

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 3 (1987)

Artikel: Anthropological narrative and the structur of North American Indian (auto-)biography
Autor: Isernhagen, Hartwig
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99859>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 02.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Anthropological Narrative and the Structure of North American Indian (Auto-)Biography

Hartwig Isernhagen

1. *Native American Literature and Anthropology: The Life History as (Auto-)Biography*

I would like to suggest in this brief essay that the development of North American Indian narrative is currently towards a greater degree of *dialogicity* and that this development is coupled with an increase in the importance of the genre of the life history, as developed by American anthropologists between the two World Wars.¹ As part of the same trend, the life history is acquiring the status of a *literary genre*, rather than a subliterary or purely documentary one; it becomes relevant outside the boundaries of the discipline of anthropology. At the same time, though, it has to undergo changes in its actual form that are correlates of changes in function. The decline in status of the traditional fictional forms of narration, one would presume, leaves a sort of gap that is filled by the life history, which is itself transformed in the process.

Other forms of narrative and other anthropological approaches *are*, of course, made use of in Native American literature,² but it is undeni-

¹ "The life history method in anthropology emerged out of research on American Indians." L. L. Langness and Gelya Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, Cal.: Chandler & Sharp, 1981), 17.

² Cf. works like the following: Jane Willis, *Geniesh: An Indian Girlhood* (Toronto: New Press, 1973), and Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell and T. D. Allen, *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma P., 1967), two largely autobiographical novels; or Anthony Apakark Thrasher, *Thrasher ... Skid Row Eskimo*. In collaboration with Gerard Deagle and Alan Mettrick. (Toronto: Griffin House, 1976), a case story; or Joseph E[ngasongwok] Senungetuk, *Give or Take a Century: An Eskimo Chronicle* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1971), an essayistic medley of different kinds of texts, including a great deal of anthropological information.

able that *biography* of different sorts is one of the dominant genres. It has always played a prominent role in the process of minority self-reflection, self-identification, and self-demonstration – and for quite obvious reasons. The more general term covers “true” biography, autobiography, and a ‘mixed’ (auto-)biography of the “The Life of X as Told to Y” type, which is also the predominant type of *life history* in twentieth century anthropology. In it, the reader is placed inside the dialogue between two voices or perspectives, between the subject (informant) and the interviewer (anthropologist); this is, in the simplest terms, what we refer to as the extra degree of dialogicity that distinguishes the *life history* (auto-)biography from the other two – the “purer” – forms of “biography.”³

Dialogicity in Native American and Canadian life histories is, then, *initially, though not ultimately*, due to the presence of the two *auctores* in interview situations and in the general making of the text. It results in a doubleness (or even duplicity) that manifests a general concern with the problematical character of *meaning* in that intercultural space where radically different world views attempt to communicate with one another. The *structure of the text* is determined by the two “voices” in such a way that it embodies the epistemological problems of the intercultural communication situation. Dialogicity has something to do, therefore, with questions of mediation, truth, and (above all) legitimacy, which will concern us in the remainder of this section of the essay.

Part of the *dialogic* nature and function of the genre is to mediate between individual and group, as well as between the native and the white “sides”. The practical work of anthropology, writes Kennelm Burridge,

entails a movement of the mind between the Aborigines themselves and their cultures, and the investigators and their cultures: a quadratic relationship whose intricacies the mind has to hold and map.⁴

That this relationship does not only exist on the level of content, but also on that of form is evidenced by the status of the individual (the “charac-

³ One might add that it only makes explicit the implicit dialogicity of the other modes; cf. Langness and Frank on the collaboration of anthropologist and subject in biography (96 ff.), and on the resulting text as a “double autobiography” (99).

⁴ *Encountering Aborigines: A Case Study: Anthropology and the Australian Aboriginal* (Elmsford: Pergamon, 1973). Quoted by Marjorie Myers Halpin, “William Beynon, Ethnographer: Tsimshian, 1888–1958,” in: Margot Liberty, ed., *American Indian Intellectuals* (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 141–156, quotation p. 152.

ter" of conventional narrative) in the text. Margaret B. Blackman suggests:

"Culture" as lived by the individual represents the ultimate inside view ... The life history ... complements the ethnographic account by adding to the descriptive an affective or experiential dimension. ... In many cultures the lives of natives span periods of critical and rapid cultural change; the life history affords a personalized, longitudinal view of these changes. Kluckhohn ... adds that life histories can be avenues to understanding status and role, individual variation within cultural patterns of behavior, personality structure, deviance, and idiosyncratic variation.⁵

This, the anthropologist's, view stresses the function of *particularization*, both within the native world and within the framework of the "white" scientific interest in the individual; to the literary scholar, who regards life histories as forms of autobiography, directly complementary statements that stress the function of *universalization* suggest themselves, once again in both realms. He would argue that such texts add to the inside view a perspective from outside, that they attempt to objectify in a greater degree than the normal biography, and that they show the patterns of the native culture and of *culture* as such underneath the individual fact, as well as the norm next to the variation. Obviously, the genre occupies a position in which it is possible to bring the particular and the universal together in a view of the individual.⁶

Charles C. Hughes makes an interesting point about the status of such views, which seems to reflect the basic concerns of the Frankfurt *Geistes-/Sozialwissenschaften* debate of the Sixties:

The uniqueness of any event – or, indeed, of any life – can ... be turned to double account: on the one hand, toward a focus on what separates it from all other occurrences, the idiographic approach, in a manner resembling the artistic and humanistic strategy; and, on the other, toward those features which, when made explicit, render it a member of a class or classes of phenomena, in the ethos of a scientific, or "nomothetic," approach to understanding.⁷

The status of whatever meaning the text may offer is, then, uncertain on theoretical and methodological grounds. It is also uncertain for a very

⁵ Margaret B. Blackman, *During My Time: Florence Edenshaw Davidson, a Haida Woman* (Seattle: University of Washington P.; Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982), 4.

⁶ And the question of the typical individual is one of the more fundamental questions of anthropological sources in general.

⁷ Charles C. Hughes, *Eskimo Boyhood: An Autobiography in Psychosocial Perspective* ([Lexington]: The University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 6.

practical reason that leads on to further problems. As Blackman points out

it goes without saying that the relationship between anthropologist and life-history subject is critical to the telling of the story in the first place and ultimately to the understanding of the final record.⁸

That this relationship is a playing-off of differences against one another, becomes apparent, for example, where the interests of the interviewer come up against a barrier characteristic of the genre: where the ordinary and everyday is not remembered as clearly as the extraordinary. Thus, Florence Davidson sometimes

was unable to remember something in the detail that I would have liked, reminding me quite appropriately, 'It wasn't important to me then; how was I supposed to know that white people might be interested in it years later?'⁹

At the same time, Blackman's questions do bring to light remembrances that would otherwise not have been actualized. Further influence is exerted in the overall shaping of the text –

the division of the narrative into chapters is an artifact of my own thinking ... and the chronology closely parallels the traditional life stages distinguished among the Haida¹⁰

– and in the addition of material later elicited from the subject because Blackman

had neglected some basic life-cycle topics: how long mothers typically nursed their children, the significance of menopause for Haida women, the learning of sexual behavior, and others.¹¹

At all these points the genre of the life history encounters the problem of its own legitimacy. The question comes up even before the founding interaction begins, in the consideration that (as Blackman admits) the life history model is not compatible with all (Native American) cultures¹², and it tends to accompany the entire interaction between the *auctores* and the actual writing. Thus, Nancy Oestreich Lurie comments on her *Mountain Wolf Woman*, which is actually controlled by its subject in a remarkably high degree, that

⁸ Blackman, 15.

⁹ Blackman, 18.

¹⁰ Blackman, 19.

¹¹ Blackman, 20. Cf. 126: "In 1981 Florence corrected her earlier [dating of the making of a canoe]. ... Because the narrative has been reorganized topically within the life cycle, discussion of the canoe was left in this chapter."

¹² Blackman, 14.

an element of coercion was involved with both Crashing Thunder [who had been paid by Radin] and Mountain Wolf Woman; Radin took advantage of his informant's poverty and I manipulated the kinship structure for my own purposes. [She was her subject's adopted niece.] However, while neither informant would have written an autobiography without the stimulus provided by an anthropologist, both informants were chosen because it was possible to interest them in the work and they were eminently qualified to perform the task.¹³

It is in accordance with this notion of the text being based on the subject's aptitude and inclination that Lurie can later stress the differences of the two autobiographies and account for them by pointing at the different personalities of their subjects.¹⁴ Out of the same notion comes one decisive test of the adequacy of the final text to the personality – the question whether the subject will accept it as his or her own story; Mountain Wolf Woman did.¹⁵

The underlying axiom here seems to be that the text is only legitimate when it is based on a fundamental equality of the participants in the dialogue, or on a certain (egalitarian or full) kind of dialogicity. Wherever it is not given, there is a danger of manipulation, violation, and exploitation of the subject. The question of legitimacy has turned the argument back, once again, upon the very notion of dialogicity. For it is only on this notion that such legitimacy can be founded, and the more recent texts seem to demonstrate this, and to shape themselves according to the insight.

2. *Varying Shapes of Dialogicity: Standpoints and Degrees of Their Accommodation*

That all "anthropologization" of the narrative constitutes a departure from a more or less spontaneously generated personal narrative does not make the text inauthentic. The "deformation" is not easily discountable one way or another, for it is not only *ultimately* sanctioned by the subject, but often also sanctioned *in each of its individual stages*; thus,

¹³ Nancy Oestreich Lurie, ed., *Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*. Foreword by Ruth Underhill. (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1961), 93.

¹⁴ Lurie, 102.

¹⁵ Cf. Spradley (James P. Spradley, *Guests Never Leave Hungry: The Autobiography of James Sewid, a Kwakiutl Indian* [New Haven: Yale Univ. P., 1969]) reporting that "when the final draft was read back, he [Sewid] responded to it as his own story and made very few changes." (5)

Blackman is asked by Florence "to 'fix it up' and 'make it look right.'" ¹⁶ That such "fixing-up" is in accordance with the conventions of a basically white genre does not diminish the authenticity of the process in the self-presentation of a woman who *has* taken over many things from white civilization and whose right to use the anthropologist as a sort of *scribe* cannot be denied. The process can, positively, be described as the infusion of a theoretical aspect into the rendering of the text *and into the self-reflexion of the subject*. "Everything about the inquiry relationship itself," says Bourdieu,

betrays the interrogator's 'theoretical' (i.e. 'non-practical') disposition and invites the interrogatee to adopt a quasi-theoretical attitude: the situation in which the interrogation is carried out rules out any reference to the use and conditions of use [of the native notions]. ¹⁷

If "formal methods ... cancel out the practical function of notions, creating important changes in their status" ¹⁸ and if informants present to the interrogator a certain "theoretical" set of notions "as long as they see themselves as spokesmen mandated to present the group's official account of itself" ¹⁹, *this may be an impediment to the normal forms of anthropological research, but it becomes an asset as soon as it is made the base situation of the life history*. Under conditions of culture contact, it there serves, in some manner and degree, to set up an intercultural space as a sort of *Öffentlichkeit*, i.e., as a public space in which public discourses need to be used – or, in many cases, to be established. On the other hand, the focus on the private life as the material basis of the story (and as ultimately its only legitimizing matter) prevents the public aspect from taking over completely.

The mediation, in such cases, is of course towards the white world, and this is the direction in which many of the great earlier life histories went. Clellan Ford's (auto-)biography of Charles Nowell, for example, is not characterized by any great editorial interference with the original narrative, but the anthropologist's perspective and interest have been internalized by Charles Nowell. That the informant knows what is expected of him and delivers it, becomes apparent when Nowell, having

¹⁶ Blackman, 19.

¹⁷ P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. P. 1977) Quoted by Ladislav Holy and Milan Stuchlik, *Actions, norms and representations: Foundations of anthropological inquiry*. Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, 45. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. P., 1984), 61.

¹⁸ Holy and Stuchlik, 67.

¹⁹ Holy and Stuchlik, 75.

talked about his life as a baby and making a bee-line for the stories his father told him, says that "he also tells me about fairies and monsters – all kinds of stories which Dr. Boas has already taken down."²⁰ More important than the full representation of the life of the individual is the newness of the material, in the sense of its not yet having been recorded, and *the structure of the text*, in the sense of the selection and combination of the material that goes into it, is determined by the needs of the science of anthropology.²¹

The autobiographical here is in an ancillary role. The same is true of the (auto-)biography of "Chris" by Opler, a text published only in 1969, but based on material collected in the thirties and wholly informed by the standards of the time;²² it may actually be true of most of the earlier texts. The autobiographical is ancillary in that the lived life and its cultural context do not yield the tools to interpret it/them, but that they require a perspective (anthropological, of course) from without to become comprehensible and "real" (i. e., discursively real). Both Charley Nowell and "Chris" do, however, show at the same time that the anthropological perspective becomes a lived one – not just a discourse chosen for rare and isolated moments of interaction with a white field worker. In this sense, there does exist a real dialogue of cultures, whose *form*, however, is determined exclusively or almost exclusively by the white science of anthropology. With regard to the interaction of the cultures, this implies a high degree of acculturation in discourse, which may perhaps be possible because there is comparatively much cultural substance left on other experiential levels to balance such adaptation; with regard to the question of genre, it implies that the life history is a source for the white science, rather than a literary expression of the native culture. The more contemporary life history, by way of contrast, seems to be a form of native historical writing that makes use of anthropological patterns.

In such texts, now, the mediation implies or includes the native side on more clearly formal levels – for example, with regard to the evaluative framework for actions and events in the story. In conventional western

²⁰ Clellan S. Ford, *Smoke from Their Fires: The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief* (New Haven: Yale Univ. P., for The Institute of Human Relations, 1941), 41.

²¹ Ford, 56.

²² Cf. in this regard chapter titles like "Childhood Play" (2), "Growing Up" (5), "Girls" (6), "Adult Life" (9). It needs to be pointed out, however, that there are others that are exclusively historical – which some of the quoted ones are, too, in part. Obviously, the distinction between anthropological pattern and individual history is not an absolute one.

autobiography, the criteria would seem to be related to a shared view of culture, and the autobiography would appear to deal with the individual's contribution to and/or experience of it, as well as with the culture's, and his or her, changes in the process. Conflict exists, but the areas of conflict and hence the shapes that conflict can take are fairly well determined – they need not be established by the work itself.²³ Tacit assumptions about the cultural meaning of the actions and events that make up the life, as well as a sustained implied reference to the cultural field in which the life is acted out, serve to structure the telling by establishing a pattern of relations (conflicts, alliances, parallelisms, and what not) in the reader's mind, within which he automatically places and accords greater or lesser importance to individual actions and events.

Where the shared fund of assumptions, codes, etc. is greatly limited or perhaps only uncertain, such patterning needs to be established by the text itself. This is what happens, for example, in several Inuit texts,²⁴ where *hunting*, which is at first merely a necessarily repeated event, attains the status of a natural and cultural *norm* associated with problems of survival and finally even with a fundamental *desire* that gives impulse and experiential reality to the subject's life. *I, Nuligak*, for example, uses a modified chronicle pattern that attempts to deal with the problem of repetition by condensing some periods.²⁵ Such abbreviation, which is much helped by the absence of year-by-year dating, also mimetically renders the decline of Nuligak into a less active old age, in which, however, the essentials of the past experience become clearer. One such essential is the excitement of the hunt.²⁶

It is not unimportant that the very end of the book returns to this theme. When Nuligak, in his old age, regrets most that he cannot any longer go hunting,²⁷ there is a loss of essential vitality and almost of personal identity implied that can make for a desire to die – so that one may return for another cycle of life. The anthropological *fact* is used to structure the narrative and to elicit from a mass of events the meaning of the life that the subject wishes to present.

²³ If the merchant's son decides he is going to be an artist, rather than a merchant or lawyer, the reader need not be informed about the implications or about the general *setting* of the conflict between father and son that "normally" results.

²⁴ Nuligak, *I, Nuligak*. Ed. & transl. [into French] Maurice Metayer, [into English] Olive Koyama & The Canada Council. (Markham, Ont.: Pocket Books, 1971, 3rd print., 1975); Hughes.

²⁵ E.g. pp. 160–62, which take the reader (and Nuligak) from 1941 to 1952.

²⁶ Nuligak, 152, cf. Hughes, 3.

²⁷ Nuligak, 171 f.

In such texts a unified structure is given to the life by imputing a dominant and unifying motive to it; other texts stress the disruptive force of diverging motives. Such uses of dialogicity serve to exhibit and enact conflicts. A case in point is James Sewid, whose ability to adapt successfully to a culture conflict situation is stressed several times by Spradley. The strategy used is basically simple and immediately perceptible on the surface of the text. Insecurities and ambivalences are clearly articulated, though the speaker always manages to bring some ultimately positive aspect to the front; he usually does so by affirming a norm that has sustained him in living through the conflict, e. g.:

Going to school was new to me and I found it awfully hard, especially such things as adding and arithmetic. Somehow I just couldn't put it in my head and I used to find it awfully hard. I really enjoyed school and that was the main reason I came to Alert Bay. I wanted to go to school pretty badly, and there was no school in Village Island, and that is why I started thinking about going to live with my grandmother. I enjoyed school very much but I had a lot of enemies there as a small boy.²⁸

3. *The Benefits of Dialogicity and the Implied Functions of Life Histories*

The value of such patterns of mediation and conflict as have been briefly pointed out seems to be immediately apparent: they are, patently, in the interest of communication between the cultures that engage, through their representatives (native subject, white interviewer, native reader, white reader), in what amounts to a multiple dialogue – two voices with different timbres talking to one another. The question, however, still remains what precisely the qualities of that communication are and what kinds of benefits can be derived from it. One can, of course, say that communication *per se* is beneficial, and in a sense I shall come around to just that answer; but I shall do so by way of a detour that may clarify our notion both of *communication* and of *benefit* a little.

At the beginning stands the observation that life histories seem to make concrete and to act out some of the central problems of the science of anthropology. Among these are: (1) the fact that symbols have meaning only for those who use them and as they use them, which becomes particularly obvious in situations of rapid cultural change in which the meanings are insecure in content and status; and (2) the varying validity

²⁸ Spradley, 47.

of explanatory systems, according to which an action may or may not make sense.²⁹ Life histories, then, communicate a sense of the tentative nature of cultural meanings, and this is beneficial if we value an attitude of scepticism.

Also, Holy and Stuchlik's two basic distinctions – of “society, or structure, [as] an objective reality to whose demands people respond in specific ways” and “society or structure emerg[ing] from, and [being] maintained or changed only by what people do,” and of “notions” and “actions,”³⁰ problematical as they may be as anthropological categories, can under certain conditions be *experiential* ones that recur in life histories and characterize the historical situation.³¹ Thus, for example, the subject can feel him/herself to be swept along by an over-powering social system, while attempting to make it *or a somewhat different one* come into being through his/her actions, or the subject can feel that his/her notions and actions, in a given context – a particularly crippling one, let us say – cannot be made to tally with one another. Life histories, then, offer an integral discourse for the articulation of alienation.³²

One could continue in this vein and list several more aspects in which the genre of the life history seems to fill a very specific and fairly important niche in the continuum of currently available forms of narrative. The more general argument may be more important, because it ascribes a privileged status to the genre. It goes something like this: *In articulating (or seeming to articulate) current problems of the discipline of anthropology, the life history deals with problems that our culture has with itself and with its own history of interaction with other cultures.*

Johannes Fabian, at least, in *Time and the Other*, sees anthropology historically involved in a contradiction between “research involving personal, prolonged interaction with the Other” and “a discourse which construes the Other in terms of distance, spatial and temporal,” on which “the scandal of domination and exploitation of one part of mankind by another” is based. “The Other’s empirical presence turns into

²⁹ Holy and Stuchlik, 36 ff., 40.

³⁰ Holy and Stuchlik, 2 et passim.

³¹ Cf. the discussion of changes of norms occurring quite rapidly under the pressure of comparatively rapid socio-economic change, 91 ff.

³² One might even go so far as to suggest that the incongruence of notions and actions, as discussed by Holy and Stuchlik (in terms of kinds of data, pp. 5 ff., and of the problematic status of norms vis-à-vis actions, p. 83) is one of the constitutive themes of autobiography – for if there were no such incongruence, one of the defining aspects of individuality (which lies somewhere in the mediation between notions or norms and actions, or in the transformation of the one into the other) would be missing.

his theoretical absence.”³³ “Evolutionist anthropologists ... *spatialized* Time,” to that “ever since ... anthropology’s efforts to construct relations with its Other by means of temporal devices implied affirmation of difference as *distance*.”³⁴ On the basis of this insight, Fabian posits as the project of an emancipated and emancipatory anthropology “the radical contemporaneity of mankind,”³⁵ which would realize itself in “a problematic simultaneity”³⁶ of cultures.

Contemporary life histories may very well be a genre that at least facilitates, and perhaps even necessitates, such contemporaneity; for the subject, at least, can they internalize the difference between the two cultures and (in living and telling them in the one life and the one act) effect their concrete, and concretely presented, interaction. Traditionally, “what makes the savage significant to the evolutionist’s Time is that he lives in another Time”³⁷; the existence of the subject of a life history denies the distinction, or – if it is imposed from without, by the general culture – it can contain both times and make them coeval. It may abolish the “temporal slope” between observer and observed of which Fabian talks,³⁸ since it implants the one time in the other. And it may thereby “image” in the subject, or create between subject and anthropologist, that “intersubjective time” that Fabian briefly alludes to as the most acceptable of time notions so far in use.³⁹ It may finally directly address what Fabian takes to be the real (or perhaps one had better say, the ultimate) referent of anthropology: the relationship or “contradiction” between “the West and the Rest.”⁴⁰

If – in the sense that “the object’s present is founded in the writer’s past” – “facticity itself ... is autobiography,” as Fabian argues in accordance with Weizsäcker, if the temporal distance between the two times is converted into coevalness in situations of dialogicity, and if finally “somehow we must be able to share each other’s [sic] past in order to be knowingly in each other’s present,”⁴¹ then the life history is a genre, once again, that does not only rely for its constitution on these aspects

³³ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Objects* (New York: Columbia Univ. P., 1983), X/XI.

³⁴ Fabian, 15/16.

³⁵ Fabian, XI.

³⁶ Fabian, 146.

³⁷ Fabian, 27.

³⁸ Fabian, 30 f.

³⁹ Fabian, 24.

⁴⁰ Fabian, 28.

⁴¹ Fabian, 89/92.

and projects of anthropology, but that is about them, in so far as both the personal and the cultural pasts of the participants in the dialogue converge, in so far as the facticity of the life is a doubly autobiographical one (being grounded in the biographies of both participants), and in so far as the subject's present is founded in the past of two observers – both the subject's, as he or she observes him/herself, and the observing interviewer's.

Coevalness and dialogicity do not completely allay the specter of exploitation that Fabian describes, in the very general ways of the present discussion, as the removal of "possessions" from the native past into the Western present.⁴² But the life history, as a possession, once again exemplifies and may (in various ways) reflect upon this process; and it will only rarely be the result of a simple act of exploitation – if only for the reason that it tends to emancipate the subject from the authority of the researcher by placing some of the latter's "theoretical" (see above) authority in that subject.⁴³

What Fabian, at the end of his book, has to say about the danger of appropriation hidden in a bad kind of coevalness⁴⁴ is less important in the context of this essay than his concern with the ways in which the old paradigms of anthropology exemplify the separation of the object of consciousness from the mind, and of the mind from the practical life of the individual. The gap between the western self and its non-western other is regarded by him in the last analysis as one phase in the alienation of Western consciousness from itself; and he suggests that

the only way to think of consciousness [materialistically, i.e.] without separating it from the organism or banning it to some kind of *forum internum* is to insist on its sensuous nature.⁴⁵

In this context, the life history can most programmatically be characterized as communication-as-praxis, and as being of a beneficial kind: the production of language in a dialogic mode that embodies the differences of the participating persons' cultures in the coevalness of one

⁴² Fabian, 95 f.; Fabian does not, however, concentrate on the aspect of commodification that (significantly enough) only comes to the fore as objects are being removed from their original context and use – cf. the example of "primitive" art that he does briefly allude to.

⁴³ This does, of course, not preclude exploitation along the same lines as of any author in western society, for example, by unfavorable arrangements or downright cheating.

⁴⁴ Fabian, 154.

⁴⁵ Fabian, 161 f.

verbal act which attempts to overcome the alienation of the participants from one another and from themselves. The structure of the text is determined, then, by the implied socio-cultural and epistemological project of the narrative.