicated her relationship with Balanchine. “I had no practice in relationships of any kind. I didn’t even trust Mr. B., particularly when he was complimentary. To me all men had a crazy side: I equated some of Mr. B.’s greatest ideas with my father’s wild schemes.”<sup>192</sup> Balanchine was a father figure who offered approval and handed out roles, and was also a stand-in for Kent’s often absent, philandering, and drug-addicted husband.

Kent held Balanchine to a standard impossible for another man to achieve. When Stern photographed Marilyn Monroe for *Vogue* and send her three dozen red roses Kent complained to her husband for never sending her three dozen roses, writing, “Mr. B. once sent Alexandra Danilova one hundred roses when she complained about not receiving opening night flowers. But Bert was not Mr. B.”<sup>193</sup> In vetting a potential boyfriend much later in life, Kent writes that she asked, “Have you heard of Balanchine?” He said yes. That was promising.”<sup>194</sup> Balanchine was more than just a choreographer to Kent – she

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>191</sup> Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. “Don Quixote” New York Public Library Digital Collections.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 324.

writes about him as if he were magical. “There was no doubt about it: Mr. B.’s love, approval, and even requests were a drug, a drug that imbued me with energy.”<sup>195</sup>

When Kent decided to get pregnant, she told no one, not her husband, her mother, or Balanchine. Kent used having children as a way to take a much-needed break from dancing, and to spend time resting at home surrounded by loved ones, instead of exhausting herself emotionally and physically with a taxing job. Though Balanchine discouraged ballerinas from having children, he took Kent back into the company again and again, entranced by her dancing despite her breaking all his rules. “Balanchine was well known for saying that ballerinas should avoid three things—getting married, having children, and dancing ‘expressively’—and he was harsh in his enforcement of this code with everyone except me.”<sup>196</sup> In a world controlled by fanatic religion, a controlling mother, and an unstable husband, having children became Kent’s own form of rebellion. After her first child was born, Kent returned to the company for its 1962 tour of Soviet Russia. Kent was a huge success, reinvigorating Balanchine with excitement over her potential. Before returning to New York he said to Kent, “Forget your husband, forget your baby, only work, work at your turnout and on your feet. It’s not too late.”<sup>197</sup> But Kent did just the opposite. She felt empowered by the freedom that having children gave her, and confidently made her own decision. “Mr. B. said, ‘Now Allegra, no more babies. Enough is enough. Babies are for Puerto Ricans’ I smiled and thought, *and for little Polish girls, too. NO man can tell me what to do when it comes to babies.* I had not even consulted Bert about having a second child... *You may direct the New York City Ballet,*

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 174.

*but I direct my own life.*<sup>198</sup> When d'Amboise had children, Balanchine hoped they would be named for him, but when Kent had children he saw it as a betrayal. In moments like this in *Once a Dancer...* Kent seems to collude her own self-destruction, exerting agency in misguided ways that tend to leave her unhappy, lonely, and distanced from ballet, sitting at home with the knowledge that other dancers were lined up to fill her shoes.

D'Amboise dedicates a chapter to "Balanchine's Muses" in which he lays out what he sees as Balanchine's romantic habits. D'Amboise writes that Balanchine would often say, "Ballet is woman,"<sup>199</sup> and used the women who came through his company as inspiration. As d'Amboise explains it, "No single woman in Balanchine's life served as a supreme muse. Rather, a succession of ballerina-muses would rise and fade, like a range of mountain peaks, inspiring him to near-obsessive passion and leading him to create extraordinary ballets. Allegra, one of those muses, commented to me, 'From the new girl in the corps to the principal ballerinas, he loved us all...in varying degrees.'"<sup>200</sup> This is one of many times where d'Amboise writes about Kent in his memoir, creating an interesting comparison between Kent's own experience and d'Amboise's take on it. D'Amboise describes the string of ballerinas who inspired Balanchine, and how he always was married to one with another waiting in the wings. In the film, *Dancing for Mr. B.* which highlights six of these muses, Balanchine's third wife, Maria Tallchief, recalls that "When we were married it was almost like I was the material that he wanted to use." Tallchief felt that Balanchine married her in part to keep her in the company.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>199</sup> D'Amboise, 267.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> *Dancing for Mr. B.*



Tallchief remembers that when Balanchine initially developed an interest in Le Clercq he often featured the two ballerinas together, cultivating a new muse while letting his current wife fade, till he eventually had his marriage with Tallchief annulled and married Le Clercq.

In order to keep up appearances and decorum, Balanchine often took d'Amboise along with him while courting the next "ballerina-muse." Kent recalls an incident on tour in Rome when she and d'Amboise were still very young and relatively unestablished in the company. D'Amboise had heard about a great restaurant and took Kent and company member Barbara Bocher there after the show, but when they walked in Balanchine was sitting with Le Clercq and her mother. The younger dancers felt embarrassed, as if they were intruding uninvited on a different world. But Balanchine said to d'Amboise, "You know, Jacques, when I was your age I did the same thing. I always took out two girls at the same time." Kent writes, "I smiled and thought this an odd comment, because at that very moment Mr. B. was still with two girls."<sup>202</sup> Later Balanchine would invite d'Amboise and Kent to his post-show dinners. D'Amboise recalls that while sitting with his chosen muse over dinner, Balanchine would always say that that evening she had danced like an angel. "With every muse, it was a variation on the same script. Allegra's reaction—sitting silently, fiddling with her fingers, she'd widen her eyes and look uncomfortable."<sup>203</sup> D'Amboise then goes on to describe each muse's reaction: Diana Adams, Suzanne Farrell, van Aroldingen, and Le Clercq.

D'Amboise writes that he played the part of surrogate for Balanchine "with a variety of muses. Onstage, dancing the pas de deux, I was a stand-in for Balanchine.

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<sup>202</sup> Kent, 67.

<sup>203</sup> D'Amboise, 269.

After performance, at supper, his foil.”<sup>204</sup> Balanchine seduced his muses through choreography, but unable to dance at a professional level, he used d’Amboise as a stand-in. In the mid-1960s while pursuing Suzanna Farrell, Balanchine would often perform the title role in *Don Quixote* to Farrell’s Dulcinea, using dance as his most powerful means of seduction. D’Amboise writes that Balanchine held Farrell on a much higher pedestal than the rest of his muses. Though her impact on Balanchine and the company is discussed by the six subjects in the aforementioned-film *Dancing for Mr. B.*, she herself is not included, as a documentary focused just on her was already in the works. Tallchief calls Farrell “his muse I think probably until he passed away.”<sup>205</sup> Farrell may have been Balanchine’s favorite muse, but she was certainly not the only one, and entered the company near the tail-end of a long string of beautiful ballerinas who inspired Balanchine.

While both Kent and d’Amboise write about Balanchine’s romantic relationships, they also write about him as a choreographer and director. Kent lauds him as a magical figure, d’Amboise as a mentor and teacher. The gift of *Apollo* changed d’Amboise as a dancer, launching him on nothing less than “a new trajectory.”<sup>206</sup> D’Amboise recalls discussing *Apollo* with Balanchine “over countless meals.”<sup>207</sup> The freedom to socialize casually outside of the studio meant that d’Amboise and Balanchine could talk about the work they were making together. Though their relationship was more clearly stated,

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>205</sup> *Dancing for Mr. B.*

<sup>206</sup> D’Amboise, 186.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 191.

d'Amboise still writes about Balanchine with deep admiration. "If someone of quality mentors you, you are lucky. If that someone is Balanchine, you are blessed."<sup>208</sup>

Kent's relationship with Balanchine as a choreographer was far vaguer. One of the pieces that Balanchine gifted to Kent was *The Unanswered Question* section of *Ivesiana*, the title of which Kent cleverly ties in to her writing. "I wondered when he'd call upon me for a dance. When the next season opened, Mr B. answered my question with "The Unanswered Question," and my charmed life turned to gold sparks."<sup>209</sup> All of Kent's communication with Balanchine was unspoken, the question never fully answered. Kent writes that when she did something well she was rewarded through new roles, that Balanchine "expressed his feelings symbolically, not verbally."<sup>210</sup> Balanchine kept Kent in the company long after she ceased to perform regularly, allowing her to dance once or twice a year to keep up her salary. But Balanchine had moved on to other muses and never again would "design an entire ballet for my special abilities, a ballet uniquely created for the peculiarities of my body and psyche, one that used my psychological raw material. For fifteen years, my personal emblems had been woven into dance created just for me. I had lost the Atlantic Ocean."<sup>211</sup> The final chapters of *Once a Dancer...* describe Kent's struggles to find work, support herself, battle depression, and assert herself with her controlling mother and husband after she was no longer regularly working for NYCB. While Balanchine gave both d'Amboise and Kent a life, d'Amboise's healthy relationship with Balanchine and natural disposition allowed him to

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>209</sup> Kent, 69.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 222.

be relatively happy and have a loving, supportive family, while Kent had a hard time weaning herself from the drug that Balanchine represented for her.

At the end of his memoir, d'Amboise describes in considerable detail his life after NYCB, focusing on NDI, which continues to enrich children's lives through public dance and arts education today. D'Amboise has received broad recognition for his work with NDI, including a MacArthur grant in 1990.<sup>212</sup> Kent's memoir was part of the 1990s rush of Balanchine dancer memoirs, but it was not her first book. In 1976, she had published *Allegra Kent's Water Beauty Book*<sup>213</sup> outlining the water-based exercise routine that she had created. In 1984, she wrote *The Dancer's Body Book*<sup>214</sup> about how to maintain a "ballet body." After her memoir came out Kent wrote two picture books about ballerinas, published in 2012 and 2016. When her career with NYCB ended, Kent was very much in need of money and saw writing as an option. In her memoir, she describes how she decided to write an autobiography. During periods of depression Kent would spend hours reading biographies, and rereading letters between herself and her father from her early years with the company. She writes, "If you can't dance, you can read about it."<sup>215</sup> Writing seemed like a second choice for Kent. "Instead of dancing on a stage, dancing in my dreams, or teaching, I would try to write about dance...I began hoping that this was a way to bring a little something in."<sup>216</sup> Kent seemed to write her memoir because she was encouraged and needed a project. D'Amboise, on the other hand, wrote his memoir when he was in his seventies, reflecting on his life. The prologue to his memoir opens, "In my

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<sup>212</sup> Yvonne Rainer was a MacArthur recipient in the same year.

<sup>213</sup> Allegra Kent, *Allegra Kent's Water Beauty Book* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976).

<sup>214</sup> Allegra Kent, *The Dancer's Body Book* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1984).

<sup>215</sup> Kent, *Once a Dancer...*, 264.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

early twenties, I was approached to write a book about my life as a dancer. I thought, ‘Ridiculous! I haven’t lived yet.’ However, over the next fifty years, I kept diaries, collected materials, and occasionally dabbled, writing little essays of an autobiographical nature. Ingredients were being stored for future use.”<sup>217</sup> D’Amboise’s memoir reads more like a victory lap.

Dozens of memoirs have been written by NYCB dancers, with many memoirists highlighting their relationships with Balanchine. But out of the previously listed collection including Tallchief, Kirkland, Ashley, and Villella, Kent and d’Amboise write in their own voices, complete with their peculiar idiosyncrasies. And their writing styles reflect how they danced. Kent was ethereal, delicate, and uncanny. D’Amboise was energetic, strong, virile, and all-American. Their memoirs offer first-person accounts of Balanchine’s different relationships with male and female dancers. Though much scholarship has been written on the way Balanchine interacted with women, these books show the power of memoir to compare first-person accounts, and fill in some of the pieces of the puzzle that was George Balanchine.

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<sup>217</sup> D’Amboise, xv.

## Chapter V: Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings are Facts*, 2006

Yvonne Rainer has had a long and boundary-breaking career. Though she remains a working artist, she began her dance career in the 1950s and was a key player in the creation of the Judson Dance Theater. By the 1970s her focus had shifted away from dance, and she became a feature-length feminist filmmaker. In the 1990s she returned to choreography at the invitation of Mikhail Baryshnikov and his White Oak Dance Project. Rainer's creations are radical, and her 2006 memoir *Feelings are Facts*<sup>218</sup> is no exception. Though at first glance *Feelings are Facts* reads like a salacious account of Rainer's romantic life, health problems, mental illness, and more, this tell-all style is rooted in extensive psychoanalysis and a radical impulse not to hold back. Rainer uses her memoir to acknowledge the limits of the genre, discuss the nature of autobiographical writing, and reclaim her narrative. Rainer's career has been strongly influenced by critics, but though she claims to use her memoir to clarify those relationships, the effort seems halfhearted. *Feelings are Facts* also paints a picture of the world that Rainer was part of: bohemian San Francisco of the 1950s and the minimalist New York downtown arts scene from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. Though Rainer published her memoir in 2006, her story is chiefly focused on the twentieth century. A documentary on Rainer also titled *Feelings are Facts* was released in 2015, and a comparison between these two narratives shows the unique weight of Rainer's own voice.

From the very start of her memoir, Rainer is aware of the limits and assumptions of the genre she has chosen. She begins the book with a claim.

Why do I seek to make myself known.... Do I wish to make claims to a hearing and in so doing seek, in Peter Brooks's words, a 'catharsis of confession'? .... No, I must remind myself that my existence does not

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<sup>218</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings are Facts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

depend on some kind of secular redemption through self-exposure. Though it may prove no more reliable, rather than confession I prefer to think of this enterprise as a more guilt-free kind of testimony: to a life, to the products of that life, and to its public and private interplay.<sup>219</sup>

By removing guilt, Rainer allows herself to write about anything she wants, regardless of how private it is. And Rainer plays with the “public and private interplay,” acknowledging that she is making the private public by publishing a memoir for an audience. Theory of memoir “intimates the importance of an audience... a witness is required to substantiate one’s existence. It is the writer’s projected audience that provides the necessary witness.”<sup>220</sup> Though Rainer does not think this book is a “catharsis of confession,” she is nevertheless exposing herself to the public. Through her dancing, choreography, and filmmaking Rainer found different modes of self-exposure and of mining her own body, life, and experience for material. This memoir may not be a “secular redemption,” but the next step in “self-exposure.”

Rainer opens her book with a quote by British literary theorist Terry Eagleton. “The autobiography is a covertly anti-intellectual genre, designed for those who are more interested in what Tolstoy had for breakfast than what he thought about Plato.” Rainer adds her own take on the quote: “If you’re interested in Plato, you’re reading the wrong book. If you’re interested in difficult childhoods, sexual misadventures, aesthetics, cultural history, and the reasons that a club sandwich and other meals—including breakfast—have remained in the memory of the present writer, keep reading.”<sup>221</sup> Rainer knows her limits as a writer and acknowledges that this is a personal memoir. This self-awareness gives her writing a sense of humor sorely missing from other memoirs

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<sup>219</sup> Rainer, xv.

<sup>220</sup> Thoms, 9.

<sup>221</sup> Rainer, xvii.

discussed in this paper. Just a few pages later Rainer writes that while studying at San Francisco Junior College she “found the readings in philosophy from Plato to Locke the most interesting.”<sup>222</sup> While mentioning Plato might be coincidental, it seems to be an example of Rainer’s subtle wit; discussing Plato, the ultimate representation of high intellectualism, immediately after claiming that this is not the right book to read if you want to hear about Plato.

Rainer’s self-awareness permeates the content of the book. Writing about an entire lifetime is a daunting task for all the authors discussed in this paper, and many leave large holes without acknowledging them. Rainer is very open about the gaps in her content. Her story stops as she starts making films. “I argue that the point at which I left dance and became a filmmaker seems a logical place to end the book...it’s also true that as more and more of my private life went into my films, such transposition, though fictionalized, reduced my need to reconfigure it elsewhere.”<sup>223</sup> While Rainer’s choreography is famously abstract and lacking in story or character, her “films can be described as autobiographical fictions.”<sup>224</sup> While telling stories that she later fictionalized in her films, she includes excerpts of her scripts, writing in conversation with herself. While writing about her troubled relationship with artist Robert Morris, she includes an interaction from her 1985 film *The Man Who Envied Women* inspired by her relationship with Morris. “*Woman #1*: So his shrink says to him. ‘If you’re going to fool around with other women you’d better become a better liar.’ So he did. *Woman #2*: Did what?” Rainer follows this, “Did what?” indeed. He became a better liar and I became more

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 433.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 432.



adept at being unsuspecting of his lies.”<sup>225</sup> This is a clever, self-referential use of autobiography. Rainer uses her autobiographical artwork to help elucidate her point by writing in conversation with it.

While Rainer includes detail about her early romantic affairs, she mentions her later relationships and lesbianism just briefly in the closing pages because she had already mined them as material for her films. She barely mentions her longtime partner Martha Gever in her memoir because their relationship was material for her 1966 film *MURDER and murder*. “The diary I kept of the interactions between Martha and me in the early days of our domesticity was a virtual cornucopia. I set about transforming it into fiction.”<sup>226</sup> Rainer’s films served the same autobiographical purpose as her memoir.

Though filmmaking gave Rainer an autobiographical outlet, choreographic ideas continued to come to her even after she had stopped making dances. Rainer would share them with her friend and Judson peer Trisha Brown, in the hope that Brown would bring them into fruition. But Rainer says that once she became more involved with scriptwriting those images receded. “I don’t know what this relation/opposition between words and body means or portends. As I returned to dance in the 1990s I stopped writing poetry. And now again movement language is superseding verbal language.”<sup>227</sup> Rainer’s self-awareness helps to elucidate the relationship between dancers and memoir that this paper explores. Movement is a dancer’s chosen mode of communication; therefore, when the body is no longer acting as that force, words take over. Rainer stopped writing poetry once she began to choreograph again – these two abstract yet creative ways of expressing

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 458.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 466.

herself filled the same need in her life, and it makes sense that artists who create great dance are still overflowing with that creative impulse when they are not choreographing. This is why Martha Graham was hoping to create a museum or musical when she was no longer mobile, and why Alvin Ailey began working on a memoir as he grappled with would-be-fatal illness. Rainer seems confused by the many expressive urges that she feels. “Why do I seek to make myself known when I have already accomplished this in performance film?”<sup>228</sup> Writing a memoir gave Rainer a different platform on which to tell her story and may have indeed been a kind of “catharsis of confession” for her.

Like nearly all the memoirists who have come before her in this paper, Rainer also uses *Feelings are Facts* to reclaim her story and acknowledge publicity myths, though her attempt to correct mistakes seems half-hearted. While Rainer’s reputation is overwhelmingly positive, she does use her memoir to clarify the myth of the “No Manifesto” and to acknowledge the tremendous impact that writers have had on her career. In 1965 Rainer wrote an essay about her dance work *Part of Some Sextets* for the Tulane Drama Review.<sup>229</sup> This essay “contained a paragraph that has since come back to haunt me.”<sup>230</sup> Rainer’s “No Manifesto” is endlessly referenced in dance history courses and writing and is regarded as the seminal code of postmodern dance. But Rainer’s intention behind the paragraph was very different than what is commonly believed. Dance writer Sally Banes made the “NO Manifesto” iconic by taking it out of context and claiming it to be the shared ideology of postmodern dance. In her well-known book, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, Baines wrote about Rainer, “In 1965, she formulated a strategy

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>229</sup> *Feelings are Facts*, dir. Jack Walsh, 1 hr. 26 min., 2015, DVD.

<sup>230</sup> Rainer, 263.

for demystifying dance and making it objective. It was a strategy of denial.”<sup>231</sup> Rainer uses her memoir to share her own perspective on what she wrote so many years ago.

That infamous ‘NO Manifesto’ has dogged my heels ever since it was published. Every dance critic who has ever come near my career has dragged it out, usually with a concomitant tsk-tsk...It was never meant to be a prescriptive for all time for all choreographers, but rather, to do what the time honored tradition of the manifesto always intended manifestos to do: clear the air at a particular cultural and historical moment. I hope that someday mine will be laid to rest.<sup>232</sup>

This statement feels like an insincere attempt to correct an error that she could have chosen to right at any point in the interceding forty plus years.

Another example of Rainer’s using her memoir to clarify misunderstandings in the press comes in her reflection on a *Harper’s Bazaar* interview from 1967. As one of “100 American Women of Accomplishment” Rainer was asked, “What do you value most?” to which she answered, “Being a part of one’s time.” Rainer was misquoted in the article with the much more conventional answer, “Using one’s time well.”<sup>233</sup> While this incident had little or no impact on Rainer’s career, she does use her memoir as a platform to set the story straight.

While Rainer uses her memoir to correct myths about her own writing, she also uses it to acknowledge that her success was made possible in large part thanks to dance writers Sally Banes, Allen Hughes, and Jill Johnston, who all took an interest in both Judson and Rainer as its ringleader. Allen Hughes of *The New York Times* and Jill Johnston of *The Village Voice* wrote about the Judson Dance Theater in very different styles and venues, but together they served to establish Judson’s reputation in both the

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<sup>231</sup> Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 42.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

mainstream and downtown dance worlds. In a streak of serendipity that would have a lasting impact on the reputation of the artists involved, *New York Times* dance critic Allen Hughes was among the more than 300 people in the audience for the Judson Dance Theater's opening show. Hughes had chiefly reviewed classical dance before publishing his 1962 review "Dance Program Seen at Church: Unconventional Concert is Given at Judson Memorial."

In his review Hughes questioned whether or not this was even a dance show, writing, "perhaps it would have been more accurate to call it a concert of 'movement' rather than of 'dance.'"<sup>234</sup> Nevertheless, Hughes did publish a dance review, clinching the initial success of the Judson Dance Theater and giving it "instant recognition."<sup>235</sup> He ended his review by writing, "The chances are, however, that their experiments will influence dance development in this country somehow, and because this seems likely, they are worth watching."<sup>236</sup> Hughes had the ability to dismiss this group of newbies and relegate them exclusively to the downtown scene, but his interest and support of the group allowed them to enter the canon of dance history. Over the next few years Hughes continued to review the Judson Dance Theater and expand his understanding of the dance world and their role in it.

In a 1963 review he wrote of Rainer, "She is the sort that makes Merce Cunningham look like the stuffiest reactionary and gives the Alwin Nikolais crowd down at Henry Street Playhouse the appearance of antiquated relics."<sup>237</sup> Whether Hughes was

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<sup>234</sup> Allen Hughes, "Dance Program Seen at Church: Unconventional Concert is Given at Judson Memorial." *The New York Times*, 7 July 1962, 9.

<sup>235</sup> *Feelings are Facts*.

<sup>236</sup> Hughes, 9.

<sup>237</sup> Allen Hughes, "Dancers Explore Wild New Ideas: Crazy or Not, Innovations Have Impact." *The New York Times*, 9 February 1963, 5.

always an advocate of the avant-garde or the Judson Dance Theater brought it out in him is unclear, but in his reviews of Judson he seemed to applaud their pushing the boundaries of the same artists that he earned his livelihood writing about. He wrote of a Judson show, “a number of young people did all sorts of zany things in their efforts to push away the barriers they find impeding the progress of the dance.”<sup>238</sup> This extends to his re-imagination of what the term modern dance means, thanks to his trying to create an umbrella that could accommodate both Graham and Rainer. He wrote that ballet is simple to understand but that “virtually every kind of serious stage dancing that is not either classical ballet or of some specific ethnic origin is called ‘modern’...the resulting diversity may well dismay or frighten the innocent bystander. But quite a bit of dazzlement is contained therein for the men with the will to search for it.”<sup>239</sup> Hughes did search for it: he discovered the Judson Dance Theater and gave it the mainstream recognition necessary to establish their reputation.

Like Hughes, Jill Johnston’s criticism helped to establish the reputation of the Judson Dance Theater. But while Hughes wrote from the outside about the group, “Johnston reviewed Judson from the inside, as a participant or observer of the work being made.”<sup>240</sup> Johnston changed the potential for what dance criticism could be. She “chose subject matter, language, and structure that have profoundly influenced a subsequent generation of critics and choreographers who have learned much about dance through her writings.”<sup>241</sup> Johnson was the first dance critic for *The Village Voice* where she wrote not

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Allen Hughes, “Modern Dance May Mean Many Things.” *The New York Times*, 29 July 1962, 76.

<sup>240</sup> George Jackson, “Judson Church: Dance.” *Dance Heritage Coalition*. 2012.

<sup>241</sup> Sally Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 3.

only about dance, but also about the downtown art world as a whole. In 1969 Johnston suffered her third schizophrenic break and vowed never again to write criticism. She shifted her lens to politics and in the 1970s and 1980s became a radical lesbian activist, writing books on feminism; then in the 1990s she returned to literary and arts criticism for several publications. Her weaving in and out of dance almost directly parallels Rainer's. Rainer refers to Johnston as "our champion,"<sup>242</sup> and dedicates a short chapter in *Feelings are Facts* to Johnston. In it Rainer muses, "Now that I think about it, a lot of things coincided or overlapped in our lives – JJ's and mine. Her entry into dance writing and mine into dancing."<sup>243</sup> Johnston's writing style grew alongside Judson in a kind of artistic synthesis or mimesis of the themes that Judson presented.

Both Johnston's writing and the choreography of the Judson Dance Theater emphasized themes of individualism, colloquialism, formal freedom, and interdisciplinarity. A sense of individualism pervaded all the work of this period. Johnson wrote in a personal style, using the first-person voice then rare in criticism, and included her commute to and from the theater as part of her experience. "Like Rainer, Paxton, and others, Johnston celebrated 'the heroism of the ordinary...it is this directness, this immediacy in vividly presenting the kinesthetic facts of life that informs Johnston's writing as well as the dances and other events she wrote about.'<sup>244</sup> Johnston's writing reflected and grew with the Judson Dance Theater in a mutually beneficial relationship. Judson gave Johnston access to a small circle of young, like-minded artists to inspire her and offer the raw material for her work, and Johnston gave Judson constant attention and

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<sup>242</sup> Rainer, 225.

<sup>243</sup> Rainer, 291.

<sup>244</sup> Banes, *Writing Dance*, 9.

promotion. Johnston's review of the first Judson concert is titled "Democracy." Here she described Judson as "a number of young talents who stand apart from the past and who could make the present of modern dance more exciting than it's been for twenty years."<sup>245</sup> Johnston was with the group till the very end and "rang their death knell" in 1965 in *The Village Voice*.<sup>246</sup> Though Johnston championed the group as a whole, Rainer says that "she especially focused on me... (these reviews) buoyed me up, carried me forward."<sup>247</sup> Rainer acknowledges that she was lucky. "There are always people for one reason or another are downplayed or diminished."<sup>248</sup> Hughes and Johnston are largely responsible for Rainer's early success, and their focus on her worked in her favor. Though Rainer uses her memoir to write her own story, her ability to sell books and her fame generally owes a considerable debt to influential critics who wrote the Judson Dance Theater and Rainer as its leader into American dance history.

A recurring theme in dance autobiography is the inclusion of personal and sometimes salacious details. Rainer is no exception, rivalling only Bill T. Jones. Due in part to her celebrity, her fans are eager to read personal anecdotes about her life. Her radicalness as an artist also translates to her no-holds-barred writing style. Rainer writes about her suicidal impulses, health scares and surgeries, and her relationship to sex. But she often writes about these aspects of her life in relation to the extensive psychoanalysis that she has undergone. She shows vulnerability in analyzing her anxiety despite her success. "One would have thought that I had by this time received enough recognition from critics and peers to bolster my fragile ego, but this recognition seemed to have no

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<sup>245</sup> Jill Johnston, *Marmalade Me* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) 40.

<sup>246</sup> Banes, *Writing Dance*, 207.

<sup>247</sup> *Feelings are Facts*.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

cumulative effect.”<sup>249</sup> Despite sharing so much about her personal life, *Feelings are Facts* does not read like a private diary. As the literary critic John Rockwell writes, “It also helps that Ms. Rainer writes very well.”<sup>250</sup> Throughout *Feelings are Facts* the reader has the sense that Rainer knows what she is doing, and is guiding the reader along.

Like the other memoirists in this paper, Rainer also connects herself to fame and celebrity. Rainer does her fair share of name dropping, but rather than come off as conceited or forced, it serves to place Rainer in the world she was part of. By mentioning the ease with which she crossed paths with Andy Warhol, Yoko Ono, Allen Ginsburg, and many others, she shows the connectedness of the arts world at the time and depicts an envy-worthy landscape of gallery parties, weekly gatherings to discuss art, and open studio shows. Rainer also describes her romantic relationships with now-famous male artists and how they contributed to her success. After being included in a MOMA catalogue she realizes “it was the first time that I had to confront the fact that my career, insofar as it encountered the art world up to that point, may have owed something to my being with Robert Morris.”<sup>251</sup> Rainer’s ascribes her success largely to chance. Throughout her memoir, Rainer acts as if things just happened to her, backing down from agency, seemingly with an unwillingness to acknowledge the degree of her own ambition.

Rainer’s lack of agency is in line with Carolyn Heilbrun’s theory regarding women’s autobiography. “What has been forbidden to women is...the open admissions of the desire for power and control over one’s life (which inevitably means accepting some

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<sup>249</sup> Rainer, 273.

<sup>250</sup> John Rockwell, “A Dancer’s Turbulent Steps Through Life.” *The New York Times* 7 July 2006, E30.

<sup>251</sup> Rainer, 342.



degree of power and control over other lives).”<sup>252</sup> Heilbrun writes that the most palatable stories of women’s success are those “whose fame was thrust upon them. Such subjects posed no threatening questions; their atypical lives provided no disturbing model for the possible destinies of other women.”<sup>253</sup> Though Rainer is known as a radical artist, and writes that she lived her life in a radical way, she backs away from her own desire for success. Rainer does acknowledge that not every artist from the Judson generation has received as much recognition as she has. She remembers in her early days in the New York art scene listening “as the cornucopia of artists’ names, many not yet—or never to be—canonized” were discussed.<sup>254</sup> This is a subtle reference to the fact that has been canonized, while many others were barely if even recognized.

In 1999 Mikhail Baryshnikov decided to revive some Judson pieces for his White Oak Dance Project and reached out to “eight of us, the original founders of Judson Dance Theater.”<sup>255</sup> Rainer recalls that she was initially “adamant that the name Judson shouldn’t be mentioned, because there were thirty people or so involved in those two years... [the] implication was that we were the best and the brightest, I always thought that was very unfortunate. Sometimes I’ve been a little negligent in pointing that out.”<sup>256</sup> This statement comes from an interview with Rainer on a bonus DVD of the 2015 biopic documentary *Feelings are Facts*, meaning that although Rainer does try to rectify the myths surrounding Judson this interview was cut from the final film. Again and again when given the chance to clarify history Rainer misses the opportunity. Her attempts come off

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<sup>252</sup> Heilbrun, 13.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>255</sup> *Feelings are Facts*.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

as disingenuous. Whether or not others received their due, Rainer's career and the renewed interest in her as seen in her memoir and subsequent film are in large part thanks to her celebrity.

It is useful to compare Rainer's memoir to the 2015 documentary of the same name because they tell the same story in different media from different perspectives. The film is comprised of a series of interviews with Rainer as well as fellow-Judsonites Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti, and others interspersed with long clips from some of her best-known pieces. Rainer is even more self-aware about the myths surrounding her role in Judson in the film than she was in her memoir ten years before. For example, she says in an interview, "I certainly feel grateful that I arrived at that particular time."<sup>257</sup> This is perhaps because though the film centers on her, she shares the screen with her peers. Moreover, the documentary emphasizes film's unique ability to show rather than only describe her work, which speaks for itself. The film focuses on her pieces *Trio A*, *Pillow/Chair*, and *Three Seascapes*. Comparing the book and film also shows what is distinctive about Rainer's narrative style. Though she is the subject of both, she is not the director of the film, which leaves out her troubled childhood and focuses on her time in New York as a choreographer, ending before she shifted to film. Unlike her memoir, the documentary is not confessional in tone and is far more sanitized.

This begs the question of why dance memoir tends to include so much of the personal. In the bonus DVD included with the documentary Rainer is interviewed by the filmmaker talking about what she likes about making films. She says that unlike dance, in film she has more control over what the audience sees. This is a meta comment on the

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

audience's role in Rainer's work. Writing provides Rainer with even greater control over her audience than film, bringing to mind George Gusdorf's theory that autobiography as a genre emphasizes that a witness is required to substantiate one's existence, and that in writing autobiography the author "delights in being looked at."<sup>258</sup> Constructing her book from letters and journal entries instead of letting them rest at home or in her archive at the Getty Research Institute, Rainer turned them into a book, thereby shaping what the reader sees. Rainer's memoir closes this paper because her self-awareness permeates her story. She acknowledges on the first page that memoir is a limited genre and that her book will not be a "catharsis of confession," then proceeds to write hundreds of pages about her personal life that do just that, in addition to describing her psychoanalysis and acknowledging her role in dance history. She uses her control over her reader to reclaim parts of her story, and to show her true voice. Rainer was a radical artist who helped transform ideas about what dance could be, and her memoir still retains aspects of that radical vision.

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<sup>258</sup> George Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 29.

## Conclusion

The nine dancers in this paper wrote autobiographies to serve different purposes in the creation of their legacies. Isadora Duncan wrote herself into history as a radical goddess who dabbles in the uncanny. Writing for Agnes de Mille was equal to choreographing, and in her first memoir, *Dance to the Piper*, she sharpens her voice and writes snappily about the dance world of the twentieth century and some of its key players. Martha Graham wrote her memoir as a last-ditch attempt at immortality, and understanding its genesis raises problems regarding authorship and the reliability of a narrative voice. Alvin Ailey wrote *Revelations* to correct myths in the media and break out of his shell of privacy to tell his story in his own words before he died. Bill T. Jones' memoir gives him a platform to discuss his intersecting identities. Misty Copeland's autobiography is a formulaic story written as part of her cross-platform media blitz and rising stardom. Allegra Kent and Jacques d'Amboise's books shed light on the enigma that was George Balanchine, and show his immense but sometimes problematic impact on the women who entered his life. Yvonne Rainer dwells on the personal, raising questions of celebrity, and attempts, albeit insincerely, to retell parts of public narrative.

Though each chapter applies a specific angle, recurrent themes of molding of identity, creation of voice and authorship, celebrity, role of ghostwriter, and clarification of media myths run throughout, building on autobiographical theory to understand the genre through the specific lens of dance. Though some of these memoirs were written in the twenty-first century, apart from Copeland these artists all matured artistically in the twentieth century and are a product of their eras. Their memoirs provide an unprecedented first-hand glimpse behind the scenes of some of the greatest dance

companies of the century. But the field of dance is changing. Thanks to the advent of social media, “dancers have found a way to break through the tulle and tiaras by presenting backstage life on their terms” on a daily basis.<sup>259</sup> The dancers in this paper constructed their memoirs from old diaries, copies of written letters, and other relics of the paper trail left behind by their careers. In an increasingly paperless world where what were once private diaries are now public blogs and posts “creating a daily hum of chatter about everything from rehearsals, classes and injuries to big breaking news,”<sup>260</sup> the future of dance autobiography is uncertain. The memoirs in this paper allowed dancers to formally write themselves into the cannon of dance history, and gave them a chance to tell their own stories. Only time will tell if the next generation of dancers will also turn to memoir, or if this group of books represents a unique chance to understand an entire century of American dance through the voices of the artists who made it all happen.

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<sup>259</sup> Gia Kourlas, “Ballet Life, Unfiltered and Uploaded to Instagram,” *The New York Times*, 19 August 2015, AR7.

<sup>260</sup> Judith Mackrell, “How Twitter Transformed Dance,” *The Guardian*, 31 July 2012.

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