

Chapter 3: Christine Kono

Introduction

Christine Kono is a dance artist with an exceptional purview of dance practices in the United States and Germany since the 1950s and first-hand memories of working with choreographers George Balanchine, Martha Graham, Eliot Feld, Kurt Jooss, Pina Bausch, and Joachim Schloemer. Born in Pomona, California, in 1946, Kono is a third-generation Japanese American woman. She grew up in Los Angeles. One of the earliest professional Asian American ballet dancers on stage in America, she danced with the Philadelphia Ballet, and was subsequently both a dancer and choreographic assistant in Eliot Feld's American Ballet Company in New York.¹ Kono trained in modern dance at The Graham School and The Juilliard School. In 1971, she moved abroad to West Germany to dance in the Cologne Dance Forum (Tanz-Forum Köln), where she worked with choreographers Kurt Jooss, Glenn Tetley, and Christopher Bruce, among others. After studying dance pedagogy at the Folkwang University of the Arts, Kono became a teacher at the Essen-Werden School for children and at Folkwang. She was ballet mistress for Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch and later for her former Folkwang student, Joachim Schloemer, at the German National Theater in Weimar and Theater Basel.

Since 1992, Kono has collaborated extensively on research with Dimitrios Kraniotis, a Greek poet and dancer based in Paris.² This collaboration has led to performance events, dance films, and workshops under the name Collective Ludwig. Kono has additionally been a guest teacher with The Forsythe Company, Ballet Preljocaj, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, and the ensemble Dance On in Berlin, with whom she performed in the 2019/2020 season. At the time of writing, Kono continues her movement research with Kraniotis in Paris and travels often to

1 Then called the Pennsylvania Ballet Company. Throughout this text, I use the current English names of dance institutions.

2 For Kraniotis' biography see footnote 33. Kono frequently uses the term "research" in conversation. At the time of writing, her identity as a researcher also appears prominently on the opening tableau of her personal website, <http://www.christinekono.com>, last accessed September 24, 2025.

Greece, compelled by the beauty of living close to nature. She is questioning how she wants to dance *now*: at this moment in her life and regarding the current changes in dance and society.

I first met Kono in the context of ballet classes for The Forsythe Company, when I was a dancer in my late twenties and “Christine” was in her early sixties. Kono was beloved by the ensemble, giving a class that resonated with spatial imagery and internal investigation of anatomical touchstones within the body—the pelvis, sternum, diaphragm. Kono subsequently invited me to participate in “exchange” with her and her collaborator Kraniotis in 2009 in Paris.³ Years later, our ongoing collaboration bore fruit in the performance *Aporia* (2014), which we created at the Athens School of Visual Art. Thus, Kono and I share many physical practices and artistic references: as teacher and student, as artists involved in different capacities with The Forsythe Company, and as dancers creating performances together. We are also both Americans who migrated to Germany in our early twenties. Thus, we share a similar transnational history—albeit offset by three decades—enabling interesting comparison of dance practices across places and times.

Figure 1: Interview between Elizabeth Waterhouse (left) and Christine Kono (right) on November 10, 2022, in Freiform Atelier Bern.



Screenshot by E. Waterhouse.

3 The term “exchange” is also one Kono has used throughout our working relationship.

Writing Kono's Body-Biography

My conversations with Christine Kono about her body-biography escaped the boundaries of the interview recording, which is preserved at the Swiss Archive of the Performing Arts.⁴ Her narration began casually, in the form of telephone conversations preparing our interview in Bern. Her stories continued during our walks to and from the dance studio; they permeated meals and transformed physical practice sessions with anecdotes. They interwove a second week of exchange in Paris, in which we explored movement research, improvising together in a dance studio.⁵ Both limiting and formalizing, the recording apparatus helped to mark what was intended for our readers versus what was the personal part of our longstanding artistic exchange. I turned the recorder on and off in line with Kono's affirmation, letting her steer this process. At times I pushed the wireless microphones closer to her, when she chose not to wear them, pestering her, but hopefully not overstepping her boundaries.

As you read the body-biography that follows, you can imagine "Christine" and me, both wearing dark dance clothes, as we move between standing and sitting in a small studio with white walls, a grey floor and windows on one side (see Fig. 1). In our dialogues, Kono foregrounded chronological reflection on her professional life—as a dancer, union representative, rehearsal assistant, and teacher—speaking also about personal matters including family planning and aging. She articulated her stories reflectively and critically: with respect for the art form and other dancers' privacy, and never losing her sense of humor. Before and after the recorded interview, we bantered about our mutual friends' recent activities and the current state of the art. We spoke about the difficulties of getting older and our current bodily ailments. She did not mention her recent battle with colon cancer during the recorded portion of the interview, though it provides significant context for interpreting her statements on injury and sickness. Overall, the interview process revealed Kono's memories of bodily experiences, filtered, reflected, and grounded in the present. Our conversations are composed by my questions and my presence as interlocuter—creating a conversational duet in which Kono's self-narrative is supported and modulated by my inquiry.⁶

One challenge in writing Kono's body-biography is doing justice to the value she places on the subtle, nonmaterial registers of bodily presence and communication.

4 For the references to this data and metadata see: Kono, "Body-Biography Interview with Christine Kono"; Waterhouse, "Metadata Body-Biography Interview Christine Kono."

5 Our recorded interview conversations took place on November 9–10, 2022, in Bern, at Freiform Atelier, the movement exchange from January 9–14, 2023, in Paris at Micadanses studio.

6 On "composure," see also Summerfield, "Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice," 10.

While the audio recording traces our speech, our bodily presence could only be partially documented in this register: requiring imaginative reconstruction, based on listening to the recorded sounds of breath and bodies brushing across the floor. Our improvised movements during the interview—dancing, gesturing, marking, and communicating—I preserved in memory like a dancer learning motion from a choreographer. Each night I chronicled these memories into written inscription in my fieldwork notes. When I daringly asked to use a video camera to record a physical warmup session on our second day of conversations, Kono politely obliged, but frequently turned her back to it. Thus, it was my challenge as her biographer to use the recordings as well as my fieldwork notes—written each evening based upon my short-term memory—to augment the conventional interview transcription, overcoming the obfuscation of body and movement. Writing our bodies into the conversation meant curating life stories where danced interaction had blossomed and attempting to describe and interpret these layers of physical presence.

The text that follows is an edited, condensed, and shortened rendering of the recorded interviews, revised by Kono through careful line-by-line editing. To make this life story narrative, I first condensed the transcript for readability, focusing on what I found to be the most meaningful and performative portions, selected for an audience of dance historians and dance practitioners. Kono's intersectional perspective as an Asian American woman on race and gender in dance practices and her recollections of working with a plethora of great artists provided rich content. Wishing to be faithful to the interview, my editing was curatorial and discreet. I marked passages that required further clarification for Kono to fill in and highlighted my own editing in color, so that she could review my insertions and changes. I maintained Kono's choices in terms of themes and the largely chronological organization of the narrative. Where possible, we chose to translate the German words used during the interview into American English, as well as to correct our grammar. While it is common in oral history testimony for interlocutors to seamlessly shift and juxtapose present and past tenses, Kono preferred editorial consistency—correcting her own statements so that each paragraph was coherent. My editing added further structure to Kono's stories by introducing titles and pull quotes as headings. Finally, I used footnotes to substantiate Kono's testimony with references I had brought into our research dialogue; I also used this space to add biographies of key persons, who, unlike the well-established choreographers that Kono has worked with, were less well-documented and canonized contributors to dance history.

Vocal performance is a vital form of embodied narration, and it was important to restore this to the transcription of our conversation. Kono's shifts in narrative tropes and tone provide the reader with very important information—this is especially true of her ironic laughter. The beginning of the interview, as I note here, is charged with irony—due to Kono's balking at her own, unaccepted identity as a ballet dancer—and

authoritative, yet diplomatic, criticism of the injustices of dancers' labor in the sixties. In addition, there are instances when she joyfully retells anecdotes, reporting the speech of others. There you can imagine her voice speeding up, only to slow again in moments of critical reflection, as she enunciates more carefully. While attempting to annotate all these modulations of pitch, volume, timbre, tempo, and rhythm would make her stories illegible to all but a few specialist linguists, I have carefully marked key instances of vocal attributes within her narrative—reminding readers of the singular voice within and behind these personal tales and chronicles.

Lastly, following Kono's own preference for poetic minimalism, in significant instances I have added description of her expressive gestures and movement, as well as my own embodied memories of moving with her during these conversations. My accounts take two forms: Short reflections are positioned in the footnotes, describing physical gestures. Longer reflections are italicized and interspersed within the interview conversation, recreating extended phases of communication interweaving words, dance, and gestures (for example when Kono described dancing Balanchine ballets and movements of the Martha Graham technique). In these sections, dancing together significantly shaped the logics of our talk, and a word-for-word transcript was startlingly incomplete.

The reader will notice that my bodily presence is also highlighted within these movement descriptions: that I describe our interactions, not only Kono's movements. Wanting to make Kono's body sensually perceivable within the transcript and illustrate its eventful participation in this interview, I described her from my perspective. It was necessary to position my body in these accounts and give my analytical perspective on the movement. To help to infuse Kono's phenomenological experience and voice back into the movement description, I asked her to re-perform and describe some of her gestures to me; I also asked her to kindly review my descriptions. Finally, taking advantage of the video recording, I inserted movement dialogues that were captured on camera during our exchanges that preceded the interviews—the camera recording offering a further source for study.⁷ In this way, movement analysis is extended into a dialogic process of life-story creation, and the co-construction is actively shown in embodied reflection that involves both authors.

The body-biography ends with a section that returns to the topic of dancing together with "Christine." Here, I discover themes from the biographical interview reiterated in our warmups and improvisation practice. I also highlight Kono's own written articulation of her dancing by referencing her teaching notes: a powerful third source for understanding her embodied history.

7 See the section "Dancing Memories: Warming Up with Kono," 165–69.

Life Stories

Beginning: Discovering Reasons to Dance

Liz Waterhouse: Can you please tell me how you started with ballet?

Christine Kono: First of all, I was very sick until I was nine years old. I had a double lung infection—pneumonia—when I was born. So, my lungs were always in a precarious condition. I never had anything to do with my body because I was always sick. I almost died when I was nine. That's not so sad. I didn't feel so sad. My doctor, Dr. Yamazaki said, "You have to do something consequently, physically active."⁸ I wanted to take swimming classes, but my parents didn't have the money for swimming classes. They had enough money for *ballet class* once a week, which for anyone who is not interested in moving was torture (laughs). I *hated* it. But Dr. Yamazaki said, "You continue, you continue. It's good for you. Especially for the lungs, because of the jumping." But I didn't like it at all.

I already could tap dance because that's what we did at school. I was a track and field athlete, doing running and hurdles like my father (a physicist and engineer). But I never had any formal dance training. Ballet was a terrible experience, *except* for one teacher. The teacher who took me for the first time was Russian, Igor Schwezoff, who ran away in 1930 from Russia because he was White Russian via Manchuria.⁹ He gave the audition for the scholarship class at the studio where I started, and when he was in LA, he gave me private classes to help me keep up with the more advanced

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- 8 Pediatric doctor and Professor Dr. James N. Yamazaki (1916–2021) was born in Los Angeles, California, of Japanese ancestry. After serving as a doctor in the US military, he was made responsible for research on the effects of the atomic bomb on children in Hiroshima and Nagasaki as part of the US Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission in 1948. Returning in 1951, he worked as a pediatric doctor and professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. Kono maintained a trusted patient-doctor relationship with Dr. Yamazaki throughout his life. See Yamazaki and Fleming, *Children of the Atomic Bomb*; Yamazaki, "Why Does a Pediatrician Worry about Nuclear Weapons?"
 - 9 During Igor Schwezoff's (1904–1982) life as a dancer, choreographer, and pedagogue he taught in many ballet institutions across Europe, North and South America, and Asia. Kono had lessons with him at "Mr. Belcher's studio" in Los Angeles and at the Washington School of Ballet. She brought out her personal copy of his autobiography *Borzoi* to fact check her testimony about his early life. An influential teacher in the development of ballet in Japan, between 1961 and 1966 he is reported to have taught between Washington and Japan at the Asami Maki Ballet Company and the Tachibana Ballet School. See Craine and Mackrell, "Schwezoff, Igor"; Schwezoff, *Borzoi*. See also photographer Scott Highton's website documentation of an article on Schwezoff published in an unknown source in 1979, <https://www.highton.com/pages/pictstoriesindex.html>, last accessed September 24, 2025.

students. I was definitely the least physically able, but maybe the way I liked to play with rhythm was appreciated?

Luckily, he had such a great sense of humor so that I went to class because he was funny. He was always smiling, with a twinkle in his eyes, and had us laughing while being corrected—although we took the corrections seriously. This is a great talent to have as a teacher. And he was encouraging to everyone. There were no favorites. He would laugh a lot and also use very nice creative images for movement. Like he said, “When you do a *failli* it has to be through the fog.” You don’t just put your foot forward. You have to feel the air changing. I said to myself, “Well that’s a good idea!” We thought he was crazy because he had these crazy images, hardly spoke any English, was trying to teach us in Russian and French. Listen, we were from Los Angeles! We all could tap dance. We had never seen ballet before in our life. You can imagine, well how crazy that was, to see *ballet*? You’re going like (mocking her childhood voice), “This guy is crazy, but he’s funny, so we’ll do it.”

I was the worst in the class. We were six little people, and I was the most turned in. My hips are turned in. I asked my doctor, “You know, they asked me to do this?” (Demonstrates first position in ballet.) He said, “Oh, you’re not turned out. You’re turned in in the pelvis.” I said, “Yeah, but they want me to do this.” And he said, “Well, you can turn out—rotate in the hip joint—but you are not naturally turned out. Your legs are placed like this in the pelvis. You can only work as much as you can.” So I did as much as I can.

Liz Waterhouse: Do you agree with the doctor’s assessment? Was this perhaps racial body stereotyping of the “turned-in Japanese girl”?¹⁰

Christine Kono: There is a backstory here. One of my other ballet teachers was not so nice to me. One day she put me in a perfect fifth position, building me into the position from the feet up. I was horrified. I said, “I might look good. But I *cannot breathe*.” I was kicked out of class for this confrontation.

Afterwards I went directly to my parents to discuss this incident. I was educated in liberal California during the fifties and sixties. As students we learned to be proactive—to voice our concerns and to have dialogues with our teachers and other adults. I also went to my doctor, Dr. Yamazaki, to ask if this ballet training was healthy, and I asked my track and field coach. I think because I was born sick, I always thought I’m not going to do something with my body that will harm it.

10 In the initial telling of this story, Kono did not explain that her doctor was Japanese American, and I had assumed that he was White. Our discussion about stereotypes and prejudices was deepened during the review of the transcript and subsequent editing. The text above condenses these multiple discussions.

So perhaps my doctor, Dr. Yamazaki, was stereotyping when he said I was turned in, but I too noticed, particularly in my childhood, many Japanese men and women with very strange leg alignments. Could this have been a dietary problem, which has since greatly declined? I'm not sure. In any case, with me my hips were not the problem. I did not have a very open pelvis, but I think there's a lot of rotation possibilities in the hip joint. Because some people have the hip joints with very little or no socket protection. This is much more dangerous. So I could rotate as much as I could, and I felt very centered. Because the hip joints are protected, it's better! Whereas many ballet dancers were loose, but they had no center. It's this feeling of the ki-hara center of energy.

Kono uses her body to communicate this narrative, to demonstrate her memories of her childhood. She rotates her toes open into the first position of ballet: making a very wide "V" without contorting or appearing uncomfortable. To my eye, she is not turned in or lacking in hip mobility.

Kono explains her hip structure using hand gestures, modeling the anatomical form of the hip's ball-and-socket joint. One hand represents the end of the leg bone, the bulbous femoral head, and the other models the hip socket that cups around the femur. On the word socket, she brings her hands together with an audible impact, modeling the stability. Then she rotates her fist, illustrating the range of internal rotation of the hip joint.

Both flexibility and strength are needed to turn out as a ballet dancer. To demonstrate her stability, Kono draws on a common teaching gesture to support the feeling of lifting "inside." She touches what she calls her "ki center" with her right fingertips, holding her shirt below the belly button. As she performs this gesture, I sense that her center energetically condenses, and her spine elevates and lengthens. Then she changes her body state to illustrate a contrast: dancers with flexibility but no stability. To demonstrate this, she playfully mimes ballet dancers with hypermobile, loose arms and legs. She dances quickly and wobbles her center and limbs, in a playful loosey-goosey manner. Then, to emphasize her point, she repeats the gesture of ki, touching her center. She accentuates the condensation of energy with her mouth: "Hm."

In a subsequent meeting to review this manuscript, she again stood up to clarify physically when I asked whether I had described her bodily communication well. She performed new gestures. Sliding her hands around her hips, she described the ki energy as the support of the deep abdominals—the transversus abdominis muscle—wrapping around the lower torso and fastening together at the front of the belly, like a muscular belt. Her hands moved from her lower back, around the ilium bones of the pelvis and met at her lower belly. With this gesture of stability, she explained that ballet creates lightness in the body. The weight of the pelvis must be suspended above the legs and the legs moved from the lower back. She compared this feeling to the sensation of hurdling in track and field, and the lightness of the quick movements in performing Balanchine ballets. In both, she observed, there is rebound and elasticity in the pelvis and knees.

These physical anecdotes, in which Kono uses her own body to reflect on her memories, give insights into the various layers of her bodily experiences and knowledge. Culture, sport, healing, medicine, and aesthetic dance movements interweave. Her embodied knowledge crisscrosses the praxis of sports at school with corrections in ballet class. Her terminology embraces Asian ideas of energy that Kono attributes to witnessing her mother's shiatsu treatments and her own exploration of muscles and anatomy. Her embodied memories go forward in time to her performance career, and then back in time to her childhood training. Like narrative memory in general, embodied memories condense, refract, and swirl in time, merging sensations, terminology, and skills.

Christine Kono: So in any case, what was more problematic for me was that I couldn't straighten my legs. This was against the tap dance principle. My teacher, Mr. Schwezoff, kept on saying, "Okay, now, Kono do a tendu to the side and drop your heel and point." I would always do a little bend in the leg (laughs). He would say, "Oh, it's much better." He wouldn't say "No, no, no." He would say, "Okay, *that much* better." I said, (whispers) "What is he talking about?" But he was being encouraging. I appreciated his kindness and humor.

Then in the exercises, we learned Russian folklore dances. We learned the *Mazurka* (demonstrates).¹¹ I said, "This is crazy," you know, really another culture, totally. We were all looking at each other like "What's this guy doing?" But it was *fun* at the end, and I think this combination of fun and creative imagination awakening was what kept all of us going.

Three of us became dancers eventually. But I was not enthused, because in my generation there were no *Asian* ballet dancers. I could care less, because I hadn't seen ballet anyways. I only started to go to performances when I was like thirteen. There was something at the Greek Theatre with Alicia Alonso. I wasn't impressed. I mean, she was amazing, but I had no personal identity with her. Then, the New York City Ballet [NYCB] came to rehearse in our studio because it was so big. The original owner of the studio, Mr. Ernest Belcher, was the teacher of Maria and Marjorie Tallchief.¹² So the big companies would come and rehearse. But I still wasn't impressed—though I loved Diana Adams. When I saw her, I went (emphatically), "That is beautiful." The NYCB did pieces from George Balanchine, like *Agon*, that were *amazing* musically, choreographically. But I never related to them. I said (frankly), "I have nothing to do with this."

11 The Mazurka has Polish origins.

12 Kono added to her testimony: "The main teachers at the time, circa 1956, were Harriet De Rea, who with her husband had taken over the school from Ernest Belcher, and Wilson Morelli, who was a former student of Mr. Schwezoff, dancer for ABT [American Ballet Theatre], choreographer and teacher." Personal correspondence, April 4, 2024.

Then the Bolshoi Ballet came for the first time in 1957/58. There was this old lady in the class like this (demonstrates). She was pudgy, moving at the barre very cautiously. I said, “Oh, she’s still doing ballet.” That was Galina Ulanova!¹³ Then I saw her in rehearsal. I went (exclaiming suddenly with a voluminous, deep voice), “Oh, transformation!” That was where I first said, “That is possible.” Where you saw the *value* of performance was this ability to transform. She became something she was not. So you didn’t see her. You saw what she was expressing. She did Giselle and Juliet, and she was sixteen years old, and she was actually at that moment almost fifty! That was my first attraction to dance, where I thought there is a *reason* to dance. I was attracted to this idea of transformation: that the body could become something else. You don’t see the body. You see what it wants to say. So that was my first decisive moment—I was thirteen—where I said, “Maybe dance is something.” But nevertheless, there were no Asians dancing professionally, as much as I knew. So that’s the beginning.

Then, I was preparing myself with a college preparatory school program to go to the university; many people in my family went into medicine and law—something must have happened because suddenly the Royal Ballet of London came, and they offered me a scholarship. I also got a scholarship to the Joffrey Ballet, the American Ballet Theatre Schools, and the San Francisco Ballet School. My first reaction (to the scholarship from the Royal Ballet) was: I don’t want to be English. I am American. And I want to study, probably international law. I really wasn’t interested in going around on pointe.

Then my classmate, Elizabeth Lee—she is of Chinese heritage and one year older than me—her parents wanted her to go to New York because she had the same scholarships as I did. But they didn’t want her to go alone. So my parents said I could go with Elizabeth to New York and make sure that she got settled, and then go down to my aunt and uncle in D.C. I was sixteen then, and I was getting ready to do my exams. My aunt and uncle helped me a lot—to inquire about the possibilities of getting a scholarship for two years. My uncle was a professor of French and German. The administration said, “Well, we’ll see what your exams are like. If you take this exam and if you qualify, you’re able to study here, but we probably can’t give you a

13 Russian Ballerina Galina Ulanova (1909–1998) made her American debut with the Bolshoi Ballet in 1959, around the age of fifty as Kono reports. See Lvov-Anokhin, “Ulanova, Galina.” When recounting this anecdote, Kono imitates Ulanova physically. She sinks her head and spine, while opening her arms to the side in a rounded second position. With low energy, she demonstrates soft leg brushes to the side, tendu, with a focus inside her body, not externalized in space. This softness, sinking, and inward focus are not ideal in classical ballet performance, but represent ways of energy saving, or marking, sensible for an older performer. This physical anecdote also adds drama and comedy to Kono’s story, emphasizing the importance of this revelation to her appreciation for dance as a medium capable of transforming the self.

full scholarship. So you will have to work.” They offered me a job, of all places at the Pentagon in 1962, the beginning of the war in Vietnam. That was the decisive point.

So I went to the Pentagon. That was a “trip”—to go through security! I only worked for two weeks. They put me in the Department of Statistics—wrong idea—because (laughs ironically) I realized what war was about. I was very shocked as a very young person—naïve as I was—and still feeling very American and very grateful to be American. I realized that even if President Kennedy was there, that the statistics were about: How many civilians will die? How many American soldiers will die? But how many weapons will be sold? And how good is this for the economy of the USA? It was an economic estimation. It was not about a “war.” It was called a police action by SEATO. So this was not a “war.” It was an action to protect Southeast Asia. I realized there was a lot of info coming in from France. The French advised: Don’t bother because they had already been there. So I went like (maturely, decidedly), “I can’t do this. I’m not ready for it. I don’t understand enough. I am too young. I don’t want to get involved in something that is way over my head. I don’t want to make any judgments either.” I said, “I need a break, to decide if I will study something like international law or go back to California to study something else.”

That was the decisive reason to go to New York, before going back to California. I was invited by a lot of dancers to stay with them and to see their performances. I knew a lot of Broadway people, so I got to see a lot of good shows. Because I didn’t have much funding left to take dance classes, I went to auditions. If I was lucky, I got at least a bit of training—a ballet *barre*—before they kicked me out! (Laughs.) Then I was taken as an apprentice into the Joffrey Ballet and into the corps [de ballet] of the Pennsylvania Ballet Company. So I called my parents. I said, “I’m going to try dancing for one season, because I’m a bit disillusioned with my former ambitions.” In the meantime, I was also offered an apprenticeship with American Ballet Theatre. They offered me other work besides dancing to exist, so I worked in the office. I said, “That’s good for me to see how a company functions,” not just to go around doing this (imitates ballet ironically, laughs).

Getting into these companies, learning to be in the corps de ballet, was rough. To learn to be in the corps for *Giselle* in ABT [American Ballet Theatre] was like being in a traffic jam. It was a mess. I felt the rehearsals were bad—without working on quality—just getting through it and going: “Go to the right. Go to the left. Go back. Go front.” I was not satisfied with that at all.

I did the most with the Pennsylvania Ballet Company [PBC], which was interesting because Mr. Balanchine was then artistic director. PBC had a big Balanchine repertoire. The first thing I did was *Donizetti Variations* which was so much fun. I danced in the group, of course, not as the main dancer. We did *Scotch Symphony*, *Concerto Barocco*—which I wasn’t in usually because I’m too short—*Raymonda* *Pas De Dix*. I learned *Serenade*, but I didn’t stay long enough to do

it. In any case, Balanchine had his touch in whatever we did. He came to work with us.

Oh, I did *Symphony in C*! I did the fourth movement.

Liz Waterhouse (sings a motif from the music): It's the one where you leap on?

Christine Kono (laughs): No, that's the third movement.

Liz Waterhouse: Oh, okay. So I just know this (demonstrates).

I mark a few steps from the corps de ballet of Symphony in C, from the grand finale performed by female dancers in a large "U" formation. I believe that I learned this series of syncopated tendus as a teenager, watching a VHS video recording of the New York City Ballet.¹⁴ I loved the music as well as the unusual movement pattern of the tendus. I had also seen Symphony in C performed live as a teenager, during the summer seasons of the New York City Ballet in Saratoga. The part that Kono references is the soloist's part, to the same music.

Christine Kono: Yeah. Good!

Liz Waterhouse: Something like this?

Christine Kono: No, the fourth movement. The coming in and doing a lot of fouettés. I was the one who came in and did this (demonstrates).

Kono demonstrates the rapid, rhythmical steps: marking the movements as an elder ballet mistress would, with precise timing and playful intention, but without full execution of the movements. She emphasizes the rhythm and dynamic play of elevation up and down: There is the triple beat of the pas de bourrée turn, then the syncopated whip of the fouetté turn with the stylistically unusual use of the right arm flying up above the head with the whip of the leg—this is done multiple times, which I imagine is challenging—then she shows the fast coupés with the arms to the side, with a rhythmic down beat audible in the recording. Kono smiles as she performs this.

Christine Kono: That was me!

Liz Waterhouse: Oh, yes! (Sings the accompanying music by Georges Bizet.)

Christine Kono: Yeah, that one!

14 To question my memory, I reviewed this sequence in documentary footage from a performance in 1973 by the New York City Ballet. See Balanchine, *Symphony in C*, 27:00–27:30.

Liz Waterhouse: You still remember that in your body? That's very impressive.

Christine Kono: Oh, I can't do that anymore. I don't do that to myself.

Liz Waterhouse: Can you tell me what it felt like to do that? Do you remember what your body felt like before, during, after?

Christine Kono: Well, sometimes I prepared myself by jogging. Because it was really important to get to this tempo and just keep it.

Liz Waterhouse: Fast.

Christine Kono: Yeah. So it really was keeping the tempo and a little bounce. It was fun. It was a lot of fun. To do Balanchine it's always fun. It's amazing because his musicality and the choreography go so well together that you don't have to think. The musicality takes you and you feel lucky to do it.

But we also did *Swan Lake*. There were stupid things in—excuse me, I don't know if I should say this—those unnecessary pas de trois. (Laughs ironically.) Totally unimaginative choreographically, and I feel, story-wise, totally unnecessary. And you end up doing some kind of variation. You say to yourself, “What? Why are we doing this?” It's totally incoherent. It doesn't belong at all, any place. The best thing in *Swan Lake* for me was to run out and pose—stay—and run back. That's so beautiful. Just that! Why do we have to do those stupid variations? No, I did, of course, the little swans, because I am short. That was okay. That was sort of funny. But the little pas de trois and the third act with the Black Swan and all these people coming in doing things. Also *Sleeping Beauty*, (gasps horrifically) “Ahh!” Superfluous!

Liz Waterhouse: So were you a ballerina then?

Christine Kono: I was a soloist. I would do ballerina things as fifth cast on tour. If someone was having a nervous breakdown, I would go on.

Liz Waterhouse: Your feeling of yourself? Were you a ballerina, Christine, at that age?

Christine Kono (changes tone to a more intimate voice, at a lower volume): I think I always had a feeling of laughing inside of me. It was really not my cup of tea to think of myself as a ballerina. You know, I was embarrassed a bit. Like if my classmates in Los Angeles had seen me doing this—because I come from a Black school where they would do like Motown coming down like this. So here you are, in ballet doing like this (demonstrates). I went like, “What would they think of me?”

With Balanchine, I didn't have that problem. With classical Petipa it was a little bit hard. You know, going like (light disgust), "Uh." Like *Giselle*, the *Peasant Pas De Deux*. I'm just going like (whispers), "Oh my God, this is stupid." For me in the audience, when I was watching something like that, I said, "I didn't know how it belonged in the whole thing and helped to create the atmosphere and the advancement of whatever was going to be said." It was like *cutting* the whole thing for me.

Kono illustrates the contrast physically. First, she performs a bit of Motown. She bobs, knees loose. With a groove and a vibe, she walks and swings her arms. Then she changes her body state to enact the light, shapely arms—the port de bras—of ballet movements, with a bit of coquetry in her head and eyes. This contrast shows that Kono experiences the tensions of embodied difference, between doing and watching, popular and stage dance, between participating in African American dance cultures and European American concert dance. The judgment of her peers seems significant here. Perhaps this also reflects issues of class: Kono having family who were educated doctors, lawyers, and professors, who would evaluate ballet from this perspective.

Liz Waterhouse: You remarked before that when you were a child that you hadn't, other than Elizabeth Lee, other Asian American dancers around. Is that right?

Christine Kono: She was the only one I knew, besides me.

Liz Waterhouse: When you came to New York were you seeing more dancers that were not White?

Christine Kono: Yeah, it was in the sixties. Well, first there was Arthur Mitchell, New York City Ballet. I saw him in LA rehearsing Balanchine's *Agon* in 1957. He was so beautiful. Then Alvin Ailey started his ensemble in 1958. Then there was Judith Jamison, who was *gorgeous*. So the Black people started to appear.¹⁵ There was—we called her "big Yuriko"—Yuriko Kikuchi in Graham, who was also a *wonderful* dancer.¹⁶ But in classical ballet, there were no Asians. There was Ruth Ann Koesun, who was half Asian in American Ballet Theatre.¹⁷ She was a principal dancer with

15 Kono's testimony gives *her* perspective on the comparative visibility of African American vs. Asian American dancers in Los Angeles and New York in the sixties. The important contribution of persons of color to American dance history is considered from an academic perspective by dance scholar Takiyah Nur Amin. She describes earlier antecedents to the visible wave and climate of diversification that Kono reports here, in which Kono also includes canonical figures visible in ballet and uptown dance. See Nur Amin, "African American Dance Revisited."

16 See Kisselgoff, "Yuriko, Keeper of Martha Graham's Flame."

17 See Kisselgoff, "Ruth Ann Koesun."

Chinese and Russian parents, but I never saw her really dancing. There was a lot of influence from Cuba, Puerto Rico, a lot of nice dancers coming from there. So things started to open up just around the sixties. I was lucky, in that sense, or unlucky because I ended up dancing. Because I was always very interested in other things.

I tell you what made the change when I was nineteen. I was about to leave dancing, because I felt it was enough. The tours were so hard—bus and truck. You didn't have your own hotel room; you always doubled up. There were no rules. You could arrive one hour before a show and go on stage and have to dance. Sometimes there was no preparation and no respect for the body and the mind. I said, me personally, "I don't think I'm going to last." The dancers were falling right and left from injury.

I broke my metatarsal in a rehearsal because I went through the floor on pointe. My partner went through the floor too. He broke his Achilles [tendon, in the ankle] and I broke my metatarsal [bone, in the foot]. We were on the floor laughing. We said, "Now we have to really think about our education." Because we both couldn't help each other stand up. We looked at each other with amazement, and the first thing we did was laugh. It was a good reaction. I mean, inevitably under those conditions, which were inhuman, something like that had to happen. It was happening also to others, not only us.

Figures 2 + 3: Christine Kono at the Pennsylvania Ballet Company (1966). Kono remembers this moment to be after the accident when she broke her metatarsals as she was returning to dancing on pointe.



Photo by André de Ribère.

Injury and Care: "I'm not going to sacrifice my body."

Liz Waterhouse: What was the process after a dancer would get injured? Or what was your process?

Christine Kono: The company was responsible because it happened during rehearsal. So the insurance company would pay us—for the doctors' fees, and for the time off in recuperation. It happened with the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, but I still had a room in New York. Nothing was happening in Philadelphia. I would go back to New York also to see a doctor for my foot—someone who said he could at least bring back the flexibility of the metatarsal and not operate so I couldn't move it anymore. I didn't think about dancing again. In the meantime, I could reorganize myself to think about studying again.

But Barbara Weisberger, who was the director of the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, said, "Christine, can you teach *Concerto Barocco* to the Balanchine scholarship class?" I said, "Well, I can't move, but I will help them as much as I can." So I went down to Pennsylvania again. This was in 1965. The students had all been selected by Mr. Balanchine. Luckily, they were all shapes and sizes: twelve girls between the ages of eleven and thirteen. They were so gifted. I mean, I only had to move my fingers. I said to myself, "That's interesting!" They were good researchers. There was no negative competition, only positive observation between them. I taught them *Concerto Barocco* more or less with my arms. I don't know how I did it, but I had already studied the concerto on the violin, which I played until I was fourteen. The last thing I studied was Bach's *Concerto for Two Violins in D minor*, which is the music for *Concerto Barocco*.

It was a good combination. I was nineteen. It was interesting to teach people who were so smart and curious. I said, "It would be interesting for me to teach because these people will *use* dance even if they don't dance." That's how I got involved in the idea of teaching, with these girls. One became a soloist: Ellen Federov with the Pennsylvania Ballet Company. Lisa de Ribère became a member of the New York City Ballet and soloist for American Ballet Theatre. One girl worked with Robert Wilson, and the rest did something else. I knew one became a lawyer. Another became a nurse. But it didn't matter (thoughtfully, bringing her words together slowly): It was this atmosphere of using dance as something for life, not in order to be on stage, that encouraged me to think, "Well, maybe dance can be something that I can investigate as a teacher?" That was the beginning, I think, of that idea.

Then after three-quarters of a year, I went right back on pointe. But that was a mistake because it was too quick, as usual. It wasn't good for my body, but I did it. Then Eliot Feld asked me to come to New York permanently. I knew him already. I was a friend of his sister. Occasionally he would come and give a class for the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, which was sort of like doing everything *backwards*,

which was interesting for me. Good for my (points to her head). But he asked me—not to dance for him—he asked me to be an agent, to look for dancers, because we personally didn't really like each other.

Liz Waterhouse: Why?

Christine Kono: Bossy. You couldn't ask questions easily. I didn't think everything he did was cool. But I liked his musicality and some of the ideas, like doing a movement without showing off. "It should look like you're doing it," he said, "on the subway." I said, "That's a good idea." Sometimes I would do the choreography but not perform it—meaning help to make the steps. That was also good for me. Because there were some dancers who didn't like to look for their own material or invent dance movements. I would take them in a room, and we would work out something—at least a score which they could present to him. He was so nasty sometimes. But I said to myself, "I don't need to take this personally."

I was also the union representative for his company, because everyone else was afraid of him. For me it was important that the dancers had someone with whom they could express their opinions openly. I said, "I have nothing to lose. If he kicks me out of the company, it doesn't matter to me. Because there are some *principles*—human principles—that have to be encouraged. And won. And I'm not afraid to defend those principles, no matter who it is."

A lot of dancers, unfortunately, they're afraid. I found that very unhealthy. So you were sort of the one they complained to. Some of them I felt shouldn't be dancing because they were unable to see themselves independently of a choreographer and imagine their lives beyond what they were doing at that moment, and sometimes dancing too injured—afraid to say, "I don't feel good." Afraid to say, "It's too much for me," like on tour.

Another injury: I fell. I was dropped on my back because my partner was doing too much. It wasn't his fault. He was suddenly thrown into the piece. Someone was sick and he had to learn so much on tour under the worst conditions, and to remember all the choreography in a couple of days. I said, "Of course he forgot." He was in the wrong wing. He was so upset. I said, "It's not your fault. You shouldn't have to be put under this pressure, especially with someone criticizing you in a not nice way. It's not your fault, you know." I said, "What are you going to do if you have to learn all these parts suddenly, like six pieces, and you're in all of them. You never had proper run-through rehearsals. You're doing great!"

These conditions had to be changed for the dancers. I tried to mention these issues at union meetings. Speaking to people, directors of companies, and saying, "Maybe it's better to have one less dancer in the company and provide the dancers with enough pointe shoes, so they don't hurt their feet." Things like that. "Consider that if you have a heavy repertoire with at least six hours a day on pointe that the

dancers may need more shoes.” Things that they don’t (indignantly) *consider*: “That someone has to see a stage before they go on it, the rehearsal conditions, and that the dancers need after eight hours of bus travel, a night off before they go to work. I thought these things would make a big difference in the quality of the performance, which everyone is dependent on, and are also very important for the health of the dancers.” It was simple. There was no planning before.

Liz Waterhouse: Were you the first union representative for Feld or had there been someone before?

Christine Kono: I was the first, because I was one of the original members of the company. I don’t know how I ended up in this, but I felt there was already a union representative for the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, for American Ballet Theatre, for all the big companies. But there was also the category of small companies. (Thoughtfully, enunciating her words slowly) I just discovered then how important it was to have an organization that protected people just for human rights—independently of your artistic freedom. Sometimes people were so afraid to miss a rehearsal and they were really sick or injured. I think this is one of the reasons why there was so much drug abuse. I have to say that I think I’m one of the few dancers who allowed myself to be sick, even if I lost a part. It was, I figured, good for *me* and also good that someone else could do it. So you don’t have this attitude, “I’m the only one who can do it.” *That’s not true*. It’s a very dangerous attitude to have. It’s good to be able to recover if you are injured or sick. It’s also good to see other people doing what you did. You learn a lot!

Sometimes I loved to dance a piece. Then, I saw the piece from the audience’s perspective, and I said, “Oh that’s boring.” And sometimes, with pieces that I hated to dance, I saw them from the audience and loved them. So you have a total “other” perspective if you go outside. It was an opportunity when you were injured to go out. Even if I lost something, a part, at least I said to myself, “This body you’re going to have to carry with you for the rest of your life. (Slowly, defiantly) I’m not going to *sacrifice* my body. I don’t help the art form. I don’t help anyone, not the choreographer, by performing sick and injured and taking drugs in order to dance. I could help by being honest about my condition and allow someone else to dance.” That’s positive, at least. And if the choreographer will not accept me because I had the audacity to be sick, then I shouldn’t work with him/her.

Liz Waterhouse: Were many dancers on drugs at that time?

Christine Kono (incensed): It was a rumor, but I saw it in some open classes. It was obvious that some dancers were going up or coming down. I knew this from Balanchine’s *Symphony in C*, for example. With the Pennsylvania Ballet Company,

there was once one girl doing the first movement *and* the fourth movement. I know I could only do the fourth. I mean, it was maybe short but exhausting to really be there for that kind of movement. I asked her how she did it. She said that she did it with speed. She took drugs. I said, (gasps) I was shocked. *It's not worth it.*

I didn't ask too many questions, but you could see that a lot of dancers were acting very silly sometimes. I thought, "They're not themselves." This is a sign of drugs (sighs). I think they took methedrine and heroin. It is absolutely amazing that people felt it so necessary to dance that they did *that*. Because I always thought dance is something about being honest. (Imploringly) Isn't it?¹⁸ About what you are, who you are, what you have. Your instrument is very precious. So you take care of it.

I've had to save some people who went on extreme diets. They were not only anorexic, but they had ulcers. I had to call ambulances and have them rushed to the hospital—stuff like that. I said (indignantly), "Why?" Young girls in their early twenties, sick when they should be flourishing. This one girl from the School of American Ballet was gorgeous! I mean, perfect! And she joined the Pennsylvania Ballet Company—beautiful, tall, perfect for the New York City Ballet. And I think sometimes Mr. Balanchine sent people into the Pennsylvania Ballet Company first to have dance experience with us. Then a ballet master told her that she had to lose weight. I said, "Why? She's gorgeous." And she was one of those dancers whose ulcers exploded. I had to take her to the hospital, call her parents to get the permission to operate. She had three hours to live and after that she couldn't dance anymore. I'm going like (despondently), "What are these people telling these kids?"

Liz Waterhouse: When I think of stereotypes of ballet and the Balanchine tradition—"Don't think, just do."—this way that the ballet world is your life, not having a perspective outside—these are things that you have always spoken out against, when I worked with you.¹⁹

Christine Kono (resolutely): Well, I was lucky that I don't look like a Balanchine dancer, and I never could get into that school. So if I got something to dance, I didn't have this pressure. They were under tremendous pressure. As soon as you were blonde, five foot seven with long legs, you had to live up to Suzanne Farrell. I went like, "I'm glad I don't have to do that." (Laughs.) I was very lucky. I saw these wonderful, talented people—beautiful dancers, really very beautiful to watch, not only their bodies, but they all had a *wonderful* sense of movement. They *destroyed*

18 Kono's belief is shared by Martha Graham, who writes: "Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul's weather to all who can read it. This might be called the law of the dancer's life—the law which governs its outer aspects." Graham, "I Am a Dancer," 120–21.

19 Wilkin, "Remembering Balanchine," 711.

themselves in order to fit into this image. They didn't have to do that. This happened often in the ballet world. Very often. I thought it was really a shame.

Listening to Kono here, we see how dancers' experiences in the ballet world reflect individual encounters with discrimination and privilege, revealing the complexities of intersectional identity. Kono describes how a ballet dancer's outward appearance makes them vulnerable to others—subject to judgment that, in her professional context, was rooted in racist and sexist ideologies about the normative physical appearance of classical ballet bodies. My follow-up question invites Kono to explain this further, in her own words as a witness.

Liz Waterhouse: Did you feel that the way others treated you when you were a ballet dancer was a form of empowerment or racism or both?

Christine Kono (speaking slowly, considerably): I was told by Barbara Weisberger, of the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, that some of the board members were very skeptical about *me* because of my Japanese background, *because* all Japanese dancing is parallel, not turned out. I said, “I’m very turned in and very proud of it.” (Laughs.) “And, I’m not really an example of Japanese culture. I’m the third generation in the United States, and I don’t want to be responsible for other Japanese dancers.” I’m sure there are many Japanese dancers—which is proven now with history—who are physically very *able* to do classical ballet. I don’t want my body to be an example for a lot of other Japanese people. We don’t fit into one basket. There are many different bodies, also within the Japanese people. This sort of attitude is really crazy.²⁰

It is maybe because of this influence—because of being Japanese American or American Japanese—that I could *identify* with classical ballet. Especially because I am Western. You know? If I were direct from Japan after the Second World War, it might be a little more difficult. But having been in—exposed to—in a society that is American, also the way of education and thinking that I don’t disassociate myself at all with what I am dancing.

I had it really much easier than a lot of other dancers after I started. Because I noticed the criticism of the other dancers, particularly female ones, was unjustifiable. They had to be like an image that was being created of what a dancer should look like. I felt so sorry for them.

Liz Waterhouse: What was the way that a female dancer should look like at that time?

20 This concurs with dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s examination of race and the dancing body as a social construct and not a biological imperative. Dixon Gottschild writes, “There is enough variation *within* any ethnic group to make the theory worthless.” See Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 5. (emphasis in original)

Christine Kono: Except for me, everyone else had to be, at least, as I said, five foot six, five foot seven, very skinny, with long legs—like a fashion model. Not like a dancer. We're not models, we're dancers. This is where I bring in transformation. There are many dancers that I *love* on stage, but if you see them in person, you don't recognize them. It's the magic that they're able to create through movement. They are able to transform themselves and everyone/everything in the space. You don't *see* them—you don't see them. You see what they create. I was wondering why they were making all this *fuss* about these girls. Because most of them, I would say, were destroyed psychologically along the way and had the potential of really becoming wonderful artists.

Liz Waterhouse: From your position today, do you have any better insight as to why all that went on?

Christine Kono (long pause, sighs audibly): I think in some places there were and still are, unfortunately, people who, when they are in positions of power, they want to control people. They're not interested in what the dancers can offer. They're interested in controlling them.

Mentors in Modern Dance: "Martha Was a Performance in Herself."

In contrast to the ballet world, the circuits of modern dance in New York City impress Kono with their generosity and provide her with role models who are also female and Asian. Throughout our dialogue, the ideal of Martha Graham's body appears as both a specter and a referenced ideal for the perfection of Graham technique.

Liz Waterhouse: When and how did your practice change from ballet?

Christine Kono: Through Kazuko Hirabayashi, a professor at Juilliard. She was the teacher of Alvin Ailey and born in Japan.²¹ She got me to do Graham classes with her and go to the Graham school in my break. She also arranged that I had enough financially for this time. So I started with Graham technique. I was twenty, so this was 1966/67. It was so nice because I started at the very beginning. There were demonstrators at the Graham school. One volunteered every day, half an hour before

21 "As a choreographer, Ms. Hirabayashi came to early notice in the 1960s with a highly personal style that combined American modern dance and some ballet with a Japanese theatrical sensibility. Yet her own creativity in the two companies she founded and directed was eventually overshadowed by her international reputation as a teacher whose depth and dignity inspired extreme devotion from students at the Juilliard School and elsewhere." Kisselgoff, "Kazuko Hirabayashi."

class, to come and help me to learn the exercises and to correct me. What a privilege! They did this for everyone. I thought, "How generous, how nice!" You know, you're not used to this generosity in the ballet world.

Kazuko did a piece called *The Stone Garden* (1971) where I danced with Jonathan Watts from the New York City Ballet, as well as with Larry Grenier and Lance Westergard, who were with Eliot in the American Ballet Company.²² The piece was for eleven boys and me. Basically, I was a boy until the very end. So it was *fun*! She had a lot of lyricism in her movement. Kazuko's movement wasn't as static as Martha Graham's, so it was easier to connect movements. There was a kind of harmony in the way phrases were made, so you initiated, and it just flowed. It was not about form. I think it was more about allowing something to unfold naturally. Kazuko had this lyrical quality in her own movement, even with Graham, which was helpful. Because we also had Graham as a teacher occasionally (laughs), which was frightening!

Liz Waterhouse: Why?

Christine Kono (her speech picks up speed and energy): Martha was a performance in herself. She was wonderful! She was so verbally articulate, but frightening. She believed in everyone; this was wonderful about Martha. I don't know if we did everything out of fright. Because in the Graham school you didn't know who was going to teach the class. You had to knock on the door of the school, and someone would come out and look at the people and decide if you were allowed in or not. It was a ritual.²³

In any case, Martha was amazing. I had her when she was in her sixties. She was still dancing. And this body! She was two hundred degrees turned out. I went like, "her legs are backwards!" (Laughs.) So all the spirals in her technique were so easy for her. It was great to *see* her because it's always great to see a body which works. Everything followed that spiral, so logically. Double spirals, and I went like "Oh my God." So, you know, you do it in your minimal possibilities, but it's great to see that it worked totally for someone else.

Kazuko also taught the Cunningham dancers Graham technique. So that brought me into another group of dancers, on the other side of the dance world. She was the teacher of Robert Swinston, who was the assistant of Merce Cunningham, and Cunningham was a Graham dancer originally.

22 "Miss Kono particularly had a special delicacy that made the abstractly presented theme of a young woman's spiritual journey and search for love radiate with poetic beauty." Kisselgoff, "Kazuko Hirabayashi Company."

23 Testimony elsewhere remembers Martha Graham as an authoritarian teacher, capable of physical and verbal abuse. See Lakes, "The Messages behind the Methods."

Liz Waterhouse: Can you share some of the things that you remember that were part of the Graham training? I have some experience, from my teacher Marcus Schulkind, who, because of his knee injuries, taught a modified Graham technique.

Christine Kono: Better. Yeah, Graham is very hard on the guys. The technique requires the maximum use of the space inside the pelvis, and naturally, in the male pelvis there is less space than in the female pelvis. I always thought of a contraction as a stretch. Because you open the ribcage lumbar to the back and the top, the sternum goes up.

Liz Waterhouse: The sternum goes up?

Christine Kono: I'm trying to go up in a contraction. I'm not trying to go down. Martha could do it. She could. I can't do it anymore. She really could arch here in the sternum and open back in the lumbar. She had a very flexible spine.

Kono experiments, gently and carefully, with her body. We are both seated on the floor of the dance studio. She opens her legs in a wide straddle ("V") and moves from the spine, finding a contraction. In recent documentation of the Graham technique, these movements are called the "deep stretches," the name in agreement with Kono's memory of the sensation of stretching.²⁴

The terminology that Kono uses with me during our movement exchange is anatomical and connected to her work with Dimitris Kraniotis. To my knowledge, it is not the pedagogical terminology used in Graham training in the late sixties. The lower back is the lumbar spine; the sternum is the chest bone where the ribs come together. The dorsal spine, another term for thoracic spine, is the spine in the middle back—from the base of the neck down twelve vertebrae to the base of the back ribs. Kono demonstrates rolling the pelvis back and floating the ribs up towards the ceiling. I am amazed how easily this happens for her, as if based on deep muscle memory.

I join Kono in exploring. I too open my legs into a straddle. I contract with an exhale that is audible on the audio recording of the interview. I extend energy through my limbs by cupping my hands and flexing my feet, details that I remember from my training with Schulkind. In this elongating extension, I move the spine in the concave position of a contraction. My guts go back, soft like a worm. Then I release the tension and return to sitting. Repeating the motion a few times and following Kono's encouragement I begin to sense the soft, pliancy of the abdominals and core. It's a layered feeling of intention: my lower body recoils backwards, while my eyes and intention stay lifting—Kono exclaims at the end: "Yeah, right!"

Christine Kono: Take your dorsal spine into an arch, and then try to get your center to go back. Yeah, right! It should take you up. Martha could do it.

24 See the documentary film *Martha Graham Dance Technique*, 12:01–13:40.

Another thing that I thought was good was also all the work here (she touches her hip) all through here.

Liz Waterhouse: You're pointing to the area of the hip crease? Not the side of your hip, but in line with the psoas muscle? And I see you making diagonal pelvis movements.

Christine Kono: I won't do it fully. All these spiral motions. Moving all through here.

Kono points to a zone on her body between leg and torso, that I call "the hip crease." Interestingly, here in our movement exchange she does not use anatomic vocabulary, even after my prompts. Instead, she dives into the motion to remember. Using her body gently, she explores the "spiral turn" motions, which through extension and release of the hip, enable turning the body in a spiral. Kono plays with the mechanics of the legs and spine—without performing the arm motions I associate with this exercise, based on recent video documentation from the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance (2018).²⁵ I join her, imitating. Crossing her legs in front of her, Kono marks some of the motions of the "breathing" exercises and "the double spirals." In her movement, she shows the importance of the internal motion, moving the upper body from inside of the torso, rather than from the periphery or limbs.²⁶

Christine Kono: There was also the double spiral. The double spiral to the back of the head. You take it *not* from the top, but here (points again to her hip crease).

And then there's all this—I can't do this anymore—going to the floor and coming up. I used to be able to do all of that (laughs). Good, Liz!

Liz Waterhouse: Is this Graham?

I perform my memory of "The Pleadings," a composite memory mixing Marcus Schulkind's modern class and Hilary Cartwright's Yoga Narada®. I begin sitting, my legs stretched out in front of me. Imagining the first beat of the phase, with an exhale I thrust suddenly into a contracted position—laying down with my legs together, an image that makes me think of Jesus on the cross. To release the position, I inhale and exhale to lie down. Then, entering a yoga pose that is also part of my current practice of Yoga Narada, I flex my feet and arch up, with minimal weight on the top of my head and elbows. Then I return to rest and lie down. Then, I exhale to hollow out my abdominals and cup the hands to come up to sitting, before lowering myself down

25 See *Martha Graham Dance Technique*, 16:30–18:00.

26 In an interview between Bessie Schonberg and Deborah Jowitt, Schonberg describes Graham's credo as "you moved between the shoulders and the knees and that was it." Bannerman, "An Overview of the Development of Martha Graham's Movement System (1926–1991)," 10.

to begin the sequence percussively again. Mixing elements from the present and the past, I have little knowledge of what is from Graham and what is from other sources.

The first part of my movement resounds with Kono's embodied memories. She, however, remembers "Martha" coming up in a different way. She also has embodied memories of developments of the exercise onto diagonals, which were adopted and simplified in Schulkind's classes. We both have many gaps in the details of the sequencing. Are the feet flexed? How is it coordinated? Kono, after her abdominal surgery for cancer, is careful not to exert her body too forcefully. I become a surrogate body, keeping our conversation going. This anecdote displays the active nature of embodied memories as reconstructions; messy and imperfect registers, they link past and present, one body to another.

Christine Kono: Then all this. I remember this (demonstrates seated spiraling exercises).

Liz Waterhouse: The fourths. I've seen this in documentation of Graham technique, but none of this was in Marcus's class. Too hard on the knees. Your heel is in line with your pubis?

Christine Kono: Yes. So, basically, if I were really good, I could stand up here—I can't do it anymore, I should be able to go up here and fold back (down to sitting on the floor). I should be able to stand up without my hands. By going from a contraction here, to unwind and bring myself all the way up to standing. That's how we stood up from the floor, from this spiral. (Amazed) I don't know how I did that! I had quadriceps [thigh muscles] I don't have anymore.

Liz Waterhouse: This side of my body just doesn't want to do it. That's very interesting. This is the knee, the left knee, that I injured in The Forsythe Company (laughs).

Here the virtuosity is challenging to both of us. I have never learned any of these motions, and Kono—amazingly agile for her age—is not able to demonstrate them.

There are a multitude of exercises to train these kneeling motions and level changes in Graham technique. The leg position of fourths is an important and challenging position in the Graham training, already taught at the beginning level. One is not supposed to feel pain in the knees as one spirals the upper body, but the danger of pain is present.²⁷ Kono's switch to speaking of an ideal body, "Martha's," as well as imperatives of what one should do are

27 The narrator of the Martha Graham Dance Technique video admonishes that in fourth position "there should be no strain on the knees." See *Martha Graham Dance Technique*, 16:50–17:00.

consistent with this virtuosic technique. I try a bit of what she is exploring. But I am not able to perform these movements.

Christine Kono: I remember a fall in six, something like that. You go one, two, three, four, five, six (both laugh).

Side Jobs in New York

Liz Waterhouse: Returning to the topic of your career as a young professional dancer in New York, you were studying Graham and performing . . . ?

Christine Kono: Well, I was doing Graham training and working with Eliot Feld, basically. Together it was a good balance. I also did other jobs occasionally. I'll mention two. One was that I was asked to be a judge at a dog show! I loved this! Another job was from a dancer who knew Richard Avedon, the photographer for *Vogue*. They were looking for someone to help him find dancers to model clothes, and they thought that I would be a good person to choose some dancers. Through that work I met this famous model, Veruschka von Lehndorff.

I chose some dancers from the New York City Ballet because they looked like models—not the principal dancers, but some dancers that could use the money! Veruschka wasn't beautiful when you saw her, but it was again one of those people who could transform: she could make clothes move. She was not too skinny, and she had a strong gaze. She was unattractive without makeup, but once she put makeup and clothes on, she transformed completely. She knew how to move and bring the clothes to life. That was a very interesting experience. So I was looking for extra jobs—not extra ways to dance—but extra things like that to do.

Sometimes, there was a ballerina who couldn't do a pas de deux—was sick or something—and they asked, “Can you do this for me?”

Liz Waterhouse (surprised): And you put on your pointe shoes again?

Christine Kono: Yes. Honestly, I don't know how good of a decision that was. I couldn't sustain performing classical ballet repertoire day-after-day. After one performance, my body would say, “Maybe you shouldn't do this for a couple of weeks?” Holding positions like this (demonstrates arabesque) and like this (she touches her back, mimicking pain, after performing an attitude), I don't think this was very good for me (both laugh). You know, I wasn't very good at it—I mean, I didn't feel like I could develop it. And this image of a ballerina, I never had it for myself, so

...

Liz Waterhouse (overlapping): The Spanish ballerina!

Christine Kono: But if I could help, I was always willing. I tried to look for other work that was more interesting to me. I didn't work in cafes, but I worked in offices, and I was a babysitter. In fact, I was a babysitter for Lewis Lloyd and Linda Fosberg. Lewis Lloyd was the first husband of Barbara Lloyd, a dancer from Merce Cunningham. That got me free tickets for Cunningham! Louis was the manager for Eliot Feld. Because his son from his first marriage was very intelligent, it was a great job. I also babysat for Jane Hermann, who eventually became the director of American Ballet Theater after Baryshnikov. She was then on the board of directors of Eliot [Feld].

I learned a lot through talking to these people about management. I learned about what they were doing, and I could complain/express my dissatisfactions to them. I could tell them what was going on in rehearsals, explain what I felt about performances and tours, because they were members of the foundation or managers. In Feld's company there was dissatisfaction. He was already thinking about having another company, and I agreed that things would have to be different. I said, "You know, this doesn't work. It creates a bad atmosphere in rehearsals: There is a bad—a wrong—sense of competition. There's not a good sense of competition. There's not a healthy atmosphere." I was able to work well with people like Lewis Lloyd and Jane Hermann; just being a babysitter and close to them on a personal basis enabled me to say things which I think interested them. They were very nice people, but as managers, they didn't always really know what was going on.

Liz Waterhouse: Why not?

Christine Kono: When they came into rehearsals, they knew, of course, that it was *difficult* sometimes, but they did not know why. To hear specifically what was behind the problems—what specifically had happened—for instance, that someone had gone to the dentist instead of taking class and therefore was treated badly in rehearsal. I explained *specifically* why the atmosphere was not good. Also, I felt that, independently of my status as a union representative, that a certain attitude had to change. It's an attitude. It's a whole attitude. It's not just this one event. It questions (with emphasis) "*What is a dancer?*" You must respect dancers as people, as human beings first, and then if you do that, maybe you can have a good working relationship. They are not just tools. They are not just instruments. They are people. And as human beings, in order to have the most productive, creative experience, there must be a respectful atmosphere. You don't have to love everyone, but there has to be at least mutual respect.

Dancing in Tanz-Forum Cologne: A New Vision of Being a Dancer

Moving from Los Angeles to Washington, then to New York and finally Cologne, Kono learns new ways of laboring and perceiving her dancing body. In contrast to her earlier work within the hierarchical structures and narrative fictions of ballet companies, dancing within the context of German Tanztheater enables Kono to explore relations between aesthetic abstraction, movements in daily life, and performing dramatic roles. Her testimony compares the various dance aesthetics she has encountered, exploring her personal preferences while also highlighting differing approaches to movement, meaning, individuality, and narrative.

At Tanz-Forum Cologne, Kono fondly remembers a sense of camaraderie in ensemble dancing. Her testimony notably shifts away from foregrounding the topic of race while continuing to reflect on the bodily vulnerability of artists in the dance profession. In contrast to her earlier experience working with choreographer Eliot Feld, she speaks with reverence about choreographers Kurt Jooss and Pina Bausch—their capacity for empathy and communication with dancers. Yet, based on her past experiences, Kono remains cautious not to sacrifice her health or body. She describes taking reflective distance from herself as a public performer, valuing the choice to keep some aspects of her life private—even secret.

Liz Waterhouse: Can you tell me about your transition to working in Europe as a dancer?

Christine Kono: I was not sure about New York anymore. I wasn't really learning anything, or couldn't find anything that really interested me. There was the option, when Eliot Feld's first company folded, to go to American Ballet Theatre or to Joffrey's. I was asked by Kazuko Hirabayashi and Martha Hill to apply for Juilliard. It would have been the only option that was interesting to me—to study choreography. But I felt like at twenty-four I still needed to have more dance experience.

Suddenly these people from Germany came up to me and said, "We're forming a company, the first German state modern dance company in Cologne, Germany."²⁸ We saw what you did for Eliot. Maybe you would be interested to join us?" One of the regular choreographers would be Kurt Jooss. I had seen Joffrey do *The Green Table* (1932/1967).²⁹ Now, I was interested, but I never imagined myself having anything to do with something theatrical. I liked abstract movement, basically. But I said, "This is a change that might be very important."

They told me they needed dancers that could still do pointe work as well as the Graham technique—which was at that moment not far from what I could do. Two students from Juilliard also went to Cologne. The rest were from who knows where. The four directors were Jochen Ulrich, Jürg Burth, Helmut Baumann, and

28 See Jeschke and Vettermann, "Germany," 63–67.

29 See Siegel, "The Green Table."

Gray Veredon. They also did their own pieces, but the major choreographers besides Kurt Jooss, were Glenn Tetley and Christopher Bruce. The company also still did some Balanchine: *Allegro Brillante* was what I learned there. So I thought, “Why not try?” The contract was for one year. I said, “Get away for a while from New York.”

Immediately when I came to Germany, 1971 in the fall, we started to work with Kurt Jooss. He was such a generous and kind person—to everyone. There were no favorites. We learned *The Green Table*. First, we did improvisations leading to the movement, and then we were divided into groups learning major parts. Everyone learned a major part. No one was left out. We also learned the corps [group dance] parts as well. It was interesting to learn a major role and to know what the group was doing at the same time, and to not know whether you're going to do a group role or the major role in the next performance. Jooss knew how to create an atmosphere of positive energy between people. It wasn't negatively competitive. I learned to appreciate my colleagues very much in this company.

What I love about Tanztheater people—and probably what they all had, like Mary Wigman—was their ability to observe what was individual about everyone.³⁰ They were very good at people observation and *concerned* about us as human beings. Even how you were cast was, more or less, you realized, what you needed to do. It would be a good lesson for you. It wasn't to fulfill a type that was already preset, even if there were three major women and three major men roles, including the role of Death. The process was so important. You felt this is good for us: to learn *this* role, or *this* kind of movement, and to understand where it's coming from.

So, for example: when I was the Infantin in *Pavanne* [*Pavanne auf den Tod einer Infantin*], Jooss said to me, “Go, go to the playground and watch how children move. You're a young girl.” He'd ask questions about your childhood. It was not about emotional *feeling*. It was something that you could find through researching everyday movement: “What happens when you kick a ball? What happens if you are running for the bus? And you're late!” Everything was associative. You could really say, “Yeah, I know that.” It was interesting how he worked with us. There was always something that you had to imagine and something that was not emotional. It was very pragmatic. He would give an impulse that you could really realize through your daily life. It wasn't like (changes voice, ironic earnestness): “You have to feel stronger.”³¹

30 It is interesting that in her description of Tanztheater, Kono draws continuity to artists from East and West Germany from the first half of the twentieth century. Dance scholars Claudia Jeschke and Gabi Vettermann have used this term more specifically to refer to the West German phenomenon beginning in the 1970s. See Jeschke and Vettermann, “Germany.”

31 Concurring with Kono's testimony, dance scholars Claudia Jeschke and Gabi Vettermann describe in Tanztheater a focus on “individual truth” in which “the body was treated as both medium and message, as an autonomous universe with its own expressive characteristics.” See Jeschke and Vettermann, 63.

I realize very much how Jooss could have been Pina Bausch's teacher. Because she was also really able to look at people and know how they *felt*, deeply. He too had this ability. You could easily talk to him about your insecurities. I said, "I don't like so much the idea of dying." I never died on stage. The idea of being a victim bothers me. I don't want to do anything that is too personal. What you learn is: It has to come from the movement. It's not you or how *you* feel. It's what the movement is saying. Even if it's a very dramatic role, you take yourself out of it and you examine the movement: how you change from something that is accented to something that is maybe dropped, from someone that is very clearly focused, to someone who is focused to the back. It's interesting that, in order to work with him, I had to approach these roles just as if I were doing something for Merce Cunningham: something very abstract. I didn't like observing sometimes when my colleagues would get emotionally involved. I said, "The movement has to speak." I spoke to him about that and said, "I don't feel it. It's difficult for me to find an identity with this." He said, "You don't have to. Just do the movement."

I mean, dancing *The Green Table* is really another trip! (Laughs.) After that I did *Pavane auf den Tod einer Infantin* (1929). He gave me the role of the Infantin, who is a princess, who was really hard for me to be, and who at the end also dies. I'm like (she makes an ironic grimace of disgust with her mouth, shakes her head and then giggles; this irony injects momentum into her narrative, as her pace of talking speeds up and her voice warms in tone). I went up to him *again* and he said, "It's good for you. It's good for you—to *find* a way to do this." He had so much patience, and interest in giving someone an experience that they needed.

I really had no problems with Glen Tetley or Christopher Bruce, but with doing Tanztheater, I was going like, "I really find it difficult." It was a study of: *Why you do dance?* Are you afraid of revealing a side of you that you would like to keep secret? Or does it have nothing to do with you, but this exists in all human beings? So that was the way to do it: It's not you; it's us; it could be anyone. So how do you *transform* the movement? Jooss would change the movement—like all choreographers—he would change the movement according to who was dancing. Like my first teachers of classical ballet, he had wonderful images to give everyone and different avenues for everyone, even if they were dancing the same role. He treated each of us differently—because I would watch him work with other people—it was *so beautiful*—because we were individually observed and coached. You learned to observe people, and to appreciate others for being different and giving you another approach to what you are doing yourself.

I would love to watch my colleagues dance. Especially then, especially after my experience with Kurt Jooss, I didn't have to be the one performing. I became really interested more and more in my colleagues. If in any of his pieces I was in the corps de ballet, it was so nice to know that you're supporting one of your colleagues; or if I had the solo that night, that my colleagues were supporting me. I felt that strongly

with *The Green Table*. I really have to thank Kurt Jooss for this experience because, you know, the ballet world was just the opposite! (Laughs.) It became clear to me that this was so important—his involvement—because his attitude towards what makes a team carried into all of our work. We appreciated everyone and everything; it wasn't just in his pieces. It started to go into the other work.

I noticed this especially with Glen Tetley. Glen was used to setting very precise, pretty, classical pieces. And when he came to us, we did a thing called *Moveable Garden* (1973). He made it in two weeks, and it was largely improvised. We were waiting for him, sitting like this (she sits on the floor casually, wrapping her arms around her knees). He said, "That's the beginning." Then he would just say, "Okay, try different ways of standing up." Then he'd say, "Well, like, maybe how would you—like if I'm with you and we're two blades of grass in the wind? So figure that out. What kind of movement you would do together and differently?" Or (laughing), "I need a water fountain over there. Everyone try something like a water fountain. I need a bird who's flying!" We all were crazy. But we finished it in two weeks. This happened after *The Green Table*. I know that it was possible for us to do something only scored and helping each other because we had gone through this other experience—of support and conversation—so that it was easier to create without this feeling of negative competition and hierarchy! This, I think, was the greatest gift from Kurt Jooss.

I wrote down a lot of what Kurt Jooss had said to me. In 1979 he died. I had a good relationship with his daughter, Anna Markard. I said, "Listen. It's not only the steps. I wrote down what I remembered from Kurt Jooss. Not only what he said to me, but what he said to *us* all, and how he approached certain movements." For example, if you have a light here in front of you or if you have light there behind your body (she gestures), it's different: The imagery changes the dancers' movement. So that way, the girls had better creative motivation. There were no videos that they could learn from, so I went and I showed them what I remembered. For me, this was really good.

Kurt Jooss would also invite us to go to different performances. He had a VW bus and could drive us. He said, "Oh, I'm interested to see this performance. I can take three or four people." Especially when Pina Bausch started in 1973, I went with him and other dancers to see her first works. I liked *Fritz* (1974). Quite frankly, I liked all her theater pieces. Of course, I was very impressed by the *details* that made a big difference in her dance pieces—like with Malou Airaud in *Iphigénie auf Tauris* (1974). Malou was so gorgeous. She was just sitting and then does the most subtle movements of—I guess of sadness, of doubt. How Pina was able, with *very fine*, almost invisible movements to create this Iphigenia that she did—it was remarkable. I knew about Pina's ability with *details* to create a total person. And her *presence*! Pina was a beautiful woman. I realized how important presence was, for her and for her work. The technique was not about an athletic technique. It was more about sensitivity, which I appreciated, as well as her observation of human beings, and human qualities. I appreciated this as a member of the audience. And

so, because of Kurt Jooss, of course, I was interested in Pina Bausch's ensemble but never thought of working with her. *Never*.

Liz Waterhouse: Why not?

Christine Kono: As I said, I'm not theatrical. I like the process of arriving into movement. Every movement has something to say—is a question. It's *how you get there*. I was amazed at the dancers who could expose a part of themselves which could be psychologically very dangerous. I felt . . . (tentatively) Maybe I'm conservative? I couldn't be so direct about some things about myself. There are some things I think I would like to keep secret. I could feel that these people who were working with Pina were really revealing themselves, exposing themselves in a way that could be very dangerous for them. This was my observation. I admire their dedication and ability to *sacrifice* basically themselves for the work. I was not ever able to do that. *Never*. I'm selfish, I guess. (Laughs.) But I was wondering also how she did it.

Career at Folkwang Tanzstudio and Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch

Liz Waterhouse: Can you please explain your transition to teaching and working for Pina Bausch?

Christine Kono: When I decided to stop performing with Tanz-Forum, I was invited by the Folkwang Hochschule to study dance pedagogy.³² I thought it was good to stop dancing and to study. Still, I kept the doors open in Cologne because I said: "Listen, if you need a substitute dancer—of course I'll be a substitute. I knew the whole repertory from all the choreographers. Or, if you need me to *help* someone learn something, or want me to come and show anything, I would do it *gladly*." I kept on as a substitute dancer until I was thirty-five. It was fun! I was allowed to leave my studies to go to rehearsal.

But after my child came when I was thirty (1977), I never did major parts or tours. I slowly went out of the repertory, but I also made sure that the people who substituted for me felt good. This was important for me. I also did that with the Pennsylvania Ballet Company, and also with Eliot Feld when I left. For me, the best was if the replacement was *better* than me. Of course you're replaceable!

I got to know Pina Bausch very well while I was doing my master's studies in dance pedagogy. She came to watch me teach. I finished my master's in '81. I had

32 Now called the Folkwang University of the Arts. This school in Essen, Germany was an important institution for the development the new German Tanztheater in the late 1960s, and remains a very important context for the education of dancers in Tanztheater as well as contemporary dance. Servos, "Folkwang Tanzstudio."

a position [*Lehrauftrag*] at the Folkwang, and I was teaching children in the public school [Gymnasium Essen-Werden]. I was co-responsible for the dance classes at the school. It was a lot of work with kids aged ten to nineteen years old. To teach children was very interesting, probably the most creative teaching I've ever done.

So Pina came to watch me teach. We went out together and she gave me some suggestions. I *never* thought of working for her company. After six years of working with children, she asked me to be the teacher for her company. Because of the association with Folkwang, of course, I had continued to watch her development. I thought her work became more and more interesting, and more and more experimental. Especially starting maybe with *Kontakthof* in 1978, it began to be not so much dancing—in the sense that we know it—but every movement was dancing. The dancers were my age. I thought, this is maybe an interesting experience for me. That's how I got to work with Pina.

Liz Waterhouse: Do you know why it took her so long to ask you?

Christine Kono: She needs a long time to decide. This is Pina Bausch! (Laughs.) I know some dancers who went three times to auditions and were not accepted, and the fourth time they were taken into the company. It's how all creative people are. It's such an "on the spur of the moment" sort of thing, where their creative tick comes suddenly at that moment. It's luck. If that is what I need now for my creative imagination, then it works. It's not a matter at that point of physical ability. It's a matter of do we match in values? Do we match in our creative imaginations?

Me, I wanted to see how I could support this sensitivity that she had. I *loved* the idea of her wanting to work with people until . . . I mean, if she were still alive, she would still have the original dancers working for her. For Pina you didn't stop dancing after a certain age. This was also *very* interesting for me. She *loved* old people. Her attitude was not as long as you can move, you can work with me—it wasn't like that—it was as long as you *want*, we will find a way to work together. This attitude was not common.

At the beginning, because I didn't have much to do with the company at the Folkwang Hochschule, I was at every rehearsal. She asked me to be there in Wuppertal. It was not to learn the movement, but if there were problems with the movement, she would ask me what I would suggest. One of the suggestions I gave was, "Don't start to work with the form. If you want people to move together, even the smallest motion, you get them to *breathe* together. If they are breathing together, the movement will follow. They will create something together, even if they don't do exactly the same form at the same time. If they're not breathing together it doesn't work." That's when I think we were working on *Palermo Palermo*. Even if they're doing the simplest movement, if they're breathing together, it will carry into space and

people will *feel it*. They will feel it, and we will feel it. That was one of the things I said.

Also regarding the sternum for Tanztheater—there are a lot of movements involving it—like in *Sacre* [*Das Frühlingsopfer* (1975)]. It's really from here (Kono touches her sternum, the breastbone, at the front where all the ribs come together). It speaks. The sternum is a very *emotive* part of the spine. I think that is what was interesting about working for Pina. She has an amazing, subtle way of moving herself. Pina would be sitting and smoking (laughs). Then she'd get up and dance *Sacre* with no preparation. She was *amazing*! Without warming up! I said, "How does she do it?" When she demonstrated, those *arms* would just cover the whole room, the entire space. Her arms were *beautiful*. I admired her as a dancer. She was an example for me. Once we were at Barnard College in New York, and Pina had a conference which I attended with her. She was asked "What you consider yourself: a choreographer, teacher, or dancer?" She said, "I am a dancer."

She would get very nervous before *Café Müller* (1978). I think with great artists, it's not the nervousness about technique. It's the nervousness about: Are you able to be *there* at that moment and transform the space? To have this big responsibility for everyone else in a company and occasionally to have to dance—it's not easy. But it's the only piece in which she danced, as well as in one other piece, *Danzón* (1995), in which she did a solo with the fish video in the back.

One reason that I'm happy to have known her is because she was never angry. I don't know how she did it! She never screamed. She was always looking through people. She would also give *very* good movement corrections. For example, in a solo she created—it was a beautiful solo for Christiana Morganti, I think. Because many solos are with people closing their eyes. All Pina said was "Very slowly, while you're doing it, take your time, just open your eyes, and I want you to (she drops a beat and then says smoothly) *smile*." It was exactly what the solo needed. It gave it a reason. She was able to do that with all her dancers. She cared—she loved all her dancers. So, it's great to have worked with someone like that.

But, at the same time, it was a very *closed* group of people. Me personally, maybe—I don't think it's right or wrong—I felt like I needed to experience working with other people. I needed to experience rejection of and questioning about what I was doing with dance. That's why I decided to leave after seven years. It was important for me to do it nicely. Alfredo Corvino, who had been Pina's teacher at Juilliard was coming regularly to teach the ensemble. Everyone was happy with him, so it wasn't like I was deserting. I was able to speak to Pina about *my* necessity to question what I was doing—to know I can use *this* kind of work, with *other* kinds of dancers." She was of course sad, but not so sad because Alfredo was there. It was the right moment.

Next, I joined a company directed by Joachim Schloemer, whom I knew as a former student from Folkwang. He had gone on to dance for Mark Morris. I worked

with him in Weimar (1994) and then in Basel (1996). It was good because I was only with his company seven months a year, and then I had time for guest teaching. I also had time to start to work consequently with Dimitris [Kraniotis]. So it enabled me not only as a teacher, but also as a *person*, to discover other things and other people. Because before, with Tanztheater Wuppertal, this was impossible while being under contract for fifty-two weeks.

Liz Waterhouse (incredulously): Did you have vacations?

Christine Kono: Listen, Pina worked! It's no wonder that she died early—poor thing—it wasn't only smoking. She would work constantly: It was ten in the morning till two in the afternoon and six to ten at night. Six days a week. Sometimes if she had a creative inspiration, it meant working overtime even later, or on Sunday. It was very, very intensive.

Kids: Motherhood and Teaching Children Dance

Liz Waterhouse: How did you balance your work as a dancer with your care duties as a mother?

Christine Kono: At the beginning, during the first three years with Pina, I had a child, Benjamin, so I didn't have to be there as intensively as the dancers. I did the morning class and stayed for the morning rehearsals. But towards the end of a creation, just before the performance, Pina asked me to be there all the time, so I had to organize childcare for my son with his nanny.

I took my son to performances occasionally. I thought it was important when you have a child to not sacrifice your interests. Actually for me, my son *helped* me to be interested in what I was doing. I never would want *him* to think that I *sacrificed* what I really wanted to do because of him. This is my idea of having a child as an active person. I also didn't want my son to lose out on normal things a child would do, because of me—to drag him into the theater all the time. He had his own friends, and he went to school. He had his hobbies. He used to play guitar and then basketball. If the basketball game was in the week, I asked to be excused from rehearsals and tried to go see it—or his nanny, Mrs. Heinschke, went, or Uncle Heinschke, her husband. They were really such wonderful people and my neighbors.

I was lucky, but I also worked on that. Even before knowing Mrs. Heinschke, I had another woman taking care of my son who was also wonderful. She was in her mid-fifties. She would pick him up at six thirty in the morning, and if necessary, she would take him to the doctor—all the things that I would normally have to do. I organized my studies so that I usually was finished at three or four in the afternoon, and weekends were free. He had enough of me. This is a problem with some mothers:

they think they're the only ones who can take care of their children. It's not true! I did a lot of research and auditioning to find the right caregiver [*Pflegemutter*]. I think it's possible if you really want it. My son was a joy for me. He was absolutely an inspiration. You shouldn't have a child if it's a problem.

I think kids are amazing! In the school in Essen-Werden I was responsible for what they call theory, composition, and ballet. For kids, the best way to get a good jump is to skip. That's the best timing for jumping. So you're looking for things that are natural that you eventually can apply. Then you ask kids their opinion, "What do you think of this?" (Laughs.) I said, "Well, how does it *feel* to go like this?" (Kono moves from a parallel position, to a turned-out first position). "What happens to you? What happens to your whole body? Why do you think that this is useful, or is it not useful for you?" You know, it's a lot of questioning the technique: "Is it useful or not?"

Kids usually do athletics. If you do track and field, there's a lot of ballet in it. Just the hurdles. It's a grind! Your hurdle is really all this "kre-kra-kruh"—and timing, timing, timing. There's mathematics. Can you jump on seven instead of eight? You can say, "Okay, now we find a rhythm, and we decide altogether when we want to jump. What count?" It's a game!

Also to do improvisation: like to finish with something like a Motown, where you choose your favorite music as a class. We get together; we're in two rows, and we slowly move to the middle. Two people come forward and they have to do an improv and go back in line. I grew up in in Black Los Angeles, so we used to do that in the afternoon. We used to improvise. There was a guy called Billy Preston who was in my class. He was a very active musician in the fifties and sixties, even had an association with the Beatles, so he would improvise on the piano in the afternoon. We would go in and figure something out, "Want to create a dance called The Four Corners? Want to hit the ball?" So you let kids do something like that.

To dance, you need flexibility and strength. So once you do something that's flexing, you have to do something that's strengthening. You decide things like that—not just stretching. It's all related eventually with daily life. The children find values in what they think are normal movements like running, jumping, falling, spinning. Once they experience turning—spinning or falling, recovering and jumping—then you can give them ballet. Then you can see if we can use that with the same impulse and feeling that you got when you ran from here to there, if you do (mimicking an arduous rhythm): *jeté, jeté, jeté, jeté!* (laughs). So you try to find associative things that the kids know and they enjoy.

The last thing I did in the Gymnasium was the project week. I had something like sixty kids who volunteered to do a dance project. One week, but six hours a day. They were divided into classes. It was really funny because they went from this size to this size (gestures from small to big), and they all wanted to do a dance project. So the thing was, "Okay, you guys. "What do you want to create? What can we create together? We're all different sizes and ages?" They decided they wanted to create

some kind of wonderful magical machine and find a way that it coordinated and functioned fluidly. Then it should go crazy. It should fall apart and slowly try to come back together again, but it didn't quite function as before. It was a little broken. They wanted to do that. That was the decision of the group. They chose some kind of electronic music that they found themselves, and they decided certain tasks they wanted to try out. They decided, "Okay, let's go with contrasting the littlest with the biggest." They created something which resembled cards folding, something like baking where everyone was a different ingredient. They were amazing!

So they had this cookie machine, or some kind of machine. They started to throw each other out (she manually imitates throwing and catching bodies). They were great at catching. My job was somehow to suggest how to put all this information together and to make sure they didn't do anything dangerous. After one week, we had about twenty minutes of interesting stuff. We put together everything they had done by themselves." The director of the Folkwang Hochschule at that time said to me. "Do you think you can finish this?" I said "I didn't do any of it, and I'll never get them together again. They're from all different classes. The last year will be gone, you know?" But I was amazed: They did it all by themselves. They had options. We discussed what to create and what inspired most of them. They were wonderful. Children are amazing.

Sometimes I regret not continuing with them. I could also offer a composition class to the senior, nineteen-years-old students—like a simple solo or duet—not group choreographies. There were some beautiful things coming from them. We did ballet as a question. "What could we use? Where was there natural movement? What was unnatural but useful? What was unnatural but harmful?" Those are the questions we asked.

I think only two of them became dancers. I still have contact with one. He works, I think, as a microbiologist—in a laboratory with things moving! He says it's like choreography. He still takes ballet class regularly. He's around fifty-five. He's also an excellent pianist. Another became a lighting designer, another a costume designer.

Liz Waterhouse: It's wonderful. You're giving people a perspective on dance for their lives!

Christine Kono: My problem was that the other co-director wanted to make an official dance school where the bodies of the children had to be evaluated at ten years old. I said, "No." Everyone who's interested in dance should be able to have good classes. Good classes mean with respect for their bodies. It's important that everyone who wants can experience their bodies in movement in an organic and positive way. It doesn't matter the shape, size, whether you're turned out or turned in. No. It was a musical school, so they all played instruments and sang. They were very good dancers. But some of them didn't have the bodies of "dancers." But they

were wonderful to watch. Beautiful. I had problems with the other co-director because she wanted a little Leningrad Kirov, you know?

Collaboration with Dimitris Kraniotis: “He Would Add Those Spicy Philosophical Words”

Figure 4: Dimitrios Kraniotis (left) dancing with Christine Kono (right). Impromptus (2009).



Photo by Thierry Gründler.

Liz Waterhouse: How did you begin your long-term collaboration with Dimitris [Kraniotis]?³³

Christine Kono: I found that my body needed it. We met in 1989. He worked with Pina Bausch, from '92 to '94 as her dramaturg. He would come to take my ballet class and do as much as he could. He didn't have prior ballet training, but sometimes he would do amazing movement. I asked myself, “Where is that coming from?” I went

33 Poet, philosopher, and dancer Dimitrios Kraniotis, whom Kono calls by his nickname Dimitris, was born in Athens, Greece, in 1950 and emigrated to Paris in 1967. He is the heir of American dancer Jerome Andrews, with whom he studied and performed from 1980 to 1992. After Andrews' death, Kraniotis was assistant and dramaturg for Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch from 1992 to 1994. There he met Kono, beginning a longstanding collaboration on movement teaching, research, and performance. He has published numerous anthologies of poetry and a book on Andrews. See Andrews, *La danse profonde*. See also the biography on Kraniotis' website, <https://www.kraniotis.com/bio>, last accessed September 24, 2025.

up to him and asked him, “Where did you learn that?” Some of the dancers were in a much better mood since he had appeared in the company. They were much more creative in their improvis. I decided to ask him where he got his ideas, and he showed me some floor exercises—this was all based on Dimitris’s work with Jerome Andrews in Paris and the work was very new for me. We moved our spines—from the top, the atlas, down through the thoracic, and to the sacrum—while on our hands and knees. Rounding, arching, circling. We also did sternum circles, active breathing, and rolls—things like that.³⁴

I was having problems in my lower back, and I realized that this way of working helped me. So every so often, even while I was working with Pina, if I had time, I scheduled a class with Dimitris in Paris. He also invited me to improvise together in a studio. He gave me all these themes based on the awakening of the spine. Then he would add those spicy philosophical words in order to stimulate the creative imagination. We went, “Huh?” (Laughs.) Things like “eclipse,” “complete with missing parts,” “the other side of the coin,” etc.

Around '99, I decided to spend more time with his work. At that time I also did Alexander classes with Tom Koch.³⁵ It was a good combination. I had been visiting Ballett Frankfurt since the end of the 1980s whenever I went to Frankfurt to take Alexander classes from Tom Koch.³⁶ One of the dancers there, Thomas McManus, asked me if I could introduce him to some work, as a coach or teacher. Thomas was in the process of leaving Ballett Frankfurt (circa 1999) and I introduced him to Dimitris. Dimitris did not have access to many professional dancers: He inherited his students from Jerome Andrews. (Jerome was against the development of a state-controlled system where only dancers educated in formal techniques were considered “professional.” So most of Jerome’s students worked outside of the system.) So Dimitris and I organized a workshop with Thomas for the Centre National de la Danse in Paris, where we worked together for three weeks with dancers we had selected. It went so well for the three of us. We found that we had a lot in common.

It was at that point that I decided that I wanted to dedicate more time to this idea of working with Dimitris and Thomas. Then David Kern, Thomas’s colleague

34 See footnote 38 on Andrews.

35 The Alexander Technique of movement re-education was developed by Australian actor Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869–1955). Alexander, *The Use of the Self*.

36 The American teacher Tom Koch was certified in Alexander Technique in New York in 1987. His impact upon professional dancers includes dancers of Ballett Frankfurt/The Forsythe Company, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, the Dutch National Ballet, Sydney Dance Company, Chunky Move and many international students of dance. He has also had a longstanding relationship cooperating with choreographer Anouk van Dijk on Countertechnique. For a short biography, see: <https://www.countertechnique.com/obocnyc2022/>, last accessed February 14, 2025.

from Ballett Frankfurt, moved to Paris as well. It was such a blessing to have both of them to work with. Then this kind of research just took over, because it enriched my ideas of how I perceive a person in space, how I look at a performance. Initially we didn't think about performing for an audience. We thought it would help us in our teaching. It was to explore—to find ideas—how to work better with ourselves as dancers, in order to then teach people. Then someone approached us, and they suggested, “Why don't you perform this?” This was in 2002. Thomas was not interested in performing with us at that moment, but he continued to come at least twice a year for one month to exchange. We did some performing with David Kern in Weimar and Jena, and in Paris at a small theater. But then David moved back to Frankfurt to join The Forsythe Company—with you. We did our first bigger performance project, *Impromptus*, at La Chaufferie in Paris, in 2006 with Thomas. So that is the beginning of making our own creations.

What I think is unique about Dimitris's way or approach to improvisation is that while he may be involved in a task, at the same time, he's looking for an escape! Not only that, but he's also looking for where that escape will take him. He doesn't *stay* on the same task, and he's also not expecting that from anyone else in the space. So you're not expecting someone to *keep* something; you're expecting them to *offer a development*, an unexpected change. The task is a catalyst. Let's see where it takes us. We know where we begin, but we don't know where it will go, and this is great.

It's also an attitude which makes human beings very special: that they can surprise themselves! They are not just instinctive. They can choose. They can deviate. This is what makes, I think, the human being amazing! Whether it is a musician or a dancer or a painter or a poet, it's where you deviate from the structure because of what you're trying to say. You may not even know what you're trying to say, but you know and trust your whole nervous system and your creative imagination, you allow them to take you away from your original intention. Only human beings can do that, and why should we not allow that to happen?

What is happening in a very strange way now with society is this: If you go on any public transportation, for example the Métro in Paris, people are not looking around at all. They are looking at their smartphones. I think it is very important to take human beings away from something so regulated and to allow them to have their own imagination, and to determine how they use it themselves. I mean, I won't be able to exist without technology. I need my computer. I need my iPhone. But, to *really* not avoid myself—to take the time to reflect—to think deeply about my own perspectives and mindset—this is where I may use my movement exploration. This is my only possibility of knowing who I am, basically. It's an opportunity to explore your potential. Instead, everyone nowadays is like this (mimics looking at a smartphone and dabbing the screen). So maybe that's a reason why we help people to dance: not necessarily to perform on stage, but to *listen* to themselves and how they are with their environments at that moment—how they are with other people

as well as objects—so that they can *discover* and be surprised by their own selves and open up their limits.

It's terrible when we go to a performance and we feel that it is not about that. It's either about impressing or showing a compositional structure that is *closing* the participants on stage. This does not help our situation. Maybe before it was necessary? I don't know. Even Laban Notation or Benesh Movement Notation is lacking a dimension—this is also the case with video documentation—and it is this dimension that is missing, that gives dance its essence. This is what we try to give to others as teachers or as performers or as choreographers. I *think* that you try to give people that dimension that is very special in human beings. When that is not the intention, it's difficult to watch that performance—for me. The performing becomes an aperitif before dinner. You go and you forget it. This is where I say: "It's a shame."

To see The Forsythe Company, to see a new piece from Pina Bausch, to see a new piece from Merce Cunningham—it was a big experience that, as a person in the audience, I had to prepare myself for. I knew that if I went, I would feel different after the show. It was as if I was going to perform myself, because I knew something would happen to me. I wouldn't just go and forget. Now I go, and I forget. I try to think positively, but this one *essential* thing I think for us now, in all societies after what we've been through in the COVID-19 pandemic and what we may have to go through—who knows what's going to happen in the future—is to remind us of our creative abilities as human beings. *All of us*. That's why sometimes people who are not trained in dance can be much more creative—freer than those who have been officially trained. This is what I've experienced, not only myself, but in the classes of other people especially, when the students have a task where they have to *offer* something. If you're really involved, if you find the right interest, you're not concerned about people watching you. You do not perform but are there, in the moment, in a process of investigation.

Broader Horizons: Ballet Mistress

Liz Waterhouse: Can you please share more with me about your work as a ballet mistress? For which companies did you work, and how did your teaching adapt to these different contexts?

Christine Kono: I worked with Ballet Preljocaj from 2001. Preljocaj choreographs—he sets the movement material—and doesn't really allow a lot of space for deviation. The dancers that he has are amazing. Many of them come originally from the Paris Opera or from the Bolshoi Ballet. For me, it was interesting to work with these super technicians. Because all of them had ideal classical ballet bodies. You know, I'm not used to that! (Laughs.) I allowed them to change what I gave them: to leave out or to add. It was also important for me.

Whereas you guys (in The Forsythe Company) changed the exercises all the time! I didn't have to do anything (laughs). For example, I would have to tell the dancers from Preljocaj to use a different timing or to go to another space, or create an obstacle in another dancer: meaning, you do a combination where the other person is in the way, so you have to do a deviation of the movement. I would have to create the questions myself. With you guys, it was easier. I would have a lot of interest in watching how you would manipulate whatever steps were given. It was more that what I did with you was an outline and for them what I did was very specific, and I had to deviate. But both were very important. To be specific and to be open was a good combination.

Then I also went back to Pina, when she was still there, to teach her company. That was also interesting because there were still these older dancers there—both old and young dancers. I tried to create combinations that someone who is young and someone who's old could also use. Even a grand allegro. So if they no longer could do big jumping, to allow them to change the movements so that they were suited to their abilities, or to take a young dancer and ask them not to show their technique. I mean, really just the opposite of what they wanted to do! They wanted to show you the big jump. I said (feigning seriousness), “No, no, I don't want to see the big jump. You do just the opposite.” (Laughs.) That was also interesting for that reason, because you had the capability of emphasizing difference—that was a very good reason to work with them. I had a wonderful time between you guys, Preljocaj, and Wuppertal.

But when you do company teaching, you're always, of course, adjusting to the needs of the company. There's no time really for extensive experiments. Luckily with The Forsythe Company, they were experimenting all the time. Whereas in most cases you don't have the time that you need to break the ice so that the people feel free to try something else which may appear for them. So, I had a very good time, but I now feel the need to work creatively (pauses): If I teach, it's not teaching, it's really exchanging. I need to work with mature people: people who are looking for their own way of working, their own way of sharing dance. They can be from another art form, but they're looking for a way of communication and to take responsibility for themselves. They are not waiting for me to tell them what to do. Because (She makes a face suggesting tedium; LW laughs.) It's enough. In any case, even if you are a beginner in teaching it's always more exciting if you are working with people who have their own values.

Dancing Memories: Warming Up with Kono

The practice-based knowledge of dancing presented in this section was recorded while warming up together with Kono in a dance studio (see Figure 1).³⁷ Beginning with the theme of learning to perceive and sense space, Kono interlinks memories from her practice of ballet, the movement language of Pina Bausch, and her movement research with Dimitris Kraniotis. The lightly edited testimony below highlights Kono's embodied knowledge as well as her voice as a pedagogue: encouraging, inquisitive, and searching for creative resonance. Dancing bodies are shown to be powerful through their imagination and their capacity to affect others.

Christine Kono: Ballet offers a lot of possibilities of thinking of moving in space. This is where I think ballet can be helpful. It's the awareness of épaulement.

Standing together in the dance studio, initially we orient our movements towards the camera as if it were a ballet teacher watching us, or a mirrored surface representing the audience's gaze. As Kono teaches me about port de bras, we stand on the diagonal, facing the corner of the room, as is common for these movements. The rectangular room construction is important for these geometric space perceptions and is included within the diagrammatic drawings of many ballet manuals. Kono uses terminology such as mathematical degrees and numbered positions that corresponded closely with the Vaganova system of classical ballet instruction.

We first practice the half port de bras, a small teaching element for children in the Vaganova method. Then Kono demonstrates the first port de bras. In both, her arms magnify themselves into very long curves, which create space around her vertically lifted torso and spine. She looks near to her body at her hands, and then further out into space away from herself. She does not flex her wrists or drop her elbows. Instead, the light tension of elongating and following the curves of her arms creates an evenly flowing motion, where passage and position eloquently morph. Her long, individually awake fingers are much more feather-like than the clawed hands I learned in Balanchine ballet technique.

The muscle memory she displays in this practice is exquisite and deep. As indicated in Figure 1, she has a radiant, humble, and eloquent presence.

Because the first thing you learn is the bras bas—you have to feel the energy between the fingers. You have to feel the energy between. And immediately when you start to move, it's asymmetrical. Now, if I'm going to open my arms to the side. I look into, for example, my right hand. Even if I feel the left hand, I follow the right hand into space with my head. That is what the little child learns. Now, I'm going to go allongé, and I'm going to go diagonally up with my arms. This is only as far—a little higher than ninety degrees. Now I follow with my focus on the right arm as it lowers,

37 Interview between Elizabeth Waterhouse and Christine Kono on November 10, 2022, in Freiform Atelier Bern.

until forty-five degrees. Then I let the arms continue moving down to bras bas, and the head returns upright. It's such an awareness of space! It's incredible what one learns. That's just a half port de bras.

Also, the interesting thing I think for me was, as a child (returns to the allongé moment), even if I'm looking past the right arm, I'm feeling there (points with her back arm to the back opposite corner of the room). And as I close, I'm taking both spaces with me: not only the one I'm looking at, but also the one that I'm *not* looking at. This is what's interesting about ballet. It's this space awareness. It's what makes someone who has studied ballet very, perhaps *precise* in the space. It's not that they can lift their legs or jump up to the sky. It's that suddenly the space becomes present (she reaches in different directions around her, with non-ballet gestures). Maybe that's what's valuable? You see this in some very excellent ballet dancers; they create the space. You don't see their bodies. This is where I think I can justify the technique.

When you're little and you start, it's not just training the legs. I had a Russian teacher, so everything was based on the port de bras. Which meant it was based on how you use your back. And the legs fell out of the back. So it wasn't first the leg. I know some teachers where you begin by moving your legs a lot, but with us, with the Russian school, the first thing you learn is épaulement. They first learn the half port de bras.

Watching Kono perform these ports de bras, I observe with reverence how her "muscle memory" animates her body. The standardized exercises of Vaganova ports de bras are routines that she performs masterfully. I view this practice-based knowledge not only as echoes of the past—echoes of what Kono's teachers told her—but also as practices that have been sustained and nourished by her subsequent career as a dancer. Through performing diverse choreographic languages and conducting movement research with Kraniotis, Kono has cultivated feeling spaces inside and outside her body; these approaches resonate with her balletic sensibilities. Rather than routines of rote repetition, these routines of practice shine through her life, interconnecting her bodily knowledge and allowing her to narrate seamlessly across dance styles.

Now, this is the first port de bras. (Demonstrates.) Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. In this first port de bras, your arms overhead, your head turns to look before the elbow, indicating out in space (she points to the corner). You open your arms, and you start to change the hands, exactly at that in-between moment (at 135 degrees diagonally upwards). Then you allongé and lower the arms down to bras bas. It's so precise. I mean, we would spend hours just going, "Okay, what does he want (laughs)?" But really, it was how we started: with port de bras.

So now in a grand position (Kono demonstrates the second port de bras in Vaganova technique, beginning in croisé devant, moving to croisé derrière). It's about how you move the space, moving the space usually from the back. So I'm

moving this whole space (she gestures behind her arms) which is logical. Now I'm going to take this space (she indicates with her eyes the moving lower arm) and put it together (the arms meet). You could put it together, and you could carry it there. All your energies going between the hands out into space (she walks forward out of her arms). This is the way I learned. When you start to watch people, that's what you start to look for. Like watching Diana Adams as a young girl, the way she used the space was amazing. It wasn't because she was a ballerina-showoff. She knew how to use space. This is also interesting about Bill Forsythe's work, because it's so space oriented. Because as soon as someone is concerned about what the space is moving or if the space is being closed—as soon as it gets to be that—it communicates beyond the person in movement. This is what was inviting for me.

Inviting for me was also the fact that Pina [Bausch] had wonderful port de bras. Her arms were moving really from her pelvis and when she would do anything, it was like when she does these eights for *Sacre* [*Das Frühlingsopfer*], the whole room was moving (gasps and laughs).

Liz Waterhouse: Can you show me?

Christine Kono (overlapping): I don't know how to do it; actually, I never danced *Sacre*. But she did it. She would do eights and the whole pelvis would move counter . . . Dimitris [Kraniotis] and I do figure eights a lot too.

Dancing while she narrates, Kono and I begin to improvise. The “figure eight” becomes an image for movement. Kono guides me to explore different spatial orientations, planes, and scales of action—inscribing the interconnected loops of the “8” into space with different parts of our spines. Our legs, arms, and heads ripple in counterpoint.

Initially we stand face to face, mirroring one another in motion. I am trying out the ideas that Kono proposes. She is speaking while moving. Holding onto her shirt at the point of her sternum, she emphasizes first the movement of her dorsal spine: the spine behind the heart. Fluidly her pelvis moves counter. Then, changing her stance to direct her motion so that the camera can see, she describes variations from her improvisations. She stops her motion to watch my progress and continues to coach with her voice. She transitions seamlessly in and out of exploring herself and watching me. The exercises have a logical progression from listening to abandon: from listening inside, practicing, moving in the space, challenging oneself and finding a surprising flow without stopping. The dialogue below captures this coaching, full of exclamations of support and surprise. “Right!”

Rather than a hierarchy of transmission, like guru and student, Kono is sharing and exploring with me in movement research. Each person is different, and each side of the body is different. Kono's body, though lighter than mine, appears on video more grounded—more weighted in its rooted quality. My supple spine is more flexible, my eyes and facial expression more inquiring.

What I would do is to take a part of my spine, and let it eight—your dorsal spine, or your sternum, say. You can write eights like this, vertically. So the movement goes forwards and backwards at the same time, doesn't it? Forwards, and then it goes in and back, and at the same time. You could do that also *through* your spine. That means, I can start with the top of the spine. So you can start with the head, and then go down to the coccyx, and start with the head, and go down to the tail. Now you can find another eight to the other side. It's not the same because your other side will be different. Right!

Now you can create eights in the space, traveling. That means you can start with your head; go back to your tail. Start with your sternum and go back here. Start with your head. Let it go in space. Do a different one, right. Right!

Now you can escape. Now you're going to challenge it. Maybe to jump a bit. Let it go down, but you have to continue the eight. Right? You're going to continue, don't stop (laughs)! Don't hit the microphone. Everything in there you incorporate, you add the extremities. Right. It's beautiful! Get in the camera. Don't stop. Keep going. Right. There you go. That's where an eight can take you. Beautiful.

Now do as small as possible. Like a secret . . .

You can also do a break . . .

I think it's great with Dimitris's approach to improvisation: What you can do is also, if you get onto a theme: Moments you show and you don't show. This one moment. I may stop, and I don't want to show it. So I try to hide (laughs) things, and then you start getting into something that could lead to an idea. If you break a rule, it's not breaking a rule, but opening it up. Like saying you can add silences . . . Add another kind of movement . . . Come back . . . Go to a space that you never use . . . What about your eyes? You can do eights just with your eyes. This is where he's great, as a coach.

It is so interesting to work with someone who is a dancer, philosopher, and poet, who does not have a formal education in dance techniques. I sometimes feel myself being a little bit, I suppose, restricted in ideas, by my formal education—feeling that I have to create a kind of structure. Yes, you should create a kind of structure but be open to changing it in the moment in order to open up to people in front of you, to give them the opportunity to really discover what dance can do for them. Sometimes coming from a formal technique restricts me.

You can start with a very simple principle. Like in classical ballet, you move either from the back of the hand, or you can move from the palm of the hand. You can move from the thumb side, or the little finger. All of this, you can use it in improvisation. I think almost everyone can do this—can feel these parts of the hand. This also in Tanztheater (gestures with her hand); this says something totally different, when I think of moving from the little finger or the thumb, or relating my hand to the space. Doris Humphrey said, "The hands are very important. The whole dance is in your hands." Pina [Bausch] also was so conscious of this.

Kono performs these gestures. Her soft fingers are slightly curled, each individually shaped in the air. Her knuckles are slightly hardened with age, but with these motions they become sensuous—like an elephant's trunk. There is a liveness in her subtle movement, in which each delicate finger is like a sea creature, able to spring into life.

One principle she models is the difference between lifting a hand with the palm raised to a spectator vs. the back of the hand. These very different attitudes of address project different energies. Another gesture is a rolling movement, turning the upturned palm and forearm from the thumb, and then reversing the rotation with a roll led by the little finger. She illustrates how the personal gestures of Bausch's solos may emerge from these fluid and meaningful details, of hands moving in space and touching the upper body.

What is also interesting is not to look at your movement. To be someplace else, while something else is going on. You either demonstrate it, or, while you're doing that, you're attracted to something else. It's all very important for classical ballet too. There are a lot of double coordinations in ballet. Like if you do petit battement with the legs, which is fast, and you do a slow port de bras with the arms (laughs). It's a kind of double coordination. Combining a swing of the arm and a vertical turn: That's a pirouette!

Creativity and Aging: "Dance Was the Whole Life"

Liz Waterhouse: You often use the words "creative" and "creativity" when we talk. Can you tell me where that interest originated?

Christine Kono: Well, I think it's probably coming from the research I did about Jerome Andrews.³⁸ Because he really—and all the Tanztheater people, Mary Wigman, Harald Kreutzberg, Gret Palucca, Dora Hoyer—I mean, for them, dance was the whole life.³⁹ Also with Pina Bausch: She never thought dance was limited to a certain age. It was a way of life, basically. Maybe that's when I started to use the word creative, because all these people were creative their whole lives. They wanted to give their students this joy that is not determined by age, but the joy you continue to have through dancing. This is sometimes lost now, because now dance becomes very amazing physically, and we lose this value of our dance as something that one

38 Jerome Andrews (1907–1992) was an American dancer, choreographer, and dance teacher who worked with many modern dance and *Ausdruckstanz* pioneers (Denishawn, Graham, Humphrey, Weidman, Wigman, Holm, to name but a few). He also studied intensively with Clara and Joe Pilates. He immigrated to France in 1950 and lived in Paris after 1953, where he continued to interweave dancing, teaching, and movement research. Kono encountered Andrews' life and work through his heir Dimitrios Kraniotis. See Andrews, *La danse profonde*.

39 On Tanztheater, see footnote 31.

can experience creatively our whole lives. Instead, dance is too often something that you only can do as long as you are physically capable. There is a problem there.

Even with ballerinas. Excuse me, Anna Pavlova was fifty when she died of pneumonia. Actually, Pavlova was promoted by Fokine because she had a *weakness*. She couldn't do bravura things, but he promoted her fragility. Now, I don't think she could survive. This is also an age thing.

But for many dancers that I know, my former colleagues, their lives seemed to have stopped at forty. When they notify me or call me, they talk about something that happened forty-five years ago. For me, it's a very *sad* experience. Instead of talking about what is happening with them *now*, with their knowledge and experience of dance. For them, teaching is not a creative experience. It's as if they give to their students what they did before. You shouldn't do that. You should give what would be good for the student at that moment. Because then the student makes you creative. It's not just saying, "Okay, this is the way I did *Giselle*. So do it like that." No! You have to figure out a way to make it a creative experience for *you* as well as the student. That means that you have to be creative as a teacher.

There's a reason for the corps de ballet which I like within the hierarchal classical ballet system. That's because in the corps de ballet, you *watched* the other people who were more experienced. What you may have noticed was that many of the younger dancers had much more technique than the ballerina, but the ballerina had something else. That something else, became evident with the experience of being in the corps de ballet: So the reason why the ballerina was a ballerina was *not* because of a physical capability. She was able to use all the elements of dance effectively, in very subtle ways, creating another world in which the imagination could thrive.

Liz Waterhouse: Do you think young people today see dance differently than you do?

Christine Kono: Of course, because they have much more exposure to dance and social media than we did in my generation. There are many more ways to dance. But I feel that they are all very, very physical. These new ways require a very young and athletic body, which is amazing and wonderful to watch. But is that the reason to dance? I mean, it's wonderful, but what happens when you can no longer do that? Do you have something to *say* through movement? Unfortunately, it's often the case that we start to learn through *injury*. Sometimes this injury gives you another path that may be even more interesting for other people to experience. What worked before no longer works: This makes you creative. It's like we have to lose the technique in order to find the dance, right? You have to let it go. Some of these amazing techniques don't allow the dancer and the public to experience *deviation*. Everything works! Deviation means experiencing something that works differently. It's not a mistake. It's a possibility to experience and think differently.

Older dancers have inspired me. Besides Galina Ulanova, dancing when she was almost fifty, there was also the Butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno. Now if you see him on video—it's nothing. I took classes with him in Yokohama. The last time I was in Japan, Kazuo Ohno was ninety-three. His son was teaching the class. Kazuo was on the chair sleeping. Yoshito, his son said to him, "Come, Papa! Get up! Dance! Dance!" We were given volleyballs and told to imagine what this could be, to carry the ball right in front of the hara and to walk as *slowly* as we can to the back.⁴⁰ Kazuo Ohno got up and he went past us—he went through us randomly. He was like light and inspiration, and he made this whole thing—he gave a sense to what we were doing—through his movement. Now, whenever I go to the theater, and it's not working, I think: Kazuo would know what to do! He would know how to appear and what to do in order to give it sense . . . in the *simplest* way. That's an example of what a great dancer he was.

This is for me like creating a good society: giving it sense. This is what this language of dance can do. Of course, when you're young, you should be athletic and experience wonders with your body and try things out. But it's so wonderful too when a dance gives everyone something essential to experience—where everyone senses their bodies in space—where the observer is *invited* to participate, and everything makes sense—it is what you call flow, right? It *happens*. I haven't witnessed this for a very long time: this flow where everything makes sense. Where you go: "Yeah, that's it." The moment, everyone in the space, everyone outside of the space, all make sense. This is what dance can do! This is what I wish would happen again, for me. I don't know if I'm not observant enough, or I don't watch enough. Well after The Forsythe Company, what also brought this sense was seeing some of the installations of Bill Viola. They moved me in that way. It doesn't have to be dance. Its why human beings are special. They're capable of creating something like William Forsythe's *Heterotopia* (2006).

It's maybe like when you watch a Noh master turn the corner. You don't know how he does it. It is so hidden. He doesn't show the technique. He creates an effect. That is not the purpose of Noh. The performers are usually trying to create great heroes or gods (laughs). In any case, there has to be magic.

Liz Waterhouse: With you, Christine, there is more than meets the eye! Thank you for these conversations.

40 The hara is the center of ki energy located below the belly button.

Dancing *Wabi-Sabi*

A few months after our biographical conversations, Kono and I meet in Paris to improvise together with an important collaborator and body in our past: Dimitrios Kraniotis. Almost ten years previously, we had made the performance *Aporia* (2014) at the Athens School of Visual Art, for which we had developed a common movement vocabulary and process for rehearsing and performing improvisation. This extended performance of two to three hours began with movement solos that focused on sensing and freeing the spine, and then extended into the unknown—wherever that evening took us.

For our reunion in 2023, Kraniotis again generously hosted our daily warmup and movement research in his home, providing lessons for us with his precious machines made by his teacher Jerome Andrews, after the constructions of Joseph Pilates.⁴¹ On two afternoons, we improvised in a rented dance studio in the center of the Marais district of Paris. During these domestic and aesthetic exchanges, aspects of our body-biographies were further substantiated and materialized in oral and nonverbal forms. Here I narrate vignettes from these encounters, theoretically linking them to themes from our interviews and concepts outlined in Kono's typed notes on her movement research that she kindly shared with me.⁴²

Kono and I are both perceptive of the daily changes and long-term malleability of our aging dancing bodies—changes accumulate and also prompt further change. Kono tells me, “We are full of handicaps, when a dancer is over forty. We bring out the handicaps into the work. We feel around them.”⁴³ Kono's feet and hands appear seasoned and sensitive. While dancing, her hands articulate her ideas. Kono describes this as a “German hand practice,” linked for her to Kurt Jooss and especially Pina Bausch. Raising her arm to demonstrate, she explains this as knowing the feeling of communicating through the energy of the palm of the hand, versus the energy of moving from the back of the hand. She then uses her whole body, improvising some arm material in memory of Pina Bausch, showing further refinement of energies linked delicately to specific fingers and planes of hand motion.

Kono's feet are also sensitive. They are small but broad: her big toe and little toe are oblique, with large bunions. Kono reminds me, as I examine her feet, that her right foot was broken during a ballet accident. Recently, her osteopath said to her that the tibia bone in her lower leg is too mobile. Indeed, the bones in her lower left

41 For Andrews' biography, see footnote 38.

42 Kono, “Themes and Tasks 2016.”

43 All citations in this section, unless otherwise attributed to different sources, are based on my fieldwork notes from January 9 to 14, 2023.

leg felt very soft and pliant when I gently pressed down on them, revealing a loose ankle and a lower leg much more pliant than my own bony shins.

As we warm up together, each of us attunes to her own body, while reacting to one another's movement and chatting informally. When Kono saw me move into a bridge (a yogic pose) she affirms that it's "good" that I practice that.⁴⁴ She reminds me that her hamstrings—the thick strands of muscles running down the back of her upper legs—do not engage like they used to when she was younger. Kono sits on her mat in a kneeling position, explaining that she is "taking it easy." Turning in her legs and reclining backwards, she stretches the ligaments and muscles of her legs and hips. Watching her, I know this is a sitting position that I cannot perform comfortably, without feeling pain through my knees. She reminds me and Kraniotis: "She is turned in." She adds, "This is part of her Japanese heritage."

In addition to cultural heritage, dance training and professional injuries, Kono's body is also shaped by her personal health history. Kono has had cancer twice on the left side of her body, treated successfully both times by the Institut Curie in Paris. First was breast cancer in her left breast, which required removal of some of the breast tissue and lymph nodes, followed by radiation treatment. Then on the left side again, she had cancer in her large intestine, requiring surgery to remove some of the intestine and heavy chemotherapy. These operations have changed the tissue of her body—the scarring adding counterrotations on the left side, modifying Kono's feeling of asymmetry. At the time of our interview, she still has the chemotherapy port inserted in her arm and neck, which irritates her when she lifts her arm. This is part of the reason why, as she moves, she is careful to explore movements under the shoulder level, or only lift one arm—her right—to explore higher regions and diagonals in space. These are examples of feeling around handicaps and readjusting habits that Kono has spoken of.

We can draw this together with a principle that Kono quotes from Japanese aesthetics: *wabi-sabi*. Kono describes *wabi-sabi* as the beauty of asymmetry and imperfection. For example, she and Kraniotis have developed movement exercises more asymmetric than the symmetric ones passed down (from Pilates to Andrews to Kraniotis). Kono recognizes the value of asymmetry, contrary to the Western norms of developing bodily bilateral symmetry and perfection, which are especially prevalent in ballet aesthetics. As a result of my scoliosis, my body is visibly and palpably asymmetric. My ballet training taught me to see that as a flaw. Around Kono, these imperfections feel less like defects to be corrected. I can focus instead on imagination, expression, and feeling. I find myself moving with greater awareness of my physical structure and my potential to communicate through it.

44 For those unfamiliar with a bridge pose: this exercise begins in a position lying down with the knees bent. Pushing into the feet, one lifts the hips upwards from the floor creating a shape like a bridge.

Kono reminds me during our movement exchange that she feels lucky to be alive and dancing again at her “old” age. She adds that her doctor told her she is lucky. Cancer has taken her to a place close to death that many people do not come back from. In 2023 her dances are no longer about recreating her past dancer self: repeating movements or ways of being with a real or imagined audience. They are instead more existential. Kono raises the question: “Perhaps I cannot dance anymore?” If so, she is not embarrassed. There is always something to be curious about—some bodily communication to explore. Returning to dancing now during her remission, she is interested to keep the body quality that she has found since the operation and recovery: A keystone of her practice is transience and impermanence. She believes that “Change is an inherent part of dance.”⁴⁵

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After arriving at the dance studio in central Paris, we change into our practice clothes. Since I’ve known her, Kono’s dance clothes are typically dark colored—navy and black—and made of soft fabrics: such as a long-sleeved cotton shirt, light cotton pants or loose shorts worn over tights, black ballet slippers and over these black cotton socks. She has curated the music for our improvisation session on her computer, with playlists that include samples from John Cage, traditional Japanese music, Bob Dylan, and Western chamber music.

Our working process, honed a decade ago, is that we begin by improvising alone, taking turns and offering solos. We allow these introductory movement ideas to evolve further into duets, solos, or even a trio. The order of our improvised dancing is not predetermined. Usually after an hour we sit down to discuss what we observed when others danced and what we experienced while dancing, before repeating the process for another cycle of dances. All of us keep notes where we track “themes” to motivate improvisations. It is often enriching to guess what themes the others were performing. Creating a common movement language, physically and verbally, our research is based on sensitive listening and response, not mimicry. What I offer will elicit a response in somebody else, and it is my responsibility to give and to receive.

I also take notes for the purpose of writing about Kono’s dancing, to further reflect on its relationship to our body-biography dialogues. I document both how she dances and what her dancing evokes in me. Kono begins one improvisation by dancing with her back to her two spectators, myself and Kraniotis. She appeared to commence movement by shifting internally, moving her spine, and articulating gestures of her arms and her feet. I observed her develop this presence by walking further away from us, and enlarging the explorative motions of her arms. Her

45 Kono, “Themes and Tasks 2016,” 1.

gestures create arcs and angles, also adding rhythm to the space. Her hands showed to me her sensitivity: It appeared that she sensed precisely how her hands curled or uncurled, the fingers flexing and unflexing lightly. On this day, some of Kono's gestures reminded me of cupids—slightly cute figures in flight. At other moments, when Kono looked down or pursed her lips in concentration, I perceived her in reflection—thinking in motion.

Kono's improvisations are a present-past: merging together elements of her understanding of dance and of the body, practiced over time. Her dance experience shows not only in her skilled balance, but also in the ways that she is able to fold her limbs pliantly to transition between levels. In the studio, she put one knee down onto the floor and descended easily from standing into sitting. Also, in reverse, she used a hand to assist her rising from sitting into standing. These weight transitions of her light body were made carefully and pragmatically—showing years of practice—teaching her how to economically rise from the floor and fall again. Reminding me of the suppleness of a child, at one point she bent down to the floor with her legs in front of her—at another instance into a little ball, with her knees bent. As I age, such movements become increasingly difficult, but I see in them my learned skill as a dancer, to adapt my body wisely. I wonder what my dancing will be like when I am in my seventies like Kono.

Part of our shared improvisation practice, honed during our work together for *Aporia*, is a manner of listening in to the body's present reality. In her notes, Kono described this process as follows:

One small change can change completely one's presence.
 Change the focus during the movement.
 Change the form during the movement.
 Change the expected/anticipated path during the movement.
 Have unusual associations of body parts: for example, have five spines . . .
 Your limbs are also spines.
 The movements are colors, lights or sounds. For example: Different parts of the body are different instruments which together form an orchestra.⁴⁶

This attention to impermanence and strangeness, to subtlety and imagination, brings a distinct quality into her practice.

One of her themes for improvisation during our studio session was: "When? And how?" Kono responded with consideration to our dancing, with timings slow and surprising. Her gestures were unadorned—minimalist and pensive. I tried to capture these qualities of her dance in my notebook, jotting down: "Christine moves slowly, like a plant orienting itself towards the light, without using too much of

46 Kono, 1.

a dance vocabulary borrowed from any one style. She slides her feet on the floor, then steps, pivots, or uses a heel or a toe to reach the leg around. Most of her steps are in parallel. Sometimes they open into turned-out or turned-in positions, showing certitude and humble grace. She knows the floor and never stumbles. The purpose, I believe, is physical curiosity: exploring, transforming her place in the room, sometimes her level, and also the vantage point from which she sees or is seen. Her dance is not driven by a desire to impress others with physical virtuosity. Rather, it is the quality of her presence stepping and sensing the room that seems important." Focusing on taking notes while she dances, I am also aware that the dancing presence Kono creates through her body challenges and resists my efforts to describe her bodily form and presence.

Kono creates rhythm as she dances. She does not mimic the music. Instead, she moves in and out of relation to the music or even ignores it. She moves in a manner that is unhurried and without strain. Her actions are punctuated with pauses. At one moment, Kono lightly interrupts her motion—suspending time by holding a position—before carrying on again in her original tempo. She also creates contrasts: an audible slap on her body or the floor, or a swinging arm that suddenly changes her direction, propelling her to the other side. Overall, her body quality is patient and explorative. Decisive but also hesitant, in that there is no "right" or "wrong" way. She has described her work as follows: "The form of the body is secondary: Ideally the body disappears."⁴⁷

Kono's dancing plays with scale and time. She varies the size of her gestures to become smaller. She takes long pauses and then speeds up. Her eyes look out into the room. Her steps take her onto *relevé*—onto the balls of her feet. She takes a few steps there, up high, before pivoting and continuing to vary the position of her upper arms, letting her fingers trail. Sometimes she appears to be imagining something else, other than what she is doing—to be both inside and outside her movement. She might be thinking: "Notice how the energy of the inner space of the body resonates in space."⁴⁸

Playing with the barre at the edge of the studio, she comes again onto *relevé* and then hits the bar loudly, making an accent and surprising me with her spontaneity. Though she is not theatrical in her face, this little moment is humorous to me—not entertaining *per se*, but delightfully strange. It deviates from what comes before. Kono continues her dance, appearing connected to her whole body and using it, she explains afterwards, like playing music. She tells me: "The dancers' body is like a musical instrument." As she learned through violin lessons as a young girl: "You learn to take care of your body. Your body is precious." In this dance, she was exploring the

47 Kono, 5.

48 Kono, 5.

technique and range of her instrument. She does not quite know what the resonance will be.

Kono remarks that almost all the themes that we work with in improvisation are good for life too: exploring the opposite, going inside (introversion) and outside (extroversion), living with imperfections (*wabi-sabi*). Another improvisation theme is “take it easy.” This too is a major life theme and a Californian cultural adage. She mentions that she is researching how to use her body in a way that never strains it. “If something hurts, well, relax. Take it easy. Find out: Is there another way?”

Kono’s movement research is developed consciously in conjunction with qualities of being oneself and the ethics of treating others. In her teaching notes, she suggests that the dancer “create atmospheres which give the sense of humility, generosity, gratitude, vulnerability (openness and willingness to risk), transparency, alertness, surprise, simplicity and complexity, honesty, *Gelassenheit* [serenity].”⁴⁹ As the three of us dance, we are appreciating, listening and responding. Kono and Kraniotis often phrase their ideas for improvisation in the form of puzzling koans, or Zen riddles. They examine and include oppositional forces. Kono also emphasizes that when you find a theme, you shouldn’t be afraid to lose it: one should not hold on to it too long. Kono lists examples in her teaching notes, such as: “fast/slow, tension/release, form/formless, obvious/unobvious, appear/disappear, inside/outside, up/down, front/back, small/big, quiet/loud/silent, linked/fragmented, close/far.”⁵⁰ Rather than seeking beauty, a spirit of the unknown, unexpected, unidentified, and unrecognizable is sought.

Again, I return to thinking about *wabi-sabi*. “*Wabi-sabi* is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional.”⁵¹ Kono’s imaginative and transformative sense of the body and dance, as a medium of human inquiry and communication, not a material for aesthetic perfection, has impacted me significantly: re-educating my ballet beliefs and aesthetic sensibilities.

The imperfect can be beautiful. Differences between people can also be moving. Perhaps I am attracted towards dancing with Kono precisely because of our differences? We don’t look alike, or move alike, even when we do the same movements. I could never imitate “Christine” convincingly—but she inspires me. When I am around her, I feel a desire to move *with* her. When I am beside Kono, dancing nearby, I feel a force come into my body. I empathize with her movements. Just walking beside her, I gain energy. Despite her calm nature, her general walking tempo is faster than mine. Our relationship is part of our movement journey. Kono

49 Kono, 5–6.

50 Kono, 2.

51 Koren, *Wabi-Sabi*, 7.

reminds me to imagine, to transform, to be more than my body's material. She inspired me to let go of the Western ideology of perfection—so strongly fostered in my childhood and ballet education—furthermore, to change my mind and to deviate from plans. Living with imperfections, the aging body of the dancer stays curious: asking how experience can lead to something puzzling and mysterious that activates communication through the body and language. A human dialogue, beyond the physical.