

## MAKING HISTORY BY CONTEXTUALIZING ONESELF: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS HISTORIOGRAPHICAL INTERVENTION

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### ABSTRACT

This essay argues that, in their reflection of theoretical positions, autobiographies by historians may become valid historical writings (that is, both true narratives and legitimate historical interpretations) and, as a consequence and simultaneously, privileged sources for historiographical inquiry and evidence of its evolution. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, following the model established by Carolyn Steedman, historians such as Geoff Eley, Natalie Z. Davis, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Dominick LaCapra, Gerda Lerner, William H. Sewell, Jr., Sheila Fitzpatrick, and John Elliott created a new form of academic life-writing that has challenged established literary and historiographical conventions and resisted generic classification. This article aims to examine this new historical-autobiographical genre—including the subgenre of the “autobiographical paper”—and highlights its ability to function as both history (as a retrospective account of the author’s own past) and theory (as a speculative approach to historiographical questions). I propose to call these writings *interventional* in the sense that these historians use their autobiographies, with a more or less deliberate authorial intention, to participate, mediate, and intervene in theoretical debates by using the story of their own intellectual and academic trajectory as the source of historiography. Traditional historians’ autobiographies, including ego-historical essays, have provided us with substantial information about the history of historiography; these new performative autobiographies help us to better understand historiography and the development of the historical discipline. Interventional historians seek not only to understand their lives but also to engage in a more complex theoretical project.

*Keywords:* historians’ autobiographies, interventional autobiography, historiography, post-postmodernism, Carolyn Steedman, Geoff Eley, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Natalie Z. Davis, William H. Sewell

*I want what I have written to be called history, and not autobiography.*  
Carolyn Steedman<sup>1</sup>

Historians have always written and published autobiographies.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, some of them have created a new form

1. Carolyn Steedman, “History and Autobiography: Different Pasts,” in Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), 50. I appreciate the insightful advice received from Rocío G. Davis, Pablo Vázquez Gestal, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Kalle Pihlainen, Ethan Kleinberg, Peter Burke, and the anonymous readers of this article.

2. An exhaustive analysis of historians’ autobiographies is Jeremy Popkin’s groundbreaking study, *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For the connections between history and autobiography, see Karl J. Weintraub, “Autobiography and Historical

of academic life-writing that has challenged established conventions and resisted generic classification. Martin Davies opens his review of John Elliott's memoir with a radical conjecture:

This book raises the intriguing question of genre. The history admits a variety [of genres]. . . . *History in the Making* exemplifies a further genre, the retrospective summation: an eminent "practising historian" explores some of the themes and problems addressed by historians in the last 60 years or so. This prospect raises expectations. . . . Exemplifying "science as personal experience" . . . the historian makes history by historically contextualizing himself and his work. . . . *History in the Making* demonstrates history compulsively historicizing itself, historiography itself being determined by history. . . . (It) leaves a paradoxical impression.<sup>3</sup>

This article aims to answer Davies's "intriguing question" about this new historical-autobiographical genre and to try to understand the "paradoxical impression" these new literary artifacts give to readers. Davies himself provides us with some of the key concepts of these new academic memoirs: science as personal experience, historians making history by historically contextualizing themselves, the presentation of autobiography as historical and historiographical documents, history historicizing itself, historiography being determined by history.

INTERVENTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES:  
MAKING HISTORY BY HISTORICALLY CONTEXTUALIZING ONESELF

These forms of autobiography have recently been proliferating among historians who have notably influenced the discipline in recent decades, such as Carolyn Steedman, Geoff Eley, Natalie Z. Davis, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, Dominick LaCapra, Gerda Lerner, and William H. Sewell, Jr.<sup>4</sup> I propose to classify these

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Consciousness," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 4 (1975), 821-848; James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Paul J. Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference on Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993); Lionel Gossman, "History as (Auto)Biography: A Revolution in Historiography," in *Autobiography, Historiography, Rhetoric*, ed. Mary Donaldson-Evans, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, and Gerald Prince (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 103-129; Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, *Memory and History in Twentieth-Century Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994); *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994). See also, more specifically for North America, Michael Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). For historians' autobiographies, see *Academic Autobiography and/in the Discourses of History* in *Rethinking History* 13, no. 1 (2009), themed issue edited by Jaume Aurell and Rocío G. Davis.

3. Martin Davies, review of John Elliott's *History in the Making* (review no. 1361). <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1361> (accessed January 11, 2013).

4. Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Natalie Z. Davis, *A Life of Learning* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper, no. 39, 1997), 1-26; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "France for Belgium," in *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination*, ed. Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 89-98; Dominick LaCapra, "Tropisms of Intellectual History," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 4 (2004), 499-529; Gerda Lerner, *Living with History/Making Social Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History, or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian," in Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2005), 22-80.

autobiographies as *interventional* in the sense that these historians use their autobiographies, with a more or less deliberate authorial intention, to participate in, mediate, and intervene in theoretical debates by using the story of their own intellectual and academic itineraries as the source of historiography. I posit that these autobiographies are a privileged mode for shaping a new concept of the historian as author that illuminates recent historiographical understanding of the shift from the modern historian-as-observer to the postmodern historian-as-participant. These historians have chosen *life-writing* not only to tell personal or academic stories (as other historians have done before them, such as Giambattista Vico, Edward Gibbon, Henry Adams, Benedetto Croce, Robin Collingwood, Arthur Schlesinger, William Langer, Felix Gilbert, Georges Duby, or Eric Hobsbawm),<sup>5</sup> but also, and more significantly, to *make* history by revealing their epistemological beliefs and commitments. Thus these personal testimonies become not only conventional autobiographies but also valid history, the historical artifacts that they really are. My research is focused on autobiographies by historians written in English, particularly from North America, England, and Australia, although it also includes other historiographical traditions, such as those of France, Italy, and Spain.

The peculiar and intense historiographical evolution of the generation of historians who were born in the 1930s and 1940s conveys the particular ways they approach their own careers: they learned and practiced traditional history, were trained within postwar historiographical paradigms, and then witnessed the successive emergence of the linguistic, narrative, and cultural turns. Though most familiar with more social-scientific and quantitative methodologies, they eventually embraced narrative and cultural approaches. They started engaging hard social sciences, such as economics, sociology, and demography, and then moved toward other disciplines in the humanities, such as linguistics, literary criticism, and symbolic anthropology. The variety of methodologies they learned and practiced predisposed them toward historiographical hybridism, looking for a third way that engages the tenets they posit in their autobiographical accounts, and reflect a certain disdain for postmodernism.

Interventional autobiographies also emerged in the context of the growing recognition of the subgenre of historiography, considered marginal among historians until the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Reflections on the discipline itself—and particularly on the development of diverse methodologies, epistemologies, dominant subjects, and negotiations with other humanities and social sciences—became a stimulating

5. Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, ed. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Edward Gibbon, *Memories of My Life* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1966); Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971); Benedetto Croce, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927); Robin G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); William L. Langer, *In and Out of the Ivory Tower: The Autobiography of William L. Langer* (New York: N. Watson Academic Publications, 1977); Felix Gilbert, *A European Past: Memoirs, 1905–1945* (New York: Norton & Company, 1988); Georges Duby, *History Continues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xvi; Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002).

6. The increasing interest among historians in journals such as *History and Theory*, *Rethinking History*, *Historein*, *Clio*, or *Storia della Storiografia* is one proof of what I say in the text.

exercise, particularly when enacted by historians at the end of their careers. Interventional historians acknowledge the difficulty in describing and dating changes in the history of ideas, especially those they have lived through. Thus they find intellectual autobiography a privileged way to think through this history. Though most of them have specialized in social and political rather than intellectual history, all share the desire to read the events around them in terms of intellectual and historiographical evolution and, more relevantly, they try to argue what *must* happen in the future. Ruth Behar explicitly notes: “We are chroniclers of the historical moment in which it has been our destiny to be thinkers.”<sup>7</sup> Such reflective practice introduces new ways of representing reality “using language in ways that make a material difference through accessibility to broad audiences” and have allowed some scholars to read memoirs as “cultural touchstones for the present-day academy,” as Margaret K. Willard-Traub and Cynthia G. Franklin suggest.<sup>8</sup>

Seeking new paths in history and autobiography, interventional historians also share a strong sense of tradition, maintaining a notable respect for the historiographical directions taken by their mentors. By epitomizing a certain distance from the iconoclastic tendency of postmodernism, they also take on the tenets of the new movements that emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which we could call post-postmodernism. In this sense, historiographical style must be understood within the general evolution of autobiography as a genre. Cynthia Franklin, David Simpson, Nancy K. Miller, and Adam Begley, among others, have read recent academic memoirs as evidencing a reaction against postmodernism and poststructuralist theory or as self-indulgent products of middle-aged academics experiencing identity crises.<sup>9</sup> Franklin describes this rejection of and/or exhaustion with postmodernism, and the subsequent emergence of new forms of autobiography (the interventional among them), in these terms:

Rather than address these problems within theory through theory, some critics instead shift to the genre of memoir. In doing so, these critics sometimes allow for the return of “human” elements that poststructuralist theory has repressed or insufficiently repudiated. . . . Thus the memoirs provide ways to track academics’ contemporary struggles with the purpose and definition of subjectivity and with other theories that centrally define the humanities during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup>

Thus I read these memoirs as typical cultural touchstones and intellectual symptoms of the present-day academy, since they appear as another way to write history effectively, and are able to attract a new audience. Lewis Curtis, one of

7. Ruth Behar, “Foreword,” in *Autobiographical Writing across the Disciplines: A Reader*, ed. Diane P. Freedman and Olivia Frey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), xvi-xvii.

8. Margaret K. Willard-Traub, “Scholarly Autobiography: An Alternative Intellectual Practice,” *Feminist Studies* 33, no. 1 (2007), 189-190, and Cynthia G. Franklin, *Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University Today* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 15.

9. David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature: A Report on Half-knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Nancy K. Miller, “Public Statements, Private Lives: Academic Memoirs for the Nineties,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 22, no. 4 (1997), 981-1015. On these academic memoirs’ historical context, see Satya P. Mohanty, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) and Michael Bérubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1994).

10. Franklin, *Memoir*, 12.

the forerunners of the interventional style and editor of the volume *Historian's Workshop*, explains that he decided to collect historians' autobiographical articles because "quite apart from my own readiness to learn from other historians, I was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the state of writing about the writing of history."<sup>11</sup>

When historians produce interventional autobiography, they confirm the paradox that writing about oneself, which might once have been a way to communicate outside the ordinary codes of academic language, "now seems to epitomize that language, and it becomes the new thing and stands at the very mark of cutting-edge professionalism."<sup>12</sup> Autobiography gives the historian the opportunity to place oneself noticeably into one's critical writing, as some of the key contributors to certain subdisciplines, such as Carolyn Steedman, Geoff Eley, and Natalie Davis (social history), Gabrielle Spiegel (history of historiography), Dominick LaCapra (intellectual history), and William Sewell (social-linguistic history) have shown. Their narratives can be understood as referential and descriptive since the language they use denotes real objects and describes actual circumstances. However, as Helen Buss has suggested, they can also be understood as "speech acts" in which the language causes the action it describes to happen, "as a marriage ceremony or a legal judgment changes the status of the subjects involved through the performance of language."<sup>13</sup> Interventional historians thus perform themselves and the disciplines they practice as they write their historical-autobiographical texts.

Based on these principles, I argue for the historical nature of interventional autobiographies and, more specifically, for them as a source for understanding the development of the discipline of history—or of other disciplines, depending on their authors' academic field. These historians use autobiographical narratives to contextualize, examine, and define not only their area of specialization but also the very process of writing history. Interventional autobiography connects with what Diane Freedman and Olivia Frey have variously termed "autobiographical criticism," "personal scholarship," "self-inclusive scholarship," or "cross-genre writing":

Here the personal background is not an incidental fact of research but that which, quite complexly, shapes the process of searching and discovering. Throughout, the process of thinking through issues is as important as any specific conclusions about those issues. In most cases, this autobiographical knowing directly challenges the methods of the fields and institutions in which the writers work.<sup>14</sup>

Embedded within these emerging subgenres, interventional historians embrace a broader range of styles than did those of earlier historians turned autobiographers, such as the humanistic, ego-historical, monographic, or postmodern, since

11. Lewis P. Curtis, Jr., "Introduction," in *The Historian's Workshop: Original Essays by Sixteen Historians*, ed. Curtis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), xi.

12. Michael Gorra, "The Autobiographical Turn," *Transition* 68 (1995), 152.

13. Helen M. Buss, *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 21-22.

14. Diana P. Freedman and Olivia Frey, "Self/Discipline: An Introduction," in Freedman and Frey, eds., *Autobiographical Writing across the Disciplines*, 2.

they aspire to present a historiographical proposal rather than just a biographical or descriptive one.<sup>15</sup> Interventional autobiography aspires to contribute not only to the development and knowledge of history, but to the whole field of historical thought and writing, along with its contribution to intellectual and academic transformations. As a result, these stories make readers—most of them historians—reflect on their own itineraries. As Jill Conway puts it, “that magical opportunity of entering another life is what really sets us thinking about our own.”<sup>16</sup> Thus these autobiographies function as mirrors in which colleagues see themselves and ask questions about their own itineraries, choices, and decisions. Historians who are now in their sixties or seventies often recognize themselves in interventional autobiographers’ narratives. The texts allow younger historians to learn about the past and the present of the discipline, and how and why it has come to the present disciplinary terms. In addition, there is usually an implicit moral purpose, which projects the discipline toward the future, since these autobiographies provide powerful stimuli for reflection on the political engagements and theoretical challenges of history, both as written and as experienced.

Finally, I argue that the increasing complexity and variety of current historiographical perplexities and transformations require different ways to approach, read, and understand them, and that interventional autobiographies contribute to meeting this need. They confirm the principle that our approaches to historiography are inevitably personal, governed by the particular contexts of our own histories, intellectual and academic training, politics, and social and professional commitments.

I have selected for this article some autobiographies that illustrate how this style is practiced and is being developed today. I start with Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), a lucid diagnosis of and proposal for social history using a hybrid strategy that straddles the conventions of the autobiography of childhood and a historian’s autobiography. I then discuss Geoff Eley’s *A Crooked Line* (2005), which remains, in my view, the most typical example of this subgenre. Here, this British historian draws a convincing portrait of the intellectual, academic, and historiographical evolution of the last fifty years using his own life as the plot. My analysis then turns to the genre of the autobiographical essay, which deserves specific attention because of its ability to blend the autobiographical with scholarship, through a conventional academic format. It functions as validation and explanation of subdisciplines of history that have significantly influenced the discipline as a whole. I have selected essays by Gabrielle Spiegel, Natalie Davis, William Sewell, and Dominick LaCapra. Finally, I will also comment on some recent collective interventional volumes and mention the

15. I have discussed these categories in other essays. For the humanistic style, see Jaume Aurell, “Benedetto Croce and Robin Collingwood: Historiographic and Humanistic Approaches to the Self and the World,” *Prose Studies* 31, no. 3 (2009), 214–226; for monographic autobiographies, see Aurell, “Autobiographical Texts as Historiographical Sources: Rereading Fernand Braudel and Annie Kriegel,” *Biography* 29, no. 3 (2006), 425–445; for the postmodern, see Aurell, “Autobiography as Unconventional History: Constructing the Author,” *Rethinking History: Journal of Theory and Practice* 10, no. 3 (2006), 433–449.

16. Jill K. Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Exploring the Art of Autobiography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 18.

most recent autobiographies published by historians, to try to discern signs of future projection and evolution.

CAROLYN STEEDMAN:  
EXPERIMENTING WITH SOCIAL HISTORY THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*, published when she was thirty-nine, is a working-class autobiography that challenges conventional academic accounts and established genres. Her introspective analysis combines feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic perspectives, blends autobiographical with academic and fictional writing, and provides an alternative to traditional historical narratives and methodology and, more specifically, to the traditional run of mother-daughter romances. While narrating her own childhood, Steedman also sheds new light on the centrality of some narratives and the essential marginality of others, and on the nature of the stories we tell ourselves to explain our lives. While deconstructing sexism in favor of gender categories, and applying the methods of social history to her own story, she constructs a bridge between social class and sexual identity.<sup>17</sup> By examining her own life, using her academic knowledge, she challenges the conventional tendency of historians and sociologists in the 1980s to collective and generalized psycho-Freudian analysis. Steedman's book uses her own and her mother's stories to reshape some of the main scenarios of modern historiography and the very process through which historical accounts are conventionally constructed. As Eley notes about her text:

As a formal structure, her book disobeyed all the rules. It ranged back and forth between different parts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between historical works and types of fiction, between history and psychoanalysis, between the personal and the political, and between individual subjectivity and the dominant available narratives of a culture, whether in historiography or politics, grand theory or cultural beliefs, psychoanalysis or feminism.<sup>18</sup>

Steedman presents her 1950s childhood through the filter of her parents' story, her father functioning as a secondary character to her mother. Yet her final objective is to interpret her own story, since "once a story is told, it ceases to be a story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretative device."<sup>19</sup> The permanent paradox of this book, and perhaps what makes it innovative and unforgettable, is the continuing dialogue between personal memories and academic discourse: "[the book] is about the stories we make for ourselves, and the social specificity of our understanding of those stories."<sup>20</sup> The book's polyphonic nature requires the use of multiple sources, which Steedman deploys flexibly: her personal recollections, her childhood readings, and her adult readings, both academic and fictional. The result is an unconventional, multilayered, and insightful text, in which the author deals with issues such as social recognition and conventions, social identity and

17. These ideas are taken from *The Nation*, and they appear on the cover of the book's paperback edition.

18. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 174.

19. Steedman, *Landscape*, 143.

20. *Ibid.*, 5.

class, the psychology of family relationships, and “about a mother who didn’t want to mother, a patriarchy without a patriarch, and forms of longing and desire, envy and exclusion, that spilled outside the acceptable frames of class and gender consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

Steedman is clearly invested in clarifying the difference between official and professional history and the other kinds of stories we imagine, dream, and tell:

The childhood dreams recounted in this book, the fantasies, the particular and remembered events of a South London fifties childhood do not, by themselves, constitute its point. We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point doesn’t lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation. The past is re-used through the agency of social information, and that interpretation of it can only be made with what people know of a social world and their place within it.<sup>22</sup>

After her introductory chapter, Steedman describes a dream she had when she was very young, a story around which the book revolves: “When I was three, before my sister was born, I had a dream. . . . Here, at the front, on this side of the wide road, a woman hurried along, having crossed from the houses behind. . . . I wish I knew what she was doing, and what she wanted me to do.”<sup>23</sup> Her use of a dream for the beginning of her narrative is, to be sure, a well-known literary strategy.<sup>24</sup> It locates her narrative at the crossroads of memory, imagination, and history. It heightens the sense of childhood fragility, lack of awareness, and the child’s dependence on adults. It alerts the reader to the prominent presence of a female character in her story. Yet it also allows the reader to empathize with Steedman’s idea of the relevance, but also the relativity, of the stories we tell—“The perspective of the dream must have shifted several times.”<sup>25</sup> This leads her to use Freud’s interpretation of dreams and to express her idea of the decisive influence of the social world for personal and historical understanding: “To see yourself in this way is a representation of the child’s move into historical time, one of the places where vision establishes the child’s understanding of herself as part of the world. In its turn, this social understanding helps interpret the dream landscape.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, paradoxically, autobiography permits her to explore the most abstract theses on modern subjectivity, the framework of capitalism and its social relations. She focuses on those places where history and culture meet subjectivity, to explore how such encounters may shape one’s sense of the self.<sup>27</sup> Her experiment deliberately tested some established ideas on Marxist historiography and social history, on psychoanalysis and conventional understandings of childhood, challenging the “kind of psychological simplicity” in which British cultural criticism seemed to

21. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 174-175.

22. Steedman, *Landscape*, 5.

23. *Ibid.*, 27-28.

24. On the use of dreams as traditional rhetorical resource, see Jaume Aurell, *Authoring the Past: History, Autobiography, and Politics in Medieval Catalonia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 187-189.

25. Steedman, *Landscape*, 28.

26. *Ibid.*, 142-143.

27. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 175.



have fallen at that time.<sup>28</sup> With her use of the fragmented and ambivalent nature of experience and self, Steedman exposes “the precariousness of theory and class consciousness when it fails to incorporate the wants and needs of the individuals—especially women—within it.”<sup>29</sup>

Deploying a postmodern style, Steedman’s interventional autobiography exhibits imagination in content, heterodoxy in form, and lack of restrictions in method. Taking one of Foucault’s fundamental ideas, Steedman argues for a historical language that could grasp “lives lived out on the borderlands . . . for which the central interpretative devices of the culture don’t quite work.”<sup>30</sup> She thus demonstrates how autobiography might become a historical-historiographical instrument that explains marginalized aspects of the past, or at least approaches them from a different perspective, since sometimes scientific knowledge is not enough:

Personal interpretations of past time—the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit—are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture. This book is organized around a conflict like this, taking as a starting point the structures of class analysis and schools of cultural criticism that cannot deal with everything there is to say about my mother’s life.<sup>31</sup>

In her account, Steedman establishes connections between the ideas articulated in singular stories with the general tenets held by scholars of history, sociology, and psychology. She demystifies a general and reductionist approach to mothering, showing that there are many different ways in which mothers conceive of their motherhood, or the possibility of being a mother. She blends her personal memories with a psychoanalytic account written at the end of the nineteenth century (the diaries of Hannah Cullwick), a sociological work on housework elaborated by Ann Oakley based on the testimonies of mothers, Steedman’s own testimony on her mother’s experience, and finally her own academic work on the subject.<sup>32</sup> Different periods (Victorian and postwar Britain), disciplines (history, literary criticism, sociology, and psychoanalysis), and genres (autobiographical accounts, female working-class autobiographies such as Kathleen Woodward’s *Jipping Street*, academic literature on working-class childhoods such as Jeremy Seabrook’s *Working Class Childhood*, and works on the parent–child relationship such as Ann Oakley’s *Taking It Like a Woman*) combine to produce a more integrated idea of the subject under analysis.

In this way, Steedman’s autobiography shatters traditional categories of grand theory and of working-class history by blending all these genres and providing historians with a new perspective for the study of class, gender, and politics. I argue that Steedman wants to highlight the polyphonic origin, meaning, and articulation of the “stories” we hear and tell, and the academic writing we create. As she notes, her book is “concerned with the relationship between the autobiographical account (the personal history), case-history, and the construction and

28. Steedman, *Landscape*, 7.

29. Mary Chamberlain, “Days of Future Past,” *New Socialist* (April, 1986), 43.

30. Steedman, *Landscape*, 5.

31. *Ibid.*, 6.

32. *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick*, ed. Liz Stanley (London: Virago, 1984); *The Sociology of Housework*, ed. Ann Oakley (London: Martin Robertson, 1974).

writing of history. It is about women's history, . . . about the difficulties of writing it, the other stories that get in the way, and different kinds of narrative form."<sup>33</sup> Steedman concludes her narrative with a postmodern gesture of defiance, a very Foucauldian gesture, arguing that *real* history (which she produces in her experimental autobiography) is the history that has traditionally been placed in the margins, but remains nonetheless valid.<sup>34</sup>

Steedman has provided us with a powerful autobiographical narrative, one that dramatizes the lives of her parents and her own life. In a sense, her book conveys the deception caused by a distant father and an elusive mother who did not respond to the idealized vision of parents that children tend to have. Yet her narrative transcends the narrative of parental deception, becoming itself an academic artifact, full of proposals in disciplines such as social and intellectual history, and criticism of some of the methodologies predominant at the time, such as social-psychoanalysis or Marxism. This explains why Steedman does not offer a chronological and systematic account of her childhood experiences. Rather, she organizes her narrative into a series of relatively disconnected chapters, which function as both autobiographical accounts and academic essays that interpret both her personal and social life. In the end, she believes that she has really written history, although another kind of history. As she admits in a meta-autobiographical exercise some years later, "It is for the potentialities of that community offered by historical consciousness I suppose, that I want what I have written to be called history, and not autobiography."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps what Steedman meant is that she wanted to write about "the stories we make for ourselves, and the social specificity of our understanding of those stories."<sup>36</sup> She seeks an *understanding* of stories rather than their historicity: the way we recall, refigure, and interpret them: "[T]he only point lies in interpretation."<sup>37</sup> Steedman has succeeded in using autobiography as an experiment to explore new ways in writing history, but she has also intervened in the historiographical debate, particularly on issues related to gender studies, cultural criticism, social history, and Marxism.

In addition, following Steedman's pioneering work, the historical discipline has witnessed the emergence of excellent autobiographies such as those of Annie Kriegel, Jill Conway, Elisabeth Roudinesco, Luisa Passerini, Gerda Lerner, and Sheila Fitzpatrick during the last two decades.<sup>38</sup> All these women historians

33. Steedman, *Landscape*, 127.

34. *Ibid.*, 144.

35. Steedman, "History and Autobiography: Different Pasts," 50. Other very interesting meta-autobiographical essays, in which historian-autobiographers reflect on their own experience of writing about themselves, include Jill K. Conway, "Points of Departure," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 41-59; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Can You Write a History of Yourself? Thoughts of a Historian Turned Memoirist," *Griffith Review* (Brisbane) 33 (2011), 1-7; and Geoff Eley, "The Profane and Imperfect World of Historiography," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008), 425-437.

36. Steedman, *Landscape*, 5.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Annie Kriegel, *Ce que j'ai cru comprendre* (Paris: Lafont, 1991); Jill K. Conway, *True North: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Généalogies* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Gerda Lerner, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *My Father's Daughter: Memories of an Australian Childhood* (Carlton:

attempt to blend the historical subjects they analyzed as scholars with their personal experiences, professional aspirations, intellectual options, and ideological claims. Thus, their ability to mix theory with practice, historical research with autobiographical reflection, the private sphere with the public, and their persistent tendency to promote a moderate path in gender studies makes their texts interventional. The increasingly prevalent autobiographical voice of female historians is also clearly connected with the progressive incorporation of women into academia after the 1960s. As scholars exploring women's history through autobiography, these historians engaged in women's emancipation and entered into contemporary debates on gender.

#### GEOFF ELEY'S CROOKED AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTERVENTION IN HISTORY

Geoff Eley was born in 1949, two years after Steedman's birth. He studied history at Oxford and received his PhD from the University of Sussex. He has taught at the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor since 1979 as a professor of history and German studies. Eley's early work focused on radical nationalism in imperial Germany, but has since grown to include social history and the history of the political left in Europe. His *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* blends the autobiographical and the historiographical in a multi-genre triangle formed by the personal, the theoretical-historiographical, and the political. Its five chapters directly refer to Eley's intellectual trajectory, and their titles convey the book's unambiguous interventional orientation: "Becoming a Historian" (his training), "Optimism," caused by the adoption of Marxism as a historical methodology and the conception of history as a social science, increasing "Disappointment" with his earlier historiographical tenets, "Reflectiveness" on the future of the discipline during the crisis of history in the 1980s, and "Defiance," his reaction to the postmodern challenge. Writing at the end of a long and productive career in social history, Eley uses the experimental and innovative form of his autobiography to illuminate the transformations in approaches to history over the last fifty years. He clearly declares his objective from the beginning:

I certainly want these reflections to play a part in shaping our understanding of what historians do, just as I'd like them to illuminate the intellectual political histories that bring us to where we are now. . . . In that respect, by far the most important feature of the past four decades of historiography has been the huge tectonic shift from social history to cultural history that forms the subject matter of this book.<sup>39</sup>

Like many other historians of his generation, Eley lived these theoretical and methodological shifts as political and moral events as well as intellectual revelations. He meticulously describes the move from social history to cultural history in the last half century, mirroring Patrick Joyce's phrase: "if once we were all social historians, now we are beginning to be all cultural historians."<sup>40</sup> Eley, always chronologically aware, locates the rise of social history in the 1960s and

Melbourne University Press, 2010).

39. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, xii.

40. Patrick Joyce, "The Return of History: Postmodernism and the Politics of Academic History in Britain," *Past and Present* 158, no. 1 (1998), 229.

1970s and the turn to cultural history in the 1980s and 1990s. His particular interventional style allows no room for a childhood story. Whereas most of the other autobiographers open their memoirs with the usual “I was born . . .” formula, the first sentence of Eley’s account is: “When I was deciding to become a historian, interdisciplinarity had yet to haunt the corridors of history departments.”<sup>41</sup> We receive only glimpses of his early years, in support of a particular historiographical point, and then without entering into detail and carrying a disclaimer about his life’s ordinariness: “My early years contained no big experiences or set of affiliations driving my curiosity, no traumas or tragedies lodged in the collective memory or the family past.”<sup>42</sup> Comparing this narrative sobriety with the importance that other historian-autobiographers such as Steedman, Conway, Carlos Eire, and Robert Rosenstone give to their early years and family background well illustrates the interventional autobiographers’ epistemological turn.<sup>43</sup>

I argue that *A Crooked Line* functions as a valid historical narration without losing its basic autobiographical identity; indeed, it is enriched by it. In his academic, historiographical, and moral autobiography, Eley transforms himself into a *source* of the shift from social to cultural history. He tries to establish a critical distance from his own life to present it objectively, and he also narrates his intellectual evolution from an epistemologically skeptical frame: “Capturing that additional complexity required a particular kind of contextualizing, which the personally grounded narratives that inform parts of my book were conceived in order to exemplify.”<sup>44</sup> He uses personal narrative to propose new paths and methods in historiography. Academic autobiography thus becomes that “transformative act” that Eley proposes for history.<sup>45</sup> More or less consciously, interventional autobiographers put themselves forward as models of historiographical evolution. Here, Eley argues for the need to reconsider the relationship between social and cultural history, at a moment when a fairly broad sense of dissatisfaction with some of the limitations of linguistic-turn historiography emerges, as social history recovers its human face after materialistic, structuralist, or quantitative determinisms and reductionisms.

Eley’s autobiography defies existing genres of historical writing and allows its author to distance himself from his own historical work. If Steedman’s autobiography may be viewed as a continuation of her historical production, Eley *needs* another genre, different from the conventional monographic work, to achieve a more theoretical approach to the past. He uses his autobiography to continue to contribute to theoretical and methodological debates on historiography. Writing autobiography itself is constitutive of this development. The text’s strict chronology replicates the methodology historians use in their monographs. His autobiography also allows him to dialogue with other historians he has met during his career, particularly those who share his methodological preferences, such as

41. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 1.

42. *Ibid.*, 3.

43. Carlos Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Robert A. Rosenstone, *The Man Who Swam into History: The (Mostly) True Story of my Jewish Family* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

44. Eley, “The Profane,” 427.

45. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 190.

Steedman (whose autobiography obviously inspired him), Tim Mason, Edward Thompson, or Raymond Williams. One reads the book as a sophisticated historiographical essay rather than a linear narrative memoir—one that contrasts with his conventional approach to political and social history in his academic production. Eley's moderate theoretical approach is demonstrated in his extensive use of the footnotes (nearly a third of the book!), which provide substantial bibliographical information, more typical of a historical monograph than of what appears to be a personal account. Yet, in my view, the unified first-person voice and the coherent chronological structure definitely make the book an autobiography. While Eley's life's context constitutes the subtext of the book, his own life becomes the text. This provides the book with a coherence that would be difficult to attain otherwise, considering his attempt to combine his prudence against theoretical innovations with his desire to understand and (slowly) to practice them.

The evident theoretical position of the book links with Eley's deep moral, political, and ideological calling typical of the historian trained in the idealistic 1960s: "My second motivation [after the historiographical] comes from politics. . . . Thus my book is about the politics of knowledge associated with social history and cultural history in the broadest of ways."<sup>46</sup> Thus he conceives his autobiography as an "exemplum" rather than a merely rhetorical, aesthetic, or narcissistic artifact. Eley's autobiography very accurately reflects history's turn from the aesthetic to the ethical in the last forty years.<sup>47</sup> The process of reading Eley's historiographical experience leads the reader to think about the nature of history, how it happens, how it is conceived, written, and, perhaps more specifically, how the historian serves as a mediator between the past and the present, the individual and the social, and the private and the public. If, as Conway suggests, the effectiveness of the autobiographical genre lies in its ability to create models with which readers identify,<sup>48</sup> Eley's essay clearly succeeds in its objective. Reading *A Crooked Line*, whether one agrees with the author or not, obliges historians to reevaluate their own historiographical options and moral commitments. Eley himself urges his readers to make a self-criticism of their own trajectory: "part of my intention in offering elements of my own story was to tempt others into doing exactly that."<sup>49</sup> Thus, autobiography becomes a mirror in which others look at themselves or, at least, functions as an intellectual model: "Recounting my particular version of this story, in careful counterpoint with the general intellectual histories it partially reflects, may have some modest usefulness as a foil for others. . . . I may be able to add something to the more familiar historiographical narratives of our time."<sup>50</sup>

Historians must hold onto their motivation and enthusiasm in spite of the twists and turns ("a crooked line") of both politics and professional historiography during the course of their careers. Yet how do we describe this complex process, full

46. *Ibid.*, xiii.

47. This idea has come out particularly in some recent interpretations of Hayden White's work, around the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of *Metahistory*. See, for instance, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Rhetorical Theory/Theoretical Rhetoric: Some Ambiguities in the Reception of Hayden White," in *Philosophy of History after Hayden White*, ed. Robert Doran (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

48. Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 18.

49. Eley, "The Profane," 428.

50. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, 6.

of unexpectedness and contingency? Instead of retelling the story of the evolution of twentieth-century historiography in the form of countless qualified guides, commentaries, anthologies, forums, and articles in new journals that have already been published, he thought it would be more illuminating to tell it as intellectual autobiography: "I wanted to use my own experience of these changes as a way of getting closer to the manner in which they actually took place—by presenting not only the clarity attained in the course of the new departures, but also something of the confusions, false starts, dead ends, and wrong turnings that were necessary along the way."<sup>51</sup> Thus Eley's autobiographical narrative moves beyond the historiographical debates that had already been described in more conventional ways, and facilitates the emergence of an unconventional author who is not readily identifiable with Eley the conventional historian. In the end, his autobiography becomes a detailed historiographical narrative for our own time, one that certainly "no one else has yet provided"<sup>52</sup>—or, more exactly, I would argue, that no one else has yet provided *through* this form. This inspired his "crossing the line" on writing, as a historian and autobiographer: the form of the account matters more than the particularities of standpoint or subjectivity and the limitations of personal perspective. Not surprisingly, the book was remarkably well received by the discipline. *The American Historical Review* devoted a forum to it three years after its publication, considering it a notable contribution to the understanding of how history has changed since the 1960s. It offered a set of arguments as to how the discipline might move beyond cultural history in order to recover some of the large-scale concerns of traditional social history.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, what most interested the commentators was Eley's ability to use life-writing to interpret historiographical evolution during the previous decades not only to perform an analytical diagnosis but also to try to influence and intervene in it.<sup>54</sup>

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAYS AS DISCIPLINARY REFASHIONING

Beginning with the spread of the French ego-histoire at the end of the 1980s, historians have adopted the form of the short essay when invited to reflect on their academic careers by editors of a journal on the theory of history or to lecture on their trajectories for a qualified academic audience. These texts tend to concision, incisiveness, and insightfulness because of the limited space available, the unequivocal academic and scientific orientation of the journals or the audience, and, perhaps more crucially, the unwitting incorporation into their autobiographical essays of the techniques more proper to academic papers.<sup>55</sup> Though I cannot

51. Eley, "The Profane," 427.

52. Eley, *A Crooked Line*, xi.

53. Anonymous editor, "AHR Forum. Geoff Eley's *A Crooked Line*. Introduction," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008), 391-392.

54. William H. Sewell, Jr., "Crooked Lines," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008), 393-405; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Comment on *A Crooked Line*," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008), 406-416; and Manu Goswami, "Remembering the Future," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (2008), 417-424.

55. One prototypical example of this orientation is the series "A Life of Learning," promoted by the American Council of Learned Societies, in which a prominent historian is invited to lecture about his/her academic trajectory, and then to publish that lecture. See the long list of historians invited at <http://www.acls.org/op45geer.htm> (accessed September 1, 2014).

give these texts the attention they deserve, I will open the discussion of them by selecting some examples and describing some of their basic features.

Two clear examples of this autobiographical style are Gabrielle Spiegel's and Natalie Davis's essays, because of their authors' roles in marking new critical directions in historiography and in fostering dialogue between history and other disciplines, particularly anthropology, linguistics, and literary criticism.<sup>56</sup> Spiegel and Davis are considered historians on the boundaries of postmodernism, but in some sense they have reacted against it by postulating a "third way" between the scientism of the postwar paradigms and the anti-referential tendencies associated with the linguistic turn. These scholars' personal essays testify to the validity of academic autobiography as an exercise in self-awareness, as they trace not only their professional trajectories, but also mark the intellectual mutations the discipline itself has undergone. These accounts enable us to examine how academic autobiographies increase our understanding of intellectual phenomena, and how personal stories cause these phenomena to develop.

Spiegel's autobiographical negotiation with the idea of the linguistic turn remains, to me, one of the most lucid diagnoses of the influx of this tendency into historiography. Her essay "France for Belgium" serves as an explanatory laboratory of historiography, where she negotiates the problems associated with the linguistic turn that she developed in her historical monographs. In this sense, there is no epistemic rupture between her historical and her (interventional) autobiographical task. Her own opening statement demonstrates her certainty regarding the continuing interaction between historians' research activities and their personal beliefs: "It is my profound conviction that what we do as historians is to write, in highly displaced, usually unconscious, but nonetheless determined ways, our inner, personal obsessions."<sup>57</sup> Spiegel's autobiographical essay explains and develops the ideas included in her two successful historical monographs, *Romancing the Past* and *The Past as Text*, based on poststructural theories of language and textuality. In those texts, she focuses on two aspects of historical texts: the context, governed by the material and social reality within which historical narratives are produced, and the strictly textual, conditioned by linguistic structure, constitution, and expression.<sup>58</sup>

Natalie Davis's first-person explanation of her attraction to marginal characters elucidates how history has brought the margin to the center in the past few decades. Her essay "A Life of Learning" illustrates how her tendency to opt for lesser-known historical genres (narrative history) and to concentrate on marginal historical figures (women, peasants, heretics) might be rooted in her sense of belonging to an ethnic minority and in her political activism in favor of counter-culture ideologies. Davis has always preferred historical analyses of the subjects

56. Spiegel, "France for Belgium," 89-98, and Davis, *A Life of Learning*, 1-26. I have written more extensively on these autobiographies in Jaume Aurell, "Performative Academic Careers: Gabrielle Spiegel and Natalie Davis," *Rethinking History* 13, no. 1 (2009), 53-64.

57. Spiegel, "France for Belgium," 89.

58. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

to which she is committed, such as the history of women, the problem of slavery, and social life. As a natural projection of these tendencies, her autobiographical essay also demonstrates her ability to open new horizons in the study of history, especially through cross-disciplinary links between history and anthropology, and through studies on women and gender. In addition, the essay confirms one of Davis's most celebrated contributions to the contemporary historiographical debate: the role of the historian's imagination. Davis's essay helps us understand that history is more than a collection of objects analyzed scientifically in the historian's laboratory. The reality of the past—individual, family-based, or national—does not lie in a simple compilation of data, but in the stories that remain in the form of documents, oral or written accounts, or images. Truths, fictions, inventions, imaginings, and myths all converge in these “histories.” Historians must strive for the truth honestly, but should not forget that often a “fiction” or a “myth” that is part of the collective imagination tells us much more about a society than the official facts transmitted by the people in power at the time. As she concludes in her essay, “no matter what happens, people go on telling stories about it and bequeath them to the future. No matter how static and despairing the present looks, the past reminds us that change can occur. At least things can be different. The past is an unending source of interest, and can even be a source for hope.”<sup>59</sup> Davis has shown that both the change that occurs and the past that is the source of interest may also be better understood autobiographically.

William Sewell's essay “The Political Unconscious of Social and Cultural History, or, Confessions of a Former Quantitative Historian” reviews the evolution of the social sciences over the last forty years, from structuralist historical sociology to the cultural turn, exemplified through the life of a historian who shifted from scientific-quantitative to cultural models.<sup>60</sup> His text “straddles the boundaries between scholarly essay, personal reflection, and political critique,” clearly illustrating the potential of interventional forms of autobiography.<sup>61</sup> In the early 1970s, Sewell began to feel frustrated with the limitations of quantitative, positivist history and with the working models implicit in materialist determinism. He set out in the 1980s on the same path that a number of his colleagues—including Louise Tilly, Joan Scott, Lynn Hunt, and Natalie Davis—were following at that time. All of these were committed to cultural history but had begun their careers when the social-quantitative paradigm was dominant. A key landmark in the establishment of cultural history and in his own “conversion” was, as Sewell explains in the essay, the dissemination of symbolic anthropology, propounded by Geertz in his influential book *The Interpretation of Cultures*.<sup>62</sup> Historians went from being scientists who analyzed empirical data to interpreters who endeavored to understand cultural processes. Social and economic structures moved from being regarded as the bones of society to products generated by human action. As a result of this evolution, in 1980 he published *Work and Revolution in France*, which analyzes the linguistic and discursive forms of revolutionary rhetoric in

59. Davis, *A Life of Learning*, 23.

60. Sewell, “The Political Unconscious.”

61. *Ibid.*, 22.

62. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).



nineteenth-century France, employing, unsurprisingly, paradigms borrowed from anthropology and linguistics.<sup>63</sup> In later articles, Sewell criticized intergenerational Marxist leaders' tendency to excessively reify social history.<sup>64</sup> In the 1990s, he espoused the canons of the new social history, which he had followed in his analysis of revolutionary discourses and which now held sway.<sup>65</sup> Lastly, Sewell acknowledges that social historians became cultural historians through anthropology and literary criticism: cultural historians' preference for symbolically rich sources meant that the textual was accorded greater importance over the social. In this sense there is a natural continuity between his autobiographical essay, published in 2005, and his historical works, since it allowed him to engage his theoretical tenets, but in another form.

Finally, Dominick LaCapra's first-person narrative, "Tropisms of Intellectual History," was defined as a "semiautobiographical essay" by the editors of *Rethinking History*, the journal where it was published.<sup>66</sup> Continuing the discussion of the historical problems he addresses in his monographs, LaCapra's essay reveals his "founding trauma," after having theorized at length about the social, religious, and cultural dimensions of the very concept of "trauma." He blends in his account ordinary and (apparently) banal stories with great narratives, giving them the same epistemological value and inviting us to re-examine and question the criteria that govern the validity and value of stories. Indeed, he appears to ask: who judges which stories are more important for history? What can be considered more "objective"? Can we distinguish the subject from the object? He notes: "I have also insisted on the tense interaction between more constative dimensions of historical discourse (related to accurate reconstruction) and performative dimensions (related to our implication in or transference relations to the past)."<sup>67</sup> His intellectual testimony itself exemplifies this performative dimension of the historian, which leads him to empathize with the past and combine—more or less consciously—personal, "subjective" experiences with "objective" knowledge of the scientific method for historical inquiry.

After reading Spiegel's, Davis's, Sewell's, and LaCapra's interventional autobiographies, one begins to question the nature of these texts: are they accounts of the trajectories of historians devoted to historiography, social history, sociological history, and intellectual history, or essays about the evolution of these disciplines during the last thirty years? In fact, these interventional autobiographies function as singular ways to access the theory and practice of historiography in its more conceptual sense. Traditional historians' autobiographies such as Duby's *La histoire continue* or Hobsbawm's *Interesting Times* provide us with excellent

63. William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

64. William H. Sewell, Jr., "How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation," in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), 50-77.

65. William H. Sewell, Jr., "Language and Practice in Cultural History: Backing Away from the Edge of the Cliff," *French Historical Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998), 241-254. See also Sewell, "The Concept(s) of Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 35-53.

66. LaCapra, "Tropisms."

67. *Ibid.*, 510.

information about the history of historiography (trajectories of historians, theoretical trends that have dominated the discipline, historical schools, succession of generations of historians), but these new performative autobiographies help us to better understand historiography itself.

Scholars thus find words to explain what, in my view, is one of the most difficult things to explain: how a philosophical theory is transformed into/applied to historical writing. There are other examples, such as Joan Scott's illuminating explanation of how Foucault's poststructuralist ideas influenced her way of conceiving and constructing gender history, and, after reading them, one wonders if any more practical and efficient way to do this can exist.<sup>68</sup> Faced with the claim that these are simply subjective or unconventional academic narratives, we should then reconsider the nature of historical and historiographical authority and the very definitions of objective and subjective, or the conventional and unconventional, in scholarship.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, some collective volumes have gathered together historians to engage in dialogue on a national tradition, the practice of a specific kind of history, similar epistemic values, ethnic identity, or research on the same historical subject or in a particular country under the form of autobiography.<sup>70</sup> Since these historians' autobiographical essays have become part of a collective publication with the assistance of an editor, their authors might have been influenced by editorial requirements and, more specifically, the editor's indications.<sup>71</sup> A coherent subject usually motivates these collective volumes edited and authored by historians. When this motivation is ideological, the contributors focus on an objective beyond academia, supporting a particular political or cultural agenda, such as collective feminist volumes,<sup>72</sup> labor history,<sup>73</sup> and race history.<sup>74</sup> Those volumes not only interpreted the world in various ways; the point was to change it, a proposition that shaped national, feminist, racial, and labor histories from their beginning. Thus

68. Joan Wallach Scott, "Finding Critical History," in *Becoming Historians*, ed. James M. Banner, Jr. and John R. Gillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 43-49.

69. See the special issue on the theory and practice of "Unconventional History," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 41 (2002), particularly Brian Fay's introduction.

70. One pioneer German project was published in *Die Geschichtswissenschaft der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*, ed. Sigfrid Steinberg, (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1925). See Jeremy D. Popkin, "Coordinated Lives: Between Autobiography and Scholarship," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 24 (2001), 783-784. The other two projects are Curtis, ed., *The Historian's Workshop*, and *Essais d'ego-histoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

71. See, for instance, the editors' introduction in Curtis, ed., *The Historian's Workshop*, 9-25; Downs and Gerson, "Introduction," in *Why France*, 1-19; Alun Munslow, "Introduction," in *Authoring the Past: Writing and Rethinking history*, ed. Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-6; and Jaume Aurell, "Introducción: La autobiografía de historiadores en España," in *La historia de España en primera persona: Autobiografías de historiadores hispanistas*, ed. Jaume Aurell (Barcelona: Base, 2012), 9-26.

72. *Feminist Histories*, ed. Bain Attwood and Joy Damousi (Victoria, Australia: The History Institute, 1991); *Voices of Women Historians: The Personal, the Political, the Professional*, ed. Eileen Boris and Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

73. *Labour Histories*, ed. Bain Attwood (Caulfield, Australia: Monash University Printing Services, 1994).

74. *Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History*, ed. Paul A. Cimbala and Robert F. Himmelberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), and *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity*, ed. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

autobiographical writing becomes both interventional historiographical artifact and activist intellectual weapon.

Alun Munslow recently edited a volume titled *Authoring the Past*, a collection of autobiographical essays previously published in *Rethinking History*: “The invitees made eclectic authorial decisions about how they view the connection between the content of the past and how they think about the historical form they give to it.”<sup>75</sup> Autobiography thus clearly becomes an intentionally historiographical account:

[This collection] is intended to be a contribution to and a reflection on the force and passion of the recent debates in rethinking history in terms of theory, practice and understanding the cultural purposes of both upper and lower-case H/history. . . . This collection is intended to demonstrate that history is a highly complex process of authorial insight, invention and experimentation that is not in thrall to the exclusivity of the understanding that history is wholly an empirical, analytical and representationalist undertaking.<sup>76</sup>

One of the authors, Patrick Joyce, acknowledges that his autobiography has historiographical implications, and may even be reduced to a writing on historiography: “If not always explicit in the account that follows (my narrative could have been concerned more with the history of the history discipline) this community [of historical scholars] is certainly implicit, in my interest in the nature of what it practices.”<sup>77</sup> Peter Burke concludes, “an account of a single historian’s development may contribute to the collective process of rethinking history.”<sup>78</sup> Burke’s (eventual) conversion to autobiography is definitively one of the most expressive signs of current interventional autobiography’s historiographical power, and a confirmation of its increasing consideration as valid history—that is, a historical account that simultaneously functions as a source of historical evidence and as a historical interpretation.

#### INTERVENTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS NEW HISTORICAL GENRE

The current proliferation of interventional autobiographies among historians allows us to reflect on the performative dimension of these literary artifacts. Recent developments in cultural studies suggest that cultural practices and products—such as history books—are highly performative: they *construct* as they *recount*. The kind of subject represented in autobiography serves a cultural purpose and “presupposes a relationship between the speaking subject and the uttered discourse.”<sup>79</sup> Autobiography is not simply a literary convention but is,

75. Munslow, “Introduction,” in *Authoring the Past*, 1; See also, in this direction, *Adventures in Russian Historical Research: Reminiscences of American Scholars from the Cold War to the Present*, ed. Samuel H. Baron and Cathy Frierson (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003); *Becoming Historians*, ed. James M. Banner Jr. and John R. Gillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Aurell, ed., *La historia de España en primera persona*.

76. Munslow, “Introduction,” 3.

77. Patrick Joyce, “More Secondary Modern than Postmodern,” in Munslow, ed., *Authoring the Past*, 91-92.

78. Peter Burke, “An Intellectual Self-Portrait or the History of a Historian,” in Munslow, ed., *Authoring the Past*, 171.

79. Betty Bergland, “Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the ‘Other,’” in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley *et al.* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 133.

more broadly, a cultural activity.<sup>80</sup> Yet “culture is not just reflective—it is also, and above all, performative, and humans are not slaves to cultural categories; they constantly redefine those categories through everyday practices.”<sup>81</sup>

When they choose autobiography to inscribe the past, historians thus are aware that this is not a “neutral” decision. As Fredric Jameson explained, “genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact.”<sup>82</sup> When certain discursive properties and practices are institutionalized, individual texts are produced and perceived in relation to the norms constituted by that codification: a genre, literary or otherwise, becomes a codification of discursive practices. Because genres exist as institutions, they function as “horizons of expectation” for readers, and as “models of writing” for authors.<sup>83</sup> Historian-autobiographers, as authors, write within the frame of the existing generic system. But, as in the cases analyzed in this article, they may also subvert or transform the traditional practice of the genre, and shift, in one way or another, their audiences’ “horizons of expectation.” To me, the emergence and rapid spread of interventional autobiography among historians in the last two decades is connected with one of Nietzsche’s intuitions: a new need in the present opens a new organ of understanding the past.<sup>84</sup> Interventional autobiographers have been aware that the increased sophistication of theory and complexity of the contemporary world required a new genre in order to achieve a deeper comprehension of modern culture.

As I tried to show in my *Authoring the Past*, I am persuaded of the permeability of historical genres, their different uses depending on the contextual political, social, and intellectual conditions, and their continued evolution and flexibility.<sup>85</sup> As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, any autobiographical approach requires that we consider the flexibilities of generic boundaries:

Autobiographical writing surrounds us, but the more it surrounds us, the more it defies generic stabilization, the more its laws are broken, the more it drifts toward other practices, the more formerly “out-law” practices drift into its domain. While popular practitioners carry on the old autobiographical tradition, other practitioners play with forms that challenge us to recognize their experiments in subjectivity and account for their exclusion from “high” literature.<sup>86</sup>

Historians have assumed this challenge and experimented with new literary forms that have located them at the frontiers of disciplinary innovation. Ultimately, it is

80. Albert E. Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 2.

81. Sarah Maza, “Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History,” *American Historical Review* 101, no. 5 (1996), 1501.

82. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 106.

83. Tzvetan Todorov, “The Origin of Genres,” *New Literary History* 8, no.1 (1976), 163.

84. Nietzsche, “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

85. Jaume Aurell, “Rethinking Historical Genres in the Twenty-First Century,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015), 1-13.

86. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “De/Colonization,” in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Narratives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xviii.

probably less important to unravel the specific genre of these texts than to attend to their revisionist ways of writing history. The postmodern intervention has helped us to better understand history and historiography itself, and, of course, expand the limits of autobiography.

In addition, while reading these texts, I have often thought that perhaps historians have turned to life-writing simply to say things they feel they cannot say within the framework of academia. In fact, academia may become for some historians a kind of straitjacket that precludes their saying what they want to about the world, past and present. Thus, historians-turned-autobiographers seem to deliberately break the rules of the game with conventional (and in some sense arbitrary) boundaries that keep them and other scholars from sharing things they know (or think they know). Even the most traditional historian has a life outside of history—and he/she feels the consequent inner impulse to escape from inside history at least for a while, looking for new ways of representing the past.<sup>87</sup> As Helen Buss explains,

In writing memoirs they not only choose to deconstruct their own privilege as academics, to work against the established discursive authority to which they have access, but they also choose to use that discursive authority to practice new formats, to speak about what had been forbidden in academic discourse. By writing memoirs they have refused to use, or found that it was impossible for them to use unmediated, authoritative academic discourse.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, this practice is in some sense iconoclastic, since the practitioners dodge the conventional readings designed to contain them in traditional paradigms by placing personal life in its institutional and cultural contexts. More specifically, I argue that interventional autobiography becomes a historiographical laboratory for the historians who practice it: their experiments with history *outside* themselves have drawn them to explore the history *inside* themselves, turning this process from objectivity to subjectivity into an operation of both historical and historiographical (that is, theoretical) writing. A new way to approach and understand the past, complementary to the conventional practices of the discipline in which they have usually been trained, emerges.<sup>89</sup> The desire that overtook a wide range of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century scholars trained in a variety of disciplines to write in newly meaningful ways, eschewing anonymity and authority in favor of connection, intimacy, agency, and passion through

87. I am grateful to Robert A. Rosenstone for the ideas included here.

88. Buss, *Repossessing the World*, 181.

89. Interventional autobiography is not a practice specific to historians, since academics in a number of areas such as geography, comparative literature, anthropology, and sociology have begun using this system to gather autobiographical essays: *Geographical Voices: Fourteen Autobiographical Essays*, ed. Peter Gould and Forrest R. Pitts (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002); *Building a Profession: Autobiographical Perspectives on the Beginnings of Comparative Literature in the United States*, ed. Lionel Gossman and Mihai I. Spariosu (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), and Geertz, *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); *Authors of Their Own Lives: Intellectual Autobiographies by Twenty American Sociologists*, ed. Bennett M. Berger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). It would be interesting to do a comparative study on autobiographical styles among scholars from different disciplines.

academic autobiography, was not accidental. Stephen Greenblatt posits that texts are cultural, not because of reference to a world beyond themselves, but by virtue of social values and contexts that they have themselves successfully absorbed.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, I argue that this idea, situated in the context of the postmodern theory of the New Historicism movement, must be nuanced by the authorial intention inherent in the logic of autobiographies and also in the ability of autobiographical texts to create a specific culture, which, in this case, carries strong historiographical meaning. In this sense, this new form of writing history clearly stresses historians' authorial intention and its ability to turn autobiography into the writing of history—that is, professional historians' conventional approach, but using an unconventional form.

More specifically, it appears that these new historian-autobiographers reflect a certain sense of dissatisfaction and frustration with classical forms of uncovering and relaying knowledge of the past, and they are looking for new ways of representing it. Brij Lal defined his collection of autobiographical texts as a “small act of rebellion against the current orthodoxy”: “It celebrates life in all its diversity, entertains the possibility of hope and progress in a world of bewildering change, and searches for complete explanations and universal truths without apology.”<sup>91</sup> Ruth Behar describes her own desire in these terms:

We seem to be a group of scholars who are committed for various reasons to demystifying the intellectual process, to showing how we know what we know and making that comprehensible to the uninitiated. . . . We think it is totally possible to do rigorous scholarship and be personal and personable in our work. . . . We are the velvet exiles of the academy, able to comfortably do the work expected of us, but choosing instead the more difficult position, that of the outsider within.<sup>92</sup>

Since these historians deploy autobiography to free themselves from the formalities of conventional history, these works serve in fact as critiques of current historical practices. Nevertheless, the reading of these autobiographies raises the question as to whether historians actually share this sense of frustration with classical forms of representing the past or whether this dissatisfaction appears in the autobiographical works *in spite of* their intentions. This is a difficult question to answer because the relationship between their scholarly texts and their autobiographical essays differs among the authors. The comparison between Steedman and Eley illustrates the different approaches they each have to history and, consequently, to autobiography. Both are well aware that an increased sophistication of theory is more and more necessary within an increasingly complex world, but Steedman is not afraid to make this sense of innovation and unconventionality explicit in both her historical and autobiographical writings. Eley makes his innovative tendency clear only in his autobiography, and not in his academic writing. Whereas Steedman is convinced that scholarship cannot fully grasp the complexity of the real world, and uses autobiography to address this limitation, Eley uses

90. Stephen Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 196-215; see also Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

91. Brij Lal, *Mr. Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey* (Canberra: Pandanus, 2001), xi.

92. Behar, “Foreword,” xvi-xvii.

autobiography as a *complement* to his historical task. Steedman published her autobiography in the middle of her career, in an unequivocal demonstration of her trust in the *historical* value of the autobiography, whereas Eley published it at the end of his career, when he felt that he was able to break with the historical conventions of his *previous* academic work, without endangering his academic reputation. Finally, Steedman functioned as a pioneer of interventional autobiography the same way she broke the conventions of social history, and she wrote history in the same unconventional way she wrote autobiography, whereas Eley used autobiography to unveil his hidden historiographical agenda, which was only implicit in his historical works.

Other historian-autobiographers analyzed in this article, including Spiegel, Davis, and Sewell, were powerfully innovative in their respective fields (medieval historiography, social history, and the relationship between language and society), and their life-writing exercises naturally reflect their groundbreaking work. Nevertheless, we have to take into account that their autobiographical essays were actually solicited, and we do not know if they would have engaged in the project had they not been requested to do so. So these authors' approaches to history and autobiography and the methodological assumptions they deploy in their historical and autobiographical works make it difficult to determine whether and to what extent they use autobiography to project and expand their position with regard to current historiographical practices or simply as an experiment in using another way to practice history.

In any case, what this corpus of autobiographies unquestionably shares is "the movement to recognize the autobiographical voice as a legitimate way of speaking in academe,"<sup>93</sup> and a liberatory stimulus for innovation and the breaking of rules; personal matters, once regarded as extraneous to disciplinary discourse, have become central to it.<sup>94</sup> Yet when looking for these new ways of representing the past, interventional historians validate autobiography as valid historical writing: a subjective but equally valid product.

Ultimately, interventional historians seek not only to understand their lives but also to engage in a larger and deeper theoretical project, and to embark on a more sophisticated and innovative historiographical journey. As their experiences show, their areas of research and the events in their lives are closely connected, a phenomenon bell hooks calls the "critical process of theorizing"—a process that I believe a systematic analysis of historians' autobiographies may reveal.<sup>95</sup> As they explore diverse forms of self-representation, these historians reshape "our perspectives on narratives of history, society, and selfhood."<sup>96</sup> Consequently, these documents modify the ways we write and read history and, by crossing into autobiography, historian-autobiographers allow their readers to re-evaluate established historical practices and implicate them in the process that creates

93. Ruth Behar, "Dare We Say 'I'? Bringing the Autobiographical Voice into Scholarship," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 29, 1994), B1.

94. David R. Shumway, "The Star System in Literary Studies," *PMLA* 112, no. 1 (1997), 96.

95. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 70.

96. Rocío G. Davis, *Begin Here: Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 185.

meaning in the approach to the past. This author–audience dialectic allows us to re-examine contemporary historiographical evolution under a new light, using historians’ autobiographies as a principal source and considering “autobiography as historiographical introduction.”<sup>97</sup> By highlighting the personal experiences and epistemological processes that govern the development of historical texts, we perceive them more clearly as *writerly acts* that limn the boundaries of scholarship and interpretation. Perhaps these historians’ autobiographies are the most fitting tribute to Roland Barthes, who in 1967 presaged profound changes in the writing of history with his influential essay “Historical Discourse.”<sup>98</sup>

If history is a mansion of many rooms, so too is the nature of the historian, and consequently the historians’ autobiographical voices and possibilities.<sup>99</sup> Thus nowadays historians keep multiplying their variety of styles and increasing their acceptance as academic artifacts. Historians such as John Elliott, Asa Briggs, Tony Judt, and Sheila Fitzpatrick have continued publishing interventional autobiographies in the 2010s, leading to public debate.<sup>100</sup> They continually seek new ways to represent the past since they need to organize, in one way or another, what they interpret, in order to produce comprehensive explanations of reality and coherent narrations of the past. They seem to confirm Conway’s conviction that “while the theoretical categories defining a genre may be fixed, its forms and stylistic patterns vary profoundly over time, and these variations constitute a kind of history of the way we understand the self, and what aspects of it we feel comfortable talking about.”<sup>101</sup>

After reading these testimonies, appreciating the effectiveness of the historians’ methods of explanation, and understanding most of the social, intellectual, and academic transformations in the last decades juxtaposed with the narrative of their lives, we recognize the scholarly effectiveness of interventional autobiography. Historians have taken advantage of the flexibility of autobiography and its potential as a valid form of history, a natural arena for the unification of subject and object. By choosing autobiography as a way of practicing history, the most recent historians-turned-autobiographers illustrate the power of the newly decentered voices that are emerging in historical writing and point toward an increasing presence of other innovative and supposedly unconventional genres, particularly those that highlight the performative dimension. Although A. J. P. Taylor wrote, “every historian should write an autobiography,” no one is being urged to write

97. Curtis, ed., “Introduction,” *The Historian’s Workshop*, xxiii.

98. Roland Barthes, “Le discours de l’histoire,” *Social Science Information/Information sur les sciences sociales* 6 (1967), 65–75.

99. I take this metaphor from Theodore K. Rabb, “Men and Books,” *Times Literary Supplement*, October 26, 2012.

100. Tony Judt, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2012); John H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Asa Briggs, *Special Relationships: People and Places* (London: Frontline Books, 2012); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2013). See also John Lukacs, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 2000). By “public debate” I mean that these autobiographies usually appear in the various literary supplements of the most international newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Independent*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *The Times*.

101. Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 4.



an autobiography.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, I am persuaded that this approach to writing the past will continue to illuminate the ways historians write histories, the history of others, and their own lives, and to understand what the traces of the past can be made to tell us about who we are and how we got here.

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102. Taylor quote in A. J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), ix.