

Conclusion: Writing Embodied History

Dancers' life stories are evocative sources offering insight into dancing bodies and history. This testimony is, however, also challenging for scholars to engage with, as self-narratives are performative and memories are fallible reconstructions. Building upon the recent work of dance scholars Christina Thurner, Julia Wehren, and Nadja Rothenburger, who argue for the potential of expanded theoretical and methodological "auto_bio_graphical" research in dance studies, my writing introduces the specific approach of body-biographies, focusing on methodological development and aspects of embodiment.¹

This book explores how to document and interpret dancers' life stories—considering how artists perform narratives that articulate their self-understanding and embodied experiences of dance. In contrast to methods valuing the scholar's distant objectivity, I advocate that the researcher reflexively participates in life review and cooperates on life-writing with the dancer, with attention, care, and energy. Advancing a body-reflexive and participatory approach to inquiry through methodological innovation and case study analysis, this book has shown how autobiographical study enriches understanding of the complex, subjective, multisensory, fine-grained, and easily disregarded components of embodied dance practice and history. Body-biographies are collections of dancers' life stories that are produced, contextualized, and refined through emergent dialogues between a well-informed researcher and a dancer: research in which the scholar participates in practice-led autobiographical storytelling (rather than working with a fixed questionnaire or performing "sit-down" interviews). The chosen topics and expressive narration of body-biographies provide a performative format for life review and historical reflection. These texts are edited for publication with a readership of both scholars and other dancers in mind. The resulting body-biographies present situated life story research, sensory movement analysis, reflexive writing, and praxeological knowledge.

1 Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 23; Hilari et al., "Auto_Bio_Graphical Urgencies. Vier Tanzwissenschaftliche Perspektiven"; Rothenburger, *Autochoreografie im Zeitgeschehen*; Wehren, *Oral Dance History*.

The book has charted the following path: Following the introduction, which discusses my motivation and research design, Part I begins with a theoretical chapter reviewing auto/biographical discourses for the purpose of dance research (“Chapter 1: Life Stories as Sources for Dance Scholarship”). With reference to the writing of Charlotte Linde and Penny Summerfield, among others, I review arguments regarding the constructed nature of life stories as narrative performances that negotiate coherence and explore psychological composure. My discussion focuses on recent scholarship in dance history—including the writing of Christina Thurner, Karen Eliot, and Jeff Friedman—highlighting how dance scholars have examined diverse forms of dancers’ autobiography and envisioned what Karen Eliot terms “embodied history.”² This is followed by a chapter articulating my methodology (“Chapter 2: Body-Biographies: A Novel Methodology for Body-Reflexive and Participatory Dance Research”). There I specify my methodological approach with reference to existing techniques and epistemological debates in interview research, oral history, transcription, life-writing, narrative analysis, and movement analysis. Taken together, Part I demonstrates the potential of dance studies to generate new performative and embodied modes of inquiry for life story research—entwining theory and practice, observation and participation. My writing also underscores the gaps within existing research on dancer autobiographies, especially the need to pay greater attention to less famous artists and to the life and work of dance teachers. The particularity of embodied history also warrants exploratory research through in-depth case studies of individual dancers. Part II of this book addresses this need.

Shifting in tone to the intimate registers of autobiography, “Interlude: Autobiographical Gestures” between Parts I and II turns to my own life and career as a dancer. I consider how contexts of dance education and professional praxis have constituted my embodied knowledge and sense of selves.³ My stories and narrative fragments illustrate the theoretical significance of the coherence-defying registers of autobiography described analytically in Chapter 1. The difficulty I faced in producing this public life-writing helped me to comprehend the challenges other dancers might experience in telling their life stories: These include the difficulty of articulating embodied memories eloquently in words, as well as the wish to efface theoretically significant but painful or embarrassing stories. My life-writing, fashioned without the support of a well-informed interview partner and emergent practice-led research with another artist, exhibits the contrast between body-biography methodology and autonomous techniques of autobiographical writing.

2 Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 2.

3 Plural selves as a person who is both dancer and scholar, an academic with multiple disciplinary foundations, and an expatriate who has lived in the United States, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland.

This sets the stage for body-biography as an alternative technique for writing embodied life histories.

Demonstrating my novel methodology of body-biography, the second part of this book publishes case studies developed with four lesser-known but significant dance artists. All are well-respected teachers in their communities of practice: Hilary Cartwright, Christine Kono, Chris Lechner, and Marcus Schulkind (Chapters 3–6). My relationships with these artists are based on my artistic study with them, as well as making and performing dances (in all cases but Cartwright, with whom I undertook teacher training). Our friendships grew through these artistic pursuits.

Taking the form of a group autobiographical project, in 2022 I embarked on life story research with these four elder collaborators, all of whom are over the age of sixty. Representing three national origins and currently living in four different countries, they present unique socio-historical life trajectories and aesthetic preferences in dance. All have achieved considerable professional distinction, without the recognition typically awarded to prominent choreographers or illustrious ballet stars. I envisioned that their experiences of dancing—as Lechner put it “working in the trenches”—would enrich my study twofold: first, through vivid accounts of dancing and embodied knowledges, and second, by discussing the challenges of sustaining life as a precarious dance artist. Studying these requires considerable rapport and reflexivity to see beyond the smoke and mirrors of coherent and status-staging self-narratives. These protagonists also have unique personalities and voices, reflective of their own international artistic histories and family backgrounds. Their evocative forms of rhetoric and empathetic styles of communication I knew well from their classrooms. I was eager to face the challenge to articulately document these distinct voices—and dancing bodies—on the page.

On a personal level, I felt an urgency to write down my teachers’ life stories because of their advanced age, the COVID-19 pandemic, and rapidly changing conditions of dance training and practice. I wished to make a record of their teaching practices and embodied knowledges for other dancers and dance historians to engage with. This documentation practice I was certain would offer me new understanding of dance history and my own dance pedagogical practice. Benefiting from my teachers’ witty and energetic investment in reflecting on their bodies and rethinking their careers, each chapter in Part II unveils an illustration of body-biographical writing.

As part of the reflexivity promoted in body-biography, I strive to make transparent how my research interests, subjectivity, identity, and aesthetic preferences shape the content of this book. One of my primary arguments is that participatory research can enhance dance historiography and dance studies, provided it is accompanied by reflexivity. My criteria for selecting these teachers and reflecting on the impact of my relationships with them on this life-writing are presented in the “Introduction.” Additionally, the opening pages framing each

individual body-biography (Chapters 3–6) expound in greater detail upon our prior relationships and mutual aesthetic interests, demarcating further limits of objectivity. With close attention to ethical debates on reflexivity and ethnographic writing in anthropology, my analysis demonstrates that life stories examining embodiment offer rich theoretical yields yet necessitate considerable care work over extended timelines to achieve the desirable balance between sensitivity and critical analysis—examining what other scholars might not gain access to, or might overlook, or dismiss as too subjective. In this way, the book defines a form of autobiographic inquiry that requires reflexivity on ethical, theoretical, and methodological dimensions simultaneously.

Our longstanding teacher-student rapport and shared practical knowledge complicated and enhanced this research. It offered me exceptionally in-depth, theoretically complex, and sensually rich content. Through this inquiry, interviews with my teachers “Christine,” “Marcus,” “Hilary,” and “Chris,” became biographic chapters staging life review with Christine Kono (b. 1947), Marcus Schulkind (b. 1948), Hilary Cartwright (b. 1943), and Chris Lechner (b. 1963). As we conscientiously shaped narratives about ourselves intended for publication, I insisted that our movements, gestures, and vocal performance appear on the page and evoke multisensory dialogues.

I learned that these aesthetic registers of embodied performance must be subtly translated into words—not cumulatively annotated—to achieve poetic effects on the page. I discovered that my embodied knowledge is mercurial, not hierarchical or Cartesian. I found that narratives describing embodied history resisted the linear timings of reading-flow and the straight lines of literacy. Our words, my editor politely noticed, were frequently shifting into unconventional grammatical positions. Out of respect for my narrators’ authority, I used light editing to adjust their speech in line with normative grammatical conventions—seeking approval for any changes (not ghostwriting) and being mindful not to eviscerate the bodily poetics of mobile and performative speech. All four narrators reported being initially overwhelmed by their words filling page after page—like a mirror presenting a strange reflection flattening reality. We took time to read and to refine the form of their individual body-biographies collaboratively. Working on paper as well as through digital interfaces, I was conscious that my expertise in scholarly writing made me the primary custodian of these texts. Body-biography methodology is emergent and does not produce cookie-cutter biographies, as the close reader will see ample evidence of.

My research revealed to me that embodied life-story narration with dancers gains momentum associatively and relationally in the excitement of dialogue with another bodily responsive and expressive participant. The sociality of the methodology impacts the content and yield. Embodied storytelling may draw together pivotal experiences and discourses that create vortexes and

springboards—then suddenly switch currents ficklely, like the wind, to follow convention and the narrator's curiosity to describe causal chronologies. After the resumption of chronological narrating, interruptions might again veer in a new direction, leaving the interviewer bewildered until they listen closely to the recordings and begin to discover patterns across life-story constellations. Recognizing embodied storytelling as relational and experimental, my narrators and I worked together with the objective of leaving rich knowledge about our artistic practices and bodies for the next generation of artists and dance historians to chew over.

We recognized that, as a group, our autobiographical project sharing one book would offer chapter-length windows onto our lives. The life stories thus would be highly selective: abridged, not comprehensive. One of my roles as author was to hold together an overview of the entire book's content, as well as to take responsibility for relaying correspondences and anecdotes orally between parties. I worked together with each participant, curating and arranging collections of life stories. While drawing upon interview recordings documenting exchanges between 2022 and '24, the writing highlights the protagonists' self-understanding in the final months of editing (rather than aiming to represent the process). Our writing would surely have changed if we had continued reviewing our lives in the subsequent months and years.⁴

In sum, *Body-Biographies: Our Life Stories in Dance* establishes an interdisciplinary framework and novel methodology for embodied life story research in dance studies and substantiates these ideas in intimate case studies with dancers. The research design is reflexively driven to draw upon my perspective as a dance scholar, teacher, and former professional dancer—placing my self-narratives, my body, and the lives of four dance colleagues at the center of my analysis. In the remainder of this conclusion, I discuss further matters for the benefit of other scholars, with sections addressing: the content and challenges of body-biographies, the writing process, the fine-scale of embodied history, the case studies, and lastly, broader methodological horizons.

4 For example, my life had a drastic change in October 2025 when I accepted a Professorship in Ballet Techniques at the Frankfurt University of Music and Performing Arts. Having submitted many applications after finishing my postdoctoral research grant for this project, I did not envision this reality concretely when drafting my life-writing presented in the interlude between Part I and Part II. I chose to leave this text unedited, reflecting my position when writing this book.

Content and Challenges

My invented term for this inquiry—ligating *body* and *biography*—has served as a gateway for articulating dancers' life stories as a form of critical dance studies scholarship. This project has drawn upon my competencies in reflexive ethnography and dance studies in addition to my skills as a practicing dance artist. As a dancer myself, anticipating the expressive and embodied ways that dancers might desire to tell their life stories based on the specific practical logics and social codes of working in the dance profession, I have built upon existing scholarship exploring how life stories are creative, performed, and composed narratives. This book develops life story research beyond an oral narrative focus on storytelling, shaping inquiry that richly attunes to the emergent dimensions of dancing bodies and the logics of dance practice—expanding and sharpening theoretical approaches for documenting dancing lives, writing embodied history, and studying aesthetic practice.

The case studies in Part II of this book foreground stories about cooperating with other dancers and choreographers, as well as teaching dance students: transmissions that are central to defining communities of dance practice. They describe physically learning to dance, energetically depicting seminal teachers and memorable lessons. Reading these body-biographies, we absorb vivid accounts of training, rehearsal, and production conditions, also gaining contextual knowledge of the networks that allowed dancers to find employment. My collaborators' life stories spiral around the topic of injury—recounting bodily discipline, vulnerability, precarity, empowerment, and resiliency. Another common theme is aging. The artists compare the experiences of young dance students today—in an age of rapid digital and social transformation—to their own memories of the past, tethered to the social revolutions of the sixties and seventies. Taken as a whole, these recollections offer valuable insights into the local contexts and extended social networks that have defined pathways for exchanging embodied knowledge. They envision “embodied history,” as historian Karen Eliot describes it, representing “dance history as it has been created on, in, and through [dancers'] bodies.”⁵

I anticipate that these body-biographies will catalyze further scholarly analysis. As Christina Thurner has shown, dancers' autobiographies not only provide testimony depicting the experiential phenomenon of dancing and accounting for its conditions of production, but also exhibit narratives of artistic self-understanding and self-fashioning, shedding light on processes of self-constitution.⁶ This is also true of body-biographies, which present self- and body-understanding, as well as accounting for pivotal discourses and practices that structure these experiences.

5 Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 6.

6 Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 29–109.

Body-biographies examine how dancing impacts the sensory perception of one's own and others' bodies, as well as the surrounding environment (and space) created through movement. Dancers' body-biographies also report extensively on bodily awareness shaped through physical injury and illness, as well as practices of healing, health, and medicine. At times, these various discourses seem to multiply understandings of the self; or, in the case of injury and illness, they may alienate one from one's dysfunctional body and divide the self. Further research on these aspects of subjectivity and embodiment, and their extension through novel case studies, I hope will be engaged with by other scholars—deepening what I have commenced here.

While body-biographies enrich dance scholarship and archives, still, this methodological approach is challenging to produce and interpret. I discuss five critical points here. First, dance—as a largely nonverbal and kinesthetic art form—is not easily translated into oral life story narratives, leading to gaps, obscurations, and misrepresentations. While emplacing life story interviews in contexts of practice and extending them over time to enhance reflexivity have compensated for these difficulties, underfunded oral history archives and early career researchers might not have the infrastructure (dance studios), technology (wireless microphones), and financial resources at their fingertips to undertake this kind of research. In the future, I imagine that the pervasiveness of video technology will make body-biography more convenient and less costly—enabling further study of the impact of digital interfaces upon body-perception and dance practices.

Second, life story and oral history research advance active memory reconstruction—not extracting memory but producing it.⁷ This recognizes that human recall is fallible and mutable. One consequence is that earnest testimony that presents inaccurate renditions of the past may still have scholarly value in terms of narrative meaning. In this research, my narrators wished to be perceived as truthful. To this end, I made “reality checks.”⁸ I fact-checked the titles of artistic works, the spelling of artistic collaborators' and institutions' names, and the dates of key events. When faced with the ambiguities of subjective memories, I used footnotes to highlight discrepancies with other historical sources and discussed these openly with my teachers. Body-biographies therefore occupy a niche between the expressive and speculative dimensions of history writing, benefitting from the scholar's critical competences in triangulation and source review.

Third, the “dance” of the interview dialogue—in performative gazes, gestures, touch, breath, movements, and affects—remains difficult to represent in writing. Dance scholar Jeff Friedman's scholarship vividly describes him dancing in dialogue with his interviewees in the process of recalling memories, as a means of enriching

7 See Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 23; Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*.

8 Plummer, “The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research,” 401.

the sensual content of interviewing by adding multisensory components to oral storytelling.⁹ Building upon this important work and relying on my background in ethnography, Laban Movement Analysis, and dance improvisation, I similarly made use of my body and my kinesthetic knowledge in the interviews, immersing myself in participant observation and writing field notes. This augmented my depiction of my narrators' bodies and movements. Longer studio sessions or other experimental modes of elicitation (for example with music) are possibilities that other interviewers may consider. Another challenge facing scholars is that dance elders may decline to dance in the framework of the interview, limiting the suitability of the methodology to elders who remain active.¹⁰ Moreover, not all dance scholars possess a background in dance practice. I have therefore also drawn up a participatory theoretical framework for movement analysis that may assist nondancers in writing up and interpreting their interviews.¹¹

Fourth, the narrative throughlines and coherence of testimony are difficult to assess in real-time during the interview. Extending these conversations into multiple interviews distributed over time permitted me to find materials for elicitation and to triangulate these with other sources. This also enabled me to gently probe narrative consistency. To assist other scholars, I have developed a framework for theoretical interpretation of life stories that can assist in real-time as well as subsequent analysis.¹²

Lastly, the duration and intensity of my process and the large volume of documentation created (recordings, transcripts, notes) produced a hefty and challenging "dataset"—echoing the complexities encountered in long-term anthropological fieldwork. This sizable collection of materials was difficult to interpret. The process of selection (for publication) was arduous. The care work involved in completing this work cooperatively was also extensive. Scholars falling down this rabbit hole must have considerable resources (time, space, an office, an assistant for transcription). I was fortunate to be offered these assets via a four-year research grant. I encourage others to use this study as a reference when requesting suitable funding for long-term research. Taken together, these points present key tensions in body-biography and critical dimensions for further development. In the next section, I will examine more closely the exploratory form of scholarly writing advocated here.

9 See Friedman, "Oral History a Go-Go," 178–82. For an astute reading of non-figural and field perception approaches to narration see, Friedman, "Spiraling Desire," 82–89.

10 In my broader interview work for the Swiss Archive of the Performing Arts, I had one example of an interview partner who explicitly declined to dance in the interview. Reasons for this can include health, limited energy, or shame related to aging as a dancer.

11 See Chapter 2 in the subsection "Movement Analysis," in particular Boxes 2 and 3, 93 and 95.

12 See Chapter 2 in the subsection "Narrative Analysis," in particular Box 1, 91.

Writing Process

Following Ken Plummer's understanding of life story research as a "reflexive and recursive" inquiry, this book offers an evocative composite of texts that weave together scholarship and embodied life-writing.¹³

Beginning with an interdisciplinary nest of theoretical materials on life story research and interview methodologies (Part I), these proposals are clarified and enriched through the examples of my dance teachers' body-biographies (Part II). Additionally, I have brought my own life review into this project by narrating key phases of my autobiography and presenting some vulnerable fragments of my own memories (Interlude). Together, the various chapters compose for the reader an assemblage of contrasting voices and conventions of writing. The discontinuities mark the research as "committed and incomplete," as historian James Clifford writes, indicative of "partial truths."¹⁴ This composite, though pruned and polished through editing, manifests the dialogic registers of its production—an articulation mobilized between writing theory and aesthetic practice, between spoken voices and their inscription, between myself and four others, in dialogues that reflect upon and speculate about the past. These conversations about life stories in the field of dance have been flattened for the page, creating a tapestry of interwoven and intersubjective knowledge.

Like Lechner's comprehension of the "fascial body" as a set of interconnected cell structures shaped and elastically enforced through movement, the knowledge inquiries in this book similarly took form—developing "composure"—through an intensive methodology of movement research.¹⁵ Respecting the dancers' authority over their bodies and lives, while actively bringing my own knowledge as a dancer and reader of dance studies into our dialogues, we cooperated on adapting the stories from private interviews to public narratives—slowly, consensually, and rigorously. The nonlinear, creative poetics of life stories, on the one hand, and the contrasting chapters of rhetorically sturdy theoretical writing, on the other, create a heterogeneity that reveals the different ways corporeal experiences may be inscribed in print. I intended the composite form of this book to resonate with a diverse readership: dance practitioners, dance scholars, and scholars of life histories more broadly. This reflects my motivation to see writing embodied history not only as a scholarly project, written with the rhetorical strategies and terminology of dance studies argumentation, but also as a collaborative work with dance practitioners who contribute to its creation. In the next section, I revisit the impact of this cooperation upon the life-writing process.

13 Plummer, "The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research," 398.

14 Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," 7.

15 Summerfield, "Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice," 9.

Composing Life Stories Together

Oral history scholars have moved beyond mining interviews for factual content, advancing the study of how oral history is composed as narratives that reflect the active co-construction of the scholar as interview partner.¹⁶ Protagonists adapt common storytelling forms and professional narratives learned through education and encountered in public media in order to create their autobiographies. They may borrow from familiar genres, such as the adventure story, the hero's narrative, the tragedy, and the sad story. Their rhetoric will commonly draw upon the poetics of narration—rhythm, repetition, alliteration, and metaphor—that renders the performance of oral discourse aesthetic and vivid. My research here expands on these known aspects of narrative composition by applying a dance studies lens, attuned to movement analysis and vocal performance. In this section, I will review my work, highlighting my role in facilitating and shaping the process of writing life stories.

In contrast to life story narratives that erase the presence of the interviewer and are told coherently in the first person without foregrounding dialogic components, I actively cooperated with my protagonists to find a written form for these stories.¹⁷ As we edited together, I enriched the dialogues to convey our bodies in conversation and the tone of my interlocutors' vocal performance. I also wrote additional vignettes describing their teaching and dance practice, which self-reflexively include descriptions of my own movement and body perception. In this way, the bricolage of body-biography exhibits biography as a performative dialogue—foregrounding the protagonist in their relations with myself and other people, and showcasing the embodied components of life story performance.

One key insight of life story scholarship is that norms, expectations about audience, and the psychological demands to present a coherent self all shape an individual's self-narrative. Thus, life stories change over the course of a lifetime and typically also adapt depending on one's interlocutor. It is for this reason that I use the term "life stories" in the plural. Key stories, repeated often, become part of one's repertoire for defining and performing the self. Building upon this knowledge, I have contextualized the composition and variance of my teachers' life stories in the introductions to each of their chapters and discussed it in my own life review (see "Interlude"). In addition to publishing their entertaining and well-rehearsed life stories, I also facilitated further examination of accounts that broke off, rambled, or otherwise eluded narrative closure. My own autobiographical writing has investigated these aspects that defy coherence—revealing narrative fragmentation, professional discontinuities, and exposing the pain and trauma

16 See for example Summerfield, "Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice."

17 Cf. Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*.

defining self-formation. Consequently, this book has reported on the ethical challenges of shaping theoretical interpretation of life stories; it has also defined theoretical criteria for doing so.¹⁸

I assumed my chosen protagonists would explore dance-specific and creative means of expression—storytelling in an “artistic” manner, for example, one that is sensitive to body language, shared attention, and emotion. Perhaps they might even approach the interview like a shared improvisation, performance, or a creative rehearsal to invent a new choreography? Indeed, Kono and Lechner—both of whom have extensive backgrounds in improvisation—embarked upon life review as an emergent form of practice-led research, modeled on processes of creative collaboration. By contrast, Schulkind and Cartwright construed the interview more conventionally as a framework for vocal performance. Their approaches to life-writing demonstrated their interests in creative writing, poetry, and, in Cartwright’s case, also memoir. Schulkind pointed out to me that his body-biography read like a script for a play: enabling the reader to act out the different players and imagine their physicality from the textual directives. In all four cases, the methodological process actively negotiated existing conventions (of autobiography, interviews, research, creative process, and life-writing), while developing creative alternatives.

In exploring these innovations, I was surprised by the lingering hold and tenacity of classical autobiography in both my own and my narrators’ life reviews. While the protagonists’ narratives did not always cohere, the speakers demonstrated awareness of the conventions pulling their stories toward coherent, causal, chronological, and credible stagings of the self. Moreover, my teachers shared the belief that biography should investigate life phases, explain causalities, be truthful, and reveal intimate details (though “not too gossipy,” as Kono reminded me) of what made a dancer into the person she is today. The narrators were also conscious of the confessional and myth-making tropes of autobiography. All four protagonists asked for editorial support and validation that their stories would be relevant—not hollow, narcissistic, and self-congratulatory. They aspired to be self-reflective and appeared to enjoy learning from cooperative life review. We aimed to leave a trace for others that might elevate public understanding of the mysterious and precarious world of dancing, imagining like Karen Eliot, “a complex, dynamic history that accounts for the contributions of the dancers themselves.”¹⁹

Rather than theoretical analysis or generalizing from this small explorative study, I have focused on grounding and specifying my methodology, in addition to developing tools for honing the interpretive potential of body-biography—in other words: for reading. I annotated our conversations with footnotes, providing

18 See the section on “Theoretical Interpretation,” in Chapter 2, 87–100.

19 Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 144.

triangulation with other sources; additionally, I added movement analysis and introductions that contextualize these texts with my own embodied memories. While editing their body-biographies with “outsiders” in mind and hoping to publish stories that will make a scholarly impact, I also endeavored to bring out the musical and emotional dimensions of dance transmission into the feeling of the text. “Bring our bodies into the text,” I kept reminding myself, “and show when and why this is impossible—or failing—when it is.”²⁰

The aesthetic and rhetorical composition of body-biographies provides substantial content for dance historians—offering us small mirrors that look at the self-presentation strategies of dance artists, as well as portals into their bodies, that give insight into their experiences and memories of their dance practice: the culture that vitalizes our art form—interlinking bodies across generations in migrating networks of practice. Their stories illustrate how the artists keep growing and studying, following the emergent qualities of embodiment as a process of discovery, shaping subjectivity dynamically. Unraveling these influences on memories through rhetorical and narrative strategies offers deeper understanding of the aesthetic practices, cultural perspectives, ideology, and morals through which the narrator has lived. In this way, the composition of body-biographies reveals the construction of bodily selves and kinesthetically vibrant worldviews.

Publishing Embodied History

The four body-biographies published here offer ample testimony for scholars—both within and beyond dance studies—interested in studying how bodily movements, affects, dance training, and performance transmissions constitute social structures and produce subjectivity. They describe how dancers cultivate the ability to transform their aesthetic bodies through training and performance, to appear different than they do in everyday life. Gestures in the life story interviews demonstrate learned dance aesthetics as well as absorbed cultural postures and gendered performances. The interview performances consequently show self-formation as an ongoing process of articulation, onstage and off. By extension, the page can also be understood as a performative stage for life-writing—continuing improvisation and performance of the self.

Body-biographies illustrate the complex ways that art worlds and daily life—the spectacular as well as the mundane details of daily practice—intermingle in constituting dancers’ embodied sense of self (or selves). This reveals multiplicities, composites, and divisions of bodies produced through negotiating interrelated practices and discourses, overthrowing conceptual separation and static ideals of

20 I thank James Leach for saying something to this effect during a feedbacking session early on in my process.

an aesthetic body, natural body, or authentic body. On the micro-scale of body-biography, the narratives in these chapters illustrate how singular persons, with unique identities, negotiate the practices that constitute aesthetic conventions and cultural norms. Identity and belonging are revealed to be scripted by gender, race/ethnicity, class, age, and ability. Markers of appearance and movement aesthetics also play key roles in constituting dancing bodies and personal identity. Dancers explore, transform, and sometimes even reject prior identities during their life journeys. They may cast off earlier aesthetic practices later in life, or interweave their prior practices into new ones, creating hybrid techniques and pedagogies.²¹ Taken together, these case studies illustrate the complex aesthetic dimensions through which identity and self-understanding are shaped.

These micro-histories also illustrate the relational networks of bodily practice and movement exchange that impact a single dancer's life. The dancers' life stories were frequently structured according to their excitement in explaining their encounters and relationships with other dance artists: describing a network of people that have influenced and supported them. Listening closely, I realized that these stories conveyed the artists' passion for novel embodied knowledge that motivated them to join new creative circles (new studios, dance ensembles, or communities of practice)—highlighting the charismatic people who energized them and drew them into new pursuits. As an editor, I recognized the challenges that these anecdotal ornaments pose for readers who do not share this lexical knowledge of “who's who.” Accordingly, I added footnotes referencing published obituaries and encyclopedia articles, and when necessary, biographical footnotes to assist readers' understanding. With the magnitude and depth of personal experience and extensive references to collaborators they contain, dancers' body-biographies may challenge, even occasionally overwhelm readers. The contrast is stark between this narrative multiplicity, flashing us with all the intensities and vulnerabilities of bodily existence, and other more linear and drier modes of theoretical writing. Body-biography is one answer to dance scholar Susan Foster's call to “vivify the study of bodies” in dance studies, producing texts that present dynamics of relationality.²²

In contrast to the “major” histories of the past, which were written in strong tones, with sweeping gestures, the tone and scale of embodied history is first-person and plural—following the temporalities of lifetimes and crossing the borders of traveling dancers' lives. For Karen Eliot, “embodied history” can be discovered at the intersection of biography and dance historiography. The scale of embodied history

21 This is also revealed in Bales and Nettle-Fiol's interviews with dancers, which focus on “training stories,” see Bales and Nettle-Fiol, *The Body Eclectic*, 170–249.

22 Foster, *Corporealities*, xi.

is small: more like a “microscope” than a “telescope.”²³ In the next section, I examine further these small dimensions as a defining scale of embodied history.

Scale: The Small Registers of Interconnected Lives

Body-Biographies: Our Life Stories in Dance presents a very fine-grain form of dance studies research, tunneling into the micro-dimensions of embodied memories. The case studies are produced through cooperation and foreground relationality. As a compilation of my teachers’ life stories, linked by their relationship to me, they offer a social view of professional dance networks and activities. This relational perspective is necessarily shaped by the fragility of memory and tinged with nostalgia. Body-biographies are speculatively personal—a deliberate departure from self-assured biography. Their fine-scale narrations differ from dance histories structured by chronological time or period, or alternatively organized around celebrated choreographers, recognized schools, or regional or national collections of oral history. My life, the fine thread that holds this group together, structures a vibrant and practice-linked study.

Like a flashlight or spotlight, the memories recounted in these life story anecdotes closely illuminate specific positions and moments, akin to local sources. Commenting on the value of local voices, dance historian Lena Hammergren observes: “We often use a shared canon of source material, which can be reinterpreted many times in different contexts, but national and regional sources hitherto not investigated or not addressed by international dance histories can offer us possibilities for new interpretations or complementary analyses.”²⁴ Life stories, like local sources, offer these possibilities for generating fresh interpretations and counter-histories. In this way, body-biographies contribute testimony that enables dance scholars to study how dance disperses: spreading across times and creating dimensions of place. Dance scholar Timmy De Laet, drawing on Foucault, imagines these new horizons of dance historiography: scholars shifting away from flattening historical data on a grand scale to emphasize, “causal relationships, homogenizing analogies, and periodization,” to instead embrace new narratives of embodied knowledges, rife with “indeterminacy, contingency, and dispersion.” This historiography would also, extending Foucault’s perspective, reflexively narrate the historic separation and regulation of embodied knowledge from written knowledge, as I explore here.²⁵

23 Eliot, *Dancing Lives*, 2.

24 Hamnergren, “Many Sources, Many Voices,” 137.

25 De Laet, “(Re)Making Dance History Together,” 31–32, here p. 31.

This fine-scale, dispersive model of body-biography inspects the detail of embodied history. These stories challenge neat notions of aesthetic periodization. In these body-biographies, each dancer explains their individual trajectories of discovering various dance styles (classical, neoclassical, modern, postmodern, and contemporary dance). They also describe their encounters with the healing arts and somatic practices (including yoga, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Pilates, etc.), specifying how they have learned and adapted these practices in the context of dance teaching and healing work. Dancers' life stories narrate memories in relation to their knowledge of dance history and perception of a canon—highlighting anecdotes that involve well-known figures (Kono's and Cartwright's stories involving Margot Fonteyn). They also intentionally spotlight lesser-known persons and institutions to fill perceived gaps (Schulkind's accounts of American Theater Lab, Lechner's testimony about the underacknowledged dancer-choreographer Laurie Booth). In this way, life stories offer perspectives that re-envision the dynamics of dancing bodies—not only artists rebelling against prior dance techniques and choreographic aesthetics, but constantly creating through mixing, alighting upon things by chance, and adapting to what others are experimenting with in the same milieu. These perspectives on dynamic historical currents and seminal artistic works convey more fine-grained readings of the past. They offer alternatives to periodization and canon-critical viewpoints.

One key dimension of the body-biographies in this book is their transnationalism. Rather than reinforcing the "sweep and generality" of dance history written on a grand scale, body-biographies highlight "nuance and detail"—the micro-locality of the migrating body, as the narrator retrospectively reflects across contexts in time and space.²⁶ The protagonists have—like myself—moved between North America and Europe, and, in Lechner's case, between Europe and India.²⁷ Unlike oral histories directed towards reconstructing a national or regional dance tradition or even a local dance scene, embodied history tunnels through perspectives: showing an individual way that the past was experienced. In her recent review of dance history writing, scholar Susan Manning observes the growth of work overturning nation-state models in favor of transnational ones, noting: "Whereas the nation-state model plots choreographic families, the transnational model traces networks of exchange."²⁸ My case studies

26 Manning, "Dance History," 303.

27 Marcus Schulkind is an exception here, as he has lived most of his life in the New York City and Boston metropolitan areas. But, even so, his life story foregrounds comparisons between these two regions and exceptions within his working career: his short time touring with Batsheva dance company of Israel in 1970 as well as his work in the American Midwest. Schulkind's narratives think back and forth, comparing times and dance contexts.

28 Manning, "Dance History," 303. See also Carter, "Reshaping Dance through Time."

of body-biographies have similarly revealed the relational connections of dancers' labor, exhibiting nuanced stories about these exchanges. As a whole, these case studies draw attention to the transnational mobility of dancers in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Like transnational historiography, body-biographies also present, as Manning describes, "how local conditions shape the assimilation and transformation of influences from abroad."²⁹ The life stories presented in this book entangle historically and regionally significant comparisons: interweaving local perspectives, international or regional contrasts, and descriptions of longitudinal change. In the next section, I will dive into these details by reviewing the specific content within my case studies and suggesting new directions for research.

The Case Studies: Domains of Further Research

The four body-biography case studies presented here (with dance artists Hilary Cartwright, Christine Kono, Chris Lechner, and Marcus Schulkind) reveal significant domains for further investigation. One noteworthy focus is upon the artistic conditions of production and networks that allowed dancers to gain employment. Body-biographies depict the economic pressures of the art market, contextualizing how choreographic aesthetics and dancing bodies are produced within systems that partition and share resources. Specifically, they detail the gatekeeping processes of auditions, securing funding, and competition for jobs. My research revealed how and why these narrators followed unique work trajectories, all dependent upon securing employment contingent on performing bodily competences. Their pre-professional habitus of daily physical practice and their first professional experiences of training and performance in precarious conditions led to injury and were unsustainable. Moreover, they reported few secure jobs and considerable competition for these positions. Their stories empathetically brought me into their efforts to improve job conditions and unite dancers politically around common grievances. In contrast to the challenges of a capitalistic dance market—marked by competition, power concentrated in strong authoritarian figures (e.g., choreographers, company directors), and little government support—these protagonists described valuing a climate of collegiality and solidarity between dancers, supported by external measures of social welfare. All four shared stories of how partnership, often domestic partners who were also dancers, helped them make new contacts, receive jobs, divide expenses, and share studio space, while also serving as close partners with whom they could hone their aesthetic practice. Further study of these competitive markets for aesthetic

29 Manning, "Dance History," 303.

bodies, together with the strategies that friends and partners develop for mutual aid, survival, and creativity are merited. More detailed readings comparing social-democratic systems of artistic support, as Kono experienced in Germany, with market-driven conditions of freelance artistic work are also warranted.

These body-biographies also accounted for social mobility and articulated criteria that the dancers used to evaluate their own careers. Our cooperation on writing a short professional biography for the introductory pages of each body-biography chapter drew my attention to specific tensions between dancers' professional status and the meanings their narratives convey, highlighting how life stories negotiate recognition, value, and embodied experience within the dance field. Their life stories manifested performance strategies to narrate discontinuities—to explain and bring into order the different professional roles of their life phases stretching across decades (e.g., as freelance dancer, ensemble dancer, solo ensemble dancer, teacher, rehearsal director, choreographer, company director, studio owner, etc.). Strategies of self-staging were apparent in the ways the artists moved certain roles into the foreground or background during our interviews and again in revising their stories into life-writing. In this way, I observed that their stories also contended with when to focalize aspects of their personal identity or roles (e.g., as partner, spouse, parent).

As one striking example, despite all four artists demonstrating choreographic competence, the two female-identifying dance artists devoted less attention and even actively downplayed self-staging themselves as choreographers. In contrast, the life stories of the male-identifying artists emphasized the trials of becoming choreographers and their reasons for stopping working as such—relating these to economic matters of status, class, and artistic identity. As a second and related example, the female-identifying dance artists placed more attention in their life stories on care roles: Moreover, they described their desire to obtain leadership positions in the dance field in order to better care for other dancers and transform the culture of authoritarian workplaces. The male-identifying artists invested in telling stories about discovering interest and talent in the healing arts—sensing empowerment in these roles as they stepped back from choreographic work. As their student, I can affirm that all four of these artists exhibit both choreographic skill and competences in the care work of teaching and healing. Therefore, these life stories reveal how social mobility is structured by gendered conventions and class. Closer inspection of the intersection of gender, care, and artistic roles, presents a promising future direction of study.

As this discussion has emphasized, body-biographies present narrative performances revealing how aesthetic and bodily discourses interweave and change throughout the protagonist's life (shifting with time, varying with regard to new activities, positions, and knowledge communities). These narrative performances describe the impact of dancing upon identity and self-understanding, as well

as the ways that bodily appearance characteristic of gender and race influence belonging and self-identification. In editing these stories for publication, I came to understand better how personal identity is experienced between the bodily appearances that mark someone within cultural categories and individual experiences of race, gender, class, age, and ability—revealing intersectional experiences of identity.³⁰ Some aspects were of course specific to dance. For example, both men in this study were conscientious of not obtaining employment opportunities because they were significantly shorter than the ideal male dancer in their field. Kono contrasted her sense of belonging to the West as an American with not looking like or identifying as a ballerina (and especially a Balanchine ballerina) as an Asian woman; she appreciated the empowerment of dancing to transform how she was seen as an artist and to offer meaningful opportunities to communicate with others. These findings point to the value of further research through body-biography on intersectional experiences of identity and subjectivity.

Another aspect highlighted by the fine-scale research of body-biographies is how engagement with dance contributes to an artist's aesthetic identity, sense of community, and experience of belonging. In particular, ballet forms a primary aesthetic habitus for three of these four artists (all but Schulkind), learned intensively in childhood and leading to professional employment. All four narrators give testimony showing how their earliest aesthetic practices primed their bodies and habituated them to a culture of labor—creating long-lasting aesthetic memories.³¹ These competences and dispositions are negotiated and questioned in their subsequent artistic training and employment. During our dialogues, the dancers' narratives often shifted back and forth in time, springing from the past to the present tense, to give energy to first-person description.³² All four artists also reflected on important exceptions and contrasts within their dance and movement educations: Cartwright on encountering cabaret dance in Paris, Schulkind on attempting nude improvisation in Vermont, Lechner on engaging with martial arts before arriving at ballet, and Kono on participating in Black dance in California. By recalling and comparing the predominantly White aesthetics of stage dance (in the sixties and early seventies) with these encounters, such life stories become an

30 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex."

31 Cartwright describes these more directly in her autobiographic writing. See Cartwright, *Dancing for a Living*, 18–42.

32 Noticing these peculiar time leaps in their interview transcripts (i.e. switching tenses while articulating one thought or sentence), my interlocutors preferred to edit their statements to follow written conventions of speaking coherently in one tense. These time leaps were helpful markers for me, highlighting meaningful memories from the past. Like reported speech, they are tactics for making autobiographical testimony compelling.

important and revealing aspect of body-biography, enabling critical exploration of experiences of race and dance.³³

Finally, these case studies have also explored the fine-grain particularities of how experiences of privilege or discrimination, as well as social mobility, interweave dimensions of gender, race, class, age, and ethnicity. In particular with regard to Kono and Lechner, their body-biographies invite further examination of layered intersectional experiences of race and gender: Kono as an Asian woman working in Western dance contexts, and Lechner as a White European man who spent significant life phases, including his childhood, in India. Lechner's life stories circled around the question of where home is. They explored how his sense of self and belonging became rooted in kinesthesia, independent of where he lived or, at times, his health. His stories recalled moral tales: discovering shame, when as an adult he was confronted about his privilege of social mobility as a White European male—he specifies even “blue-eyed”—raised in an affluent and intellectual home in India. Taken together, these body-biographies illustrate how these travelers experience new cultures that shape their identity and influence their dance practices—creating hybrid, multiple, or even divided enactments of “the self” that belie any single aesthetic or cultural category. In this way, these life stories reflect on Whiteness and “othering” while considering the aesthetics of Western dance practices, offering testimony for rethinking dance historiography through the lens of intersectional frameworks. I hope this potential will be augmented and refined with new case studies by other scholars.

Broader Methodological Horizons

Dance scholar Jeff Friedman reminds us: “If we agree that history is comprised of a collection of memories teased into narratives, it is incumbent on us to acknowledge and incorporate those complex embodied experiences into the construction of memory and of history.”³⁴ Embracing textual and embodied study of historical sources, this book has defined a novel methodology for dance studies and demonstrated how theoretical analysis of life stories achieves rigor and complexity by attending to the fine-grain scale of embodied history. Because dancers are socialized through intensive daily training practices to dance with and for others, our dance research methodologies may benefit, as I explore here, from including the sensual participation of bodies and dancing environments as dancers collectively rethink “their” (or “our”) life stories. This, I demonstrate, can enhance our collective

33 The category of race is also a focus in Christina Thurner's analysis of dancers' autobiography. See Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 242–65.

34 Friedman, “Oral History a Go-Go,” 170.

ability to recall, reflect on, contribute to, and write down dance history, as well as the narrative form of this writing. In particular, my inquiry has substantiated the possibility of the researcher's body becoming both a physical and theoretical partner in research: a tool for reflexive learning and an epistemological site for knowledge production.

Not only have I emphasized a sensitive and dialogic approach to life story research, but my methodology fosters sustained reflection and critical thinking. The approach advanced here offers dance scholars tools to cooperatively document dancers' lives and artistic processes. These ideas are also suitable for pedagogical techniques and student projects, educating students of dance practice or dance studies, in dance research and historiography. More generally, this book supports new methodological horizons by discussing the ethical, multisensory, medial (text, voice, image, movement, and embodied knowledge), and reflexive aspects of research in dance studies. It is through this research "choreography," merging rapport and reflexivity, that body-biography operates like a stereoscope, blending biographical inquiry and the scholarly domain of dance studies.

Like dance scholars Jeff Friedman, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Karen Eliot, and Susan Foster before me, in writing this book I have sought to relate how the scholars' own empathy and kinesthetic skills—as dance scholars with biographies rooted in dance practice—can enrich their interpretation of dancing bodies and dancing lives.³⁵ Whether they dance with their oral history partners physically, as Friedman does, bring their identity into their interviews and analytic writing, as Dixon Gottschild does, or dance in their imaginations with historical protagonists, as Foster and Eliot do, such practical knowledge shapes scholarly interpretation of embodied history. While embodied history should include impressions—even data—on the material dimensions of bodies, we see in these authors' writing astute attention to the relational, emotional, performative, and affective registers of body politics, praxis, and corporeality—setting the tone for the embodied biography that I have realized here, through my methodology of cooperating with living dance artists on rethinking dancing lives.

My approach to body-biography takes its cue from these dance scholars, while specifying a mode of reflexivity informed by feminist ethnography and debates in social anthropology. Reflexivity entails not only recognizing how one's identity both informs and limits one's fieldwork—producing varying degrees of alienation from or association with cultural "others." Reflexivity is also an acknowledgment that the researcher is representing and constructing knowledge. Self-reflection helps clear analysis from some of the biases of one's background, prior beliefs as well as the

35 These authors have multiple works addressing these topics. Here I speak in particular of Friedman, "Oral History a Go-Go"; Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*; Eliot, *Dancing Lives*; Foster, "Choreographing History."

feelings experienced while interviewing and undertaking participant observation. Beyond this, a stronger form of feminist reflexivity considers the operations of knowledge construction itself: the power dynamics of the author's scholarly field and publication process.³⁶ My practice of body-reflexivity recognized that body representations and sensual embodied knowledge are not easily inscribed in writing, for the reasons that I have elaborated previously. I have worked observantly and creatively to bring embodied attention into my research, structuring a theoretical engagement with life story materials and performances.

Drawing on the debates of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), *Body-Biographies* has examined how the poetics and politics of embodied history may generate new historical narratives—highlighting participatory inquiry that sensitivity and reflexivity learns from and with living protagonists.³⁷ To close this discussion with one final scholarly reference that has informed my approach here, I turn briefly to Susan Foster's essay "Choreographing History" (1995/2019).³⁸ To choreograph history, after Foster, is to write from a reflexive scholarly position highlighting the formative ways that choreographic praxis shapes dance historiography. Foster argues that dancers' experiences of learning to dance and perform choreography are exceptionally powerful aspects shaping their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of the world.³⁹ Embodiment and choreography materially and theoretically shape the frameworks and trajectories of dancing lives—and for dance scholars who have danced, as Foster reminds us, also their academic research. In her essay, Foster highlights the impact of kinesthetic empathy and creative writing on dance historiography. The historian she envisions is theoretically attentive to the ways that bodies must be imagined as locally present in time and space, while also resonating with or resisting broader social contexts—bodies as active and transformative processes of material and symbolic signification—bodies as individual-collective, linking and joining us in action.

For Foster, choreographing history involves many comparisons: between the historian's present body and the past, and between the fragments of past bodies in postures and movements across time. Foster honors movement as both semiotic and textual, yet resistant to full translation into written text. For her, an aesthetic translation of poetics and rhetoric comes into play where the historian brings aspects of dance into the form of the theoretical writing—through metaphor, alliteration, rhythm, and the poetics of vibrant verbs. Foster does this often through

36 See Wasserfall, "Reflexivity, Feminism, Difference."

37 See Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*.

38 See Foster, "Choreographing History."

39 Foster does not draw on theoretical writing from Pierre Bourdieu, but her writing presents a similar comprehension of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. See Waterhouse, *Processing Choreography*, 98–100.

textual assemblies that vibrate the margins; *the fonts themselves shift form or slide with italics—just like this*. To choreograph history is to prevent distance, stillness, and thinness in writing history. It resists the erasure of the sensual and kinesthetic aspects of living bodies, including the historian's many bodies. It aims to “vivify” corporeality.⁴⁰ Body-biographies can also be described as a specific approach to choreographing history, through a methodology of collaboration with living dance artists upon life review and publication.

Following in the footsteps of these dance scholars, in this book I too develop dance studies scholarship that works with sensitive authority to destabilize academic postures of objectivity, certitude, and disembodied writing. I promote instead the theoretical study and writing of embodiment as a form of biographical dance research. Through this body-biography project, I have shown how life story interviews and published life-writing bring into view embodied memories, experiences, and worlds. I hope that other dance artists and scholars will further advance and continue this research, expanding the field of body-biography with a multitude of diverse artists. Perhaps one might begin an interview with a citation of choreographer Deborah Hay: “Just move the question from your head down through your whole body and notice how the sensual impact from the question alters you.”⁴¹

40 See Foster, *Corporealities*, xi.

41 Hay, “My Body, the Archive,” 198.