

Interlude: Autobiographical Gestures

Figure 1: Holding a photo of myself. The headband suggests that I am growing out my bangs, around the age of seven, circa 1986. Location is the swing set of Albany Academy for Girls in upstate New York. I am wearing my school uniform for gym class.



Photographer unknown. Part of my parents' collection of photos.

December 31, 2024. I am writing from an apartment in the Piedmont region of Italy, a short train ride away from my primary residence in Bern, Switzerland. My four-year research grant at the Institute of Theatre Studies at the University of Bern has recently finished. While applying for teaching positions, I anticipate itinerant projects as a freelance dance artist: teaching, dramaturgy, production assistance, and perhaps even performing again. This morning, I drafted a short statement for an artist residency before revising my notes for this autobiographical chapter. In a few weeks I will celebrate my forty-sixth birthday. Other facts: I am in a long-term partnership, unmarried and without children. I am perceived by others who do not know me well (i.e. at “face value”) as younger than I am. I welcome my white hairs: finally, visible evidence for others of the time and authority I’ve developed in *this* everchanging body, making *these* interdependent selves.

My aging body helps others to recognize me—as continuously there but also changing. I perceive these changes as a sign of vitality and mortality. They coincide with a wide range of emotions: sadness, joy, anxiety, fear, laughter. Thankfully, my senses are sharp. My stature is short and sturdy. I have movement-vision: I can sense a slinking cat in my peripheral gaze or locate a moving satellite in the night sky in just seconds. My feet and toes are deft. My skin elastic. My muscles are not toned like they were in my youth, but they still pump well enough to keep me going here and there as desired. My mind is plastic. My memory, regretfully, is becoming slower and rusty. I search for words or slide them into wrong grammatical places—justifying that my difficulties stem from switching frequently between English and German. With my dancing body, I find joy among other dancers and, in particular, passing on dance to younger professionals. I continue to style and make my body through my interactions. My movement changes depending on where I am and who is watching—my body adjusts to the terrain, in time, to others, and is supported in locomoting by my comfortable shoes and clothes. I am patterned from this doing, repeating, and creating; resisting and changing requires energy, but so does all the dancerly upkeep of listening, practicing, and sweating.

I was raised in a lusciously green region of upstate New York. I departed the United States to move to Frankfurt, Germany, in 2004; I moved to Dresden in 2012 and to Bern, Switzerland, in 2013. Through my family heritage, I have two passports that legalize my citizenship and mobility. If I were to narrate my life as an adventure tale, my quest has been for freedom: the intellectual freedom of lifelong learning as a scientist and the embodied freedom of a dancer. I discovered dancing very young, as the subsequent narrative will recount. Ballet was my first love, and like many love stories, this one was riddled with misunderstanding, disappointment, and a surprising resolution. My life stories are interwoven with dilemmas regarding the pressures of social norms. For example, it has not been easy for me to define myself as *one* coherent, developing person and personality, given the plurality of contradictions and desires within me. My life stories share how these constructions

of the self are imparted through participation in various communities. I focus in this Chapter on tensions between dance worlds and other positions that I have inhabited in my professional identity. I strive to tell you truthfully about my body and myself, the confluence and divergence of the two. Sharing this body-biography book with four other protagonists, my commentary here must be brief, and therefore very selective. I preserve the privacy of my family life, my romantic partnerships, my sexuality, and many other intimacies. To show the importance of others in my life stories, the body-biographies that follow and the acknowledgements section illustrate the interdependency and generosity with which others have made me who I am.

This life story collection is one among many. I have typed multiple drafts in the last two years, as an exercise to explore embodied life-writing through self-reflexive life review. These different versions of my life stories convinced me how strongly these narratives can shift and change. I struggled to articulate my life stories from my position as a writer in “middle age,” a phase of life whose nature the philosopher Christopher Hamilton has described as “to resist articulation and clarification.”¹ Moreover, my narrative mood was frequently dark, marked by crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, rising authoritarianism, and a general sense that the digital age has propelled us into an epoch of alienation, insecurity, and terror. Dear reader, be forewarned: I am nostalgic towards the dancing of my youth. This project of body-biography made by conducting life review with four of my dance teachers sometimes burns with my wish to turn back the clocks—not to be younger and to suffer again the growing pains of self-confusion in coming to maturity, but to again taste the freedom that I associated with my youth, discovering dancing and thereby becoming my plural and changing self.

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I was born in Albany, New York, in 1979. Dance came into my life early, at the young age of two and a half. There are photos of me from this time, wearing two pigtails and a gaping T-shirt over my tights and leotard, doing what appears to be a side chassé—but of course I cannot remember exactly what gestures I made, nor what dancing felt like. The remaining photographs and my parents' stories are my best clues about this period of my life. These photos, like the one at the start of this chapter (see Figure 1), portray a happy child amid family, teachers, and friends—often wearing a bathing suit or a costume—content blowing bubbles, playing in piles of leaves in the autumn, going to school, riding a bicycle on the weekend, and performing in dance recitals, dressed in frilly pastel tutus.

1 Hamilton, *Middle Age*, 24.

At the age of two and a half, I begged my mother for ballet lessons. I insisted with such fervor that she first bargained with me and then acquiesced, searching for a teacher who would take a very young tot. I have a memory of seeing a ballerina on television at a very young age—being mesmerized by the textured swirling of a long blue tulle costume. I can also recall watching a homemade VHS recording off a public broadcast on television of the Royal Ballet dancing *La fille mal gardée* (1981).² I remember being confused by the manner in which this ballet enacted storytelling, without words and involving a man wearing a dress playing a woman. I was delighted by the dancing, and fascinated by how a large ensemble could dance together in formations on a stage. I watched the tape repeatedly.

My first dance school was JoAnn's Academy of Dance, a privately owned studio that had classes in ballet, tap, and jazz.³ Unfortunately, I cannot recall any bodily sensations or other memories from my earliest years of dancing. I remember only how the room looked and felt: including the large squares of the hard grey linoleum floor and some of the dance memorabilia on the walls, including a headshot of Mikhail Baryshnikov. I can recall this in a manner that I believe is filtered by the cultural circuit of memories of women dancing in the early eighties: the sexiness of high-cut leotards framing the hips, the smell of hairspray, and the convoluted saucy feminism of aerobics. I remember encountering older girls who presented themselves with these fashion markers of femininity, and wondering what it would feel like as I too grew up into a young woman. My first memory I have of the *feeling* of dancing is from the age of five or six. Alone in our basement, I invented movements to the vibrations of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* spinning on the record player. Jumping off the brown plaid sofa, I danced with abandon to the *Overture*, making up the dance as I went along. I was thrilled by the richly orchestrated sound of the music, which I remember playing really loud. The musical world of sound was a power that riveted me—still rivets me—and sustains my closest relationships today.

My life in dance reflects inclinations—towards movement, music, and play—that all appeared early. But becoming a dancer required considerable resources and consistent practice, all of which was dependent on my parents' dispensable income and regular commitment to driving me to dance lessons. The dance I encountered also reflects that my family was White, living with middle-class means at a suburban crossroads. Our home was three hours' drive north of New York City, about 240 kilometers, and an hour by road from Saratoga Springs; this placed me within a network of connections around the vibrant dance center of

2 A film of the Royal Ballet from 1981. Choreography by Frederick Ashton, with Leslie Collier and Michael Coleman.

3 Directed by Jo Ann Tibbitts.

New York.⁴ The Saratoga Springs outdoor performing arts center is the summer home of the New York City Ballet and the Philadelphia Orchestra. It smelled like pine and gardenias in the summer, and my parents took me to watch magical performances.

Before the age of twelve, I explored many forms of the performing arts—ballet, pointe (starting at ten), tap dance, musical theater, acting, piano, singing, jazz dance, and ballroom dancing. From these lessons and little shows, I imbibed a sense of musicality with its roots in Western ballet music and American Broadway tunes. As an only child, I loved performing with other youngsters. A highlight of my childhood was the shows that I appeared in as a child actress with the New York State Theater Institute. This community, involving adult actors and a couple of children rehearsing and performing together, enveloped me in warmth—imparting a feeling of belonging, collective risk, and shared achievement. I sensed for the first time what a big stage feels like as you dance or sing alone as the central focus of attention—how the audience perceives you, while you perceive them—the quiet of the audience concentrating on you. As an only child, I appreciated the extended family structure of the theater. I was delighted by how sets and costumes could transform the stage into an entirely new and fantastical world.

The world of theater was, like other elements of adulthood, mysterious to me. One aspect that remains vivid in my memories was the stressful auditions. By competing for roles as a young child, I experienced the vulnerability of self-presentation, evaluation, and rejection. I began to strategize to get the parts I wanted: putting on a certain outfit, preparing for a role with voice lessons, and learning to look at the jury with my eyes and act like the part I wanted. As I aged, I acquired the ability to perceive expertise, assessing which performers were better and which were worse. I felt and learned how actors were “typecast” based on gender, age, race, and appearance. Thankfully, this is before the social media that young people are dependent upon today; while my self-presentation was intensively evaluated a few times a year, I did not feel this perpetually. Thankfully, I had safe childhood spaces where I was freer to play, with neighbors and my school mates.

Around the age of twelve, I asked my parents to let me focus on ballet more seriously, by attending a different local school and receiving more lessons. I was excited by annual performances of *The Nutcracker* and my new one-piece pink leotard with an attached skirt, a luxury item that had been a birthday present. After JoAnn’s Academy, my parents enrolled me in ballet classes in the Cecchetti method at a more professional ballet school in Albany. The summers when I was eleven and twelve, I also participated in a ballet program in Saratoga with the then recently retired New

4 Our home was also an hour east of Jacob’s Pillow, a pivotal festival in the history of American modern dance, but I did not visit “the Pillow” until I was an adult, to see a performance of *Love* from choreographer Sharon Eyal.

York City Ballet soloist David Otto (see Figure 2). Part of the program include passes to attend the entire summer season of the New York City Ballet at SPAC, giving me an insight at a young age into Balanchine repertoire and the technical level of world-class ballet dancers. This education into ballet expertise and training practice would pivotally shape my emotions, beliefs, and body, in short my *habitus*.

In the fall of 1990, I followed Otto to join his newly opened Albany Dance Institute, which was above a garage and had two studios. I was transfixed by the advanced structure and kinesthetic sensations of Balanchine ballet technique and its progression within and for my body. There was something exceptionally empowering about learning physical skills and performing them to music. My teacher “David” was youthful and charismatic.⁵ Not only could he embody these forms, having only recently retired, he was excited by the opportunity to try his hand choreographing ballets for our student performances.

In discussion between classes and rehearsals, Otto was plainly honest about both the positive and negative sides of a dance career. The positive side, of course, being the magical feeling of dancing ballet and the expressive registers of using your body to feel and communicate; the negative sides included that the career was short and could be crippling for the body. With so many young women interested in dancing ballet, the competition to garner a place in an elite company was extreme. Understanding the importance of female mentors for his predominantly female students, Otto also hired his colleague from the New York City Ballet, Leslie Roy, to teach us pointe classes, and his wife, jazz dancer Christine Miller Otto, to teach us jazz and intermediate ballet. I enrolled in two ballet classes a day, taking both the intermediate and the advanced classes, and took part in rehearsals for the Capital Ballet Company on the weekend. Those long days at school, followed by ballet classes at night, a home-cooked meal, and then homework, are very happy memories of growing up.

5 David Otto, born 1960, is from a family of dancers with five siblings in the field. His mother, Leslie Otto, trained at the School of American Ballet and started the Eastchester School of Ballet and Ballet Atlantic. See Ames, “About Westchester: Ballet Fever.”

Figure 2: Dancing in the center, on a makeshift dance studio on a basketball court. On the back of the photo is written "Age 12. David Otto's Summer Dance Program."



The photographer is unknown.

Otto taught us what he knew and found important about ballet and life: crossing the existing gender conventions of ballet pedagogy to teach his young female students how to jump and turn (as is needed in the male dance repertoire). I was a “natural turner” and a “good jumper.” Turning one, two, three, four . . . five . . . six, sometimes even more pirouettes! These sensations of moving I remember much more vividly than the bodily pain and tiredness reported in my ballet notebooks. Beside the scrupulous writing down of corrections, these notes also chronicle my growing obsession with the ideal female ballet body. These notes begin during the summer schools that I attended at the School of America Ballet (SAB), the gateway school for the New York City Ballet. While Otto’s teaching was generally constructive to building my confidence as a teenager, the teaching at SAB was driven by very elite ideals of female beauty and pleasing aesthetic line, around which there was a steady stream of young girls competing for attention.

I remember thinking that the competition was more body- than talent-driven, which in hindsight might have to do with how ballet teachers seek malleable bodies to enter the field. For the first part of the one-hour auditions for SAB in New York City, our appearance and joints were assed optically and manually by two women (a director and her secretary). They asked us to point each foot to the side in tendu, to check the articulation of our feet. The director then lifted our legs with her hands to feel the flexibility of our hip joints, to the front, side and back. Next, we were given a short ballet barre and a few center exercises. Because my body was not “perfect” for

ballet—my feet were “pretty” but my legs were not long, nor was my extension very flexible—I was very nervous for these assessments. My heart would beat quickly, and my palms would sweat. I spent extensive time choosing the leotard to wear that could best flatter my body. To my relief, I was accepted for three summers. Each year I rose in level and received different teachers. I wish I could review these ballet auditions and classes again with my eyes today, to know if my harsh feelings towards this institution, marking the end of my childhood, are justified. I wish a comparative ethnographer had conducted interviews or observed these sessions to give a richer interpretation of how power influences the development of young dance artists—of children’s dancing bodies.

On the one hand, I observed that my progress at the school was rapid. The refined exercises, corrections, and the other dancers’ mastery all synergized my learning. My quality of movement improved as well as my musicality. My muscles changed shape, and I appeared leaner. Boys and girls were separated for all but *pas de deux* class, and gossip and social interaction were also significant. Emulating George Balanchine’s preference for thinness, girls at SAB learned to “diet” to maintain the ballerina body; many were also pushing through pain and injury to stretch their bodies and keep their good standing in class. Other girls suggested that I start dieting, for example eating only salads and fruits, so that my body would appear longer and more aesthetically pleasing. I come from an Italian American family, with a mother who insisted that I eat home-cooked meals each night with my family at dinner. But encouraged by other students around me I started skipping breakfast or lunch—eating just a yogurt or a grapefruit and a few bites of sandwich. Instead of eating enough to dance and grow, my personality and energy started to fade. My parents sought me a therapist, who helped me to reflect on the costs of this competitive world on my bodily health, emotional well-being, and social relationships.

It is at this point, in the tumult of puberty and with the challenges of being malnourished, where my memories become very occluded. Journal entries list my thoughts and experiences that I can no longer remember. There are some positive memories: the radiant warmth of ballet classes with Violette Verdi, the mysterious corrections of Stanley Williams that I still teach today, and the fun-moving choreographies by David Otto. But I will fade out here, leaving a gap or silence around events that I can no longer recall.

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One of the main discontinuities in my autobiography is this phase that I cannot remember and narrate well, which is a mix of growing pains and culturally relevant ways that our bodies and selves are constituted by the situations, interactions,

aesthetic and social performances we place them in. Therapy, interestingly, would foreshadow my later work as a dance ethnographer by introducing a distant “other” into my field—my therapist who did not ascribe to ballet values. She helped me to learn, as a young person, how values can be chosen and experiences used to enact change, to live a fulfilling life. The social order and intensity of the ballet world at SAB had diminished my sense of agency—to the point of physical weakness. Unfortunately, it may have been the purpose of such orders of power—thinking with Foucault—to create docile bodies: an army of women for the optical field of the corps de ballet.⁶ Ballet can also be practiced as a form of empowerment or resistance, I would see this later in queer performance by Ballez and Ballets Trockadero—but as a child, I was quickly derailed by the force of its practices of bodily objectification. My parents breathed a collective sigh of relief when I told them that I wanted to take some time off from dancing to focus on my life as a high school student.

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I prefer to leave these discontinuities as part of my life story, rather than to erase them entirely. They mark the ongoing nature of life review and the complexity of major life transitions.

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Two years later, I am a freshman at Harvard University, living in one of the newer brick-buildings in Harvard Yard and struggling through problem sets in Physics 16, the toughest introductory course. I will earn my degree in physics four years later. Narrating my anecdotes from my time in the natural sciences usually requires extra justification: Interlocutors will be confused, intrigued, or beguiled, exactly as Charlotte Linde predicts for atypical professional trajectories.⁷ To take one example, if a host introduces any disbelief when they read my biography before a conference or group of artists, the audience will laugh; it’s happened on multiple occasions. The reason is that dance and physics are both exoticized professions perceived as lying at opposite ends of multiple dualities: dualisms of body and mind, irrational and rational, and stereotypes of female and male competences. These dualisms have shaped my experience of these practices. Yet, I prefer to conceive of them as different logics of practice—communities with alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting.⁸ Their contrasts were important to my exploration of the world and

6 See Liu, “Mind and Body,” 36.

7 Linde, *Life Stories*, 5–11.

8 I take this term from Pierre Bourdieu. See Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 89.

even my balance as a person. Moreover, their discontinuities became part of my longer life story arc, as a dancer and dance scholar.

My passion for the sciences manifested differently than my attachment to the performing arts and the accompanying sense of community. This coincided with my starting to understand myself as part of a larger world: a biological one and a natural world with its own language (mathematics) and order. My interest was certainly influenced by my mother's passion, as a biology teacher, and the support also of my own schooling. I went to an all-girls' school, which meant that between my education and dancing, my world was largely defined by female teachers and students. Theater had been a positive exception to this, as were my lessons with "David." There are photos of me from this time next to my science fair projects, "Senses and the Sexes," and "The Effects of Gravitation on Human Balance." I found the strategizing and creativity of science fascinating, and I think also a sort of performance—using certain discourses to explain my ideas and become recognized. In contrast to ballet, in science my appearance and body were supposedly unimportant—though being a "girl" still marked me as an other in the male-dominated natural sciences.

Around the time that I stopped dancing, I applied for a scholarship to attend "Space Camp," attracted by the romantic idea of becoming an astronaut. I did not get the award, but was encouraged to apply for a second scholarship, for the Astronomy Camp at Steward Observatory in Tucson. Gifted with this opportunity, in this "coming of age" moment, I took my first flight alone to a city in a new landscape: landing in the heat of Tucson and busing with the campers through the desert up Mount Lemmon to the telescope site we would inhabit for the week. This camp introduced me to a very different culture of work. Astronomy was a romantic science that impressed us young people with the "wonders" and "beauty" of the universe. The camp director, Don McCarthy, took an active interest in mentoring young students and was extremely generous with his support for me. I received help in networking, academic advice, and emotional support. McCarthy even reached out regularly to dialogue with my parents, giving them perspective on a career that was outside their familiar world. McCarthy also gave me my first assignment as a writer, for *Mercury* magazine. Having a mentor like this was seminal to my path. McCarthy was also a runner, I remember, and took an interest in my dance background.

The liberal arts education I received at Harvard catered to my breath of academic and artistic interests: I was required to take eight courses across disciplines as well as a mandatory academic writing course. My physics education, shaped by the vision of Professor Howard Georgi, emphasized collaborative learning on problem sets and took place in an atmosphere supportive of the participation of women and minorities. Harvard students in physics had a reputation for testing poorly afterwards on standardized tests, but we were supported in learning analytic problem-solving skills and working in teams, something I believe Georgi saw as preparation for cross-disciplinary innovation. Already at this time, Georgi and other

institutions at Harvard actively supported women in STEM fields, and I recall the change of policy in the 1997–1998 school year, the first in which Harvard admitted an equal number of male and female physics graduate student candidates. Prior to this, I was one of the few women studying in the physics library. The department also had few female physics professors (my memory was there were only two, my fabulous advisor Melissa Franklin and Lene Hau). I partnered up with another female student, and we worked together in study groups to get through problem set after problem set: solving them through teamwork until the wee hours of the morning.

My interest in becoming an astrophysicist flickered as I discovered the professional reality of academic research practices. Long hours writing at a desk and especially programming code at a computer hurt my body intensely. In a development that was not infrequent among STEM students at Harvard, I developed Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) in both hands from extensive typing during computer science courses. The pain was worse than I remembered from dancing, though I was able to manage it enough to complete my studies by reducing my typing and doing physical therapy.

At Harvard and within the local area of Cambridge, Massachusetts, I avidly explored new dance styles and discovered the pleasure of participating in this city's vital dance communities. I took ballet classes and created performances as part of a student-run ballet ensemble at Harvard University. During the first year of my studies, I met Boston-based choreographer and teacher Marcus Schulkind (interviewed in Part II of this book), and became a regular class-taker at Green Street Studios. It is Schulkind who ushered my transformation into a modern dancer. (My memory is that I invited Schulkind to watch a student performance during the second year of my studies, which in hindsight—I cringe with embarrassment on this aspect—was a “rock ballet” to the music of Pink Floyd, with terribly tacky lighting. Schulkind, who does not remember this event, told me days later I should come study modern dance with him. Perhaps he saw my potential as well as my ignorance of the diversity of dance aesthetics and choreographic projects at my fingertips?)

In Schulkind's expressive classes with live piano music, I felt something energetically stir in me—between me and others—in the room. His Graham-influenced modern classes followed a routine, and these exercises I can still remember today, despite having not performed them in over twenty-five years.

With graduation approaching, I sought advice from mentors in both physics and dance about the prospects of graduate school, or other related career choices. It was a very difficult decision for me. In this aspect of my life story, I can usually convince my interlocutors of coherence without actually telling the truth. The more involved story is highly personal, and I usually do not bother explaining the full version. I do so here as a means to explore writing an aspect of my life story that I normally have trouble performing in social interactions.

In the summer after my junior year of college, I had a fellowship at the University of California Berkeley in biophysics research. I took the position for my own career advancement, as well as to be closer to my boyfriend, who was a graduate student in physics at Stanford. Though my research on the challenges of genetic repeats for genome coding proved to be less interesting than I anticipated, I enjoyed the fun student atmosphere of Berkeley's campus, the smell of eucalyptus in the air, and the laid-back quality of student life.

On a hot afternoon over a month into my fellowship, I was at home alone in my sublet—an apartment east of the Berkeley campus that I shared with two other young women. We customarily left the front door open because of the heat, and I heard someone come in. I assumed it was my roommate. When I exited my room I discovered a stranger at the door—a young man, wearing casual clothes and sneakers. He asked to use my bathroom and then followed me into the apartment. He asked me for money. I knew within seconds that I was no longer safe.

This story is a narration of a traumatic memory—describing an event lasting only a few minutes, for which I was truly not prepared, that violated my sense of safety and security. This vulnerability is a very important aspect of embodied life stories that are difficult to articulate in social interactions. I have lost the memory of the intruder's face and clothes. This happened immediately, as I told the police officers directly afterwards, and the memory has not been regained. I reported that the man attacked me and that I fought back—for my life. I can remember some fragments of the choreography of our bodies fighting in the space of my bedroom. There was a part where I was throwing my brown leather wallet down on the floor and pleading with him to take it; in another moment we were on my bed, and he was trying to push me down and pull off my dress; I remember also being in the middle of the room and somehow toppling him over to the floor, before escaping out the side entrance. The mantra in my head during all of this was to “get out.” When I ran onto the street in my bare feet, I started yelling for help. A stranger came to my aid and helped me to phone the police. I had scratches and small bruises, but no lasting physical injuries.

I include this life story for its importance in highlighting bodily trauma and the existential dimensions of our body-biographies. Aside from with my family and closest partners, I have not practiced telling this story to others. I resist recounting it, because when I do, I feel like I am losing my breath; I feel my heart begin to race. As a writer, I am concerned with finding the right tone: not exaggerating to seem heroic, nor belittling my physical and psychological strength. Yet this event is a stinging turning point in my biography, explaining my transition back to dancing. Displaced by this event, I began commuting from my partner's home in Stanford—a

long two-hour journey each morning and evening. I lost focus upon my research. My supervisor empathetically understood and allowed me to slow down. Each evening, I sought out dancing: taking night classes in “Savage Jazz” with dance teacher Reginald Ray Savage in Oakland. Unfortunately, I cannot describe these few weeks of classes in much sensory detail, but I remember that they were physically demanding and in a new style; Savage had danced in the Katherine Dunham Dance Company before moving West to California. In his classes, he played jazz music, and I found solace in the challenge of encountering a new dance technique, very different from the modern and ballet that I was used to.

A few weeks after this event, I was sitting on a bus with another dancer, who told me that she wanted to attend graduate school for dance, perhaps at the University of Michigan or The Ohio State University. My life was floating in a lot of confusion for the remainder of my stay in Berkeley, but that physical and existential fight also changed my sense of self: I was a person who could fight alertly with my body when provoked. My body was both the object of others’ violence, and a tool for my own survival, curiosity, and empowerment.

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I returned to Harvard and sought out advice from mentors about what to do after graduation. With the provisional decision in mind that I could always return to physics if exploring dance yielded disappointment, I was fortuitously accepted into the three-year MFA program in dance practice at The Ohio State University (OSU). Within this close-knit community, in my class of ten master’s students, I explored the possibility of a career identity as a modern dancer. My studies introduced me to the distinctions between different genres of American dance—modern dance, release technique, Contact Improvisation, what today I would call “Black dance,” but then I believe I called “dances of the African diaspora.” I tried my first classes in yoga, bodywork, and somatic practice—all of which would later become passions. At that time they either made me feel embarrassed, due to the intimacy of someone else touching me, or challenged my patience, because of the slowness.

At OSU, my knowledge was developed to reflectively address dance practices culturally and historically, building further upon an introductory dance studies course I had taken at Harvard.⁹ In particular, our professors at OSU fostered critical

9 The course, titled “Embodied Expression/Expressive Body. Dance in Cultural Context,” was taught by Deborah D. Foster within the Folklore and Mythology department. The description reads: “An examination of the ways in which the dancing body internalizes and communicates cultural knowledge to both dancer and observer. By participating in dance workshops, watching dance performances (live and on film), and reading ethnographic and theoretical texts, we attempt to understand the emergent meaning of dance performances

reflection on the impact of postmodernism on American stage dance aesthetics and training practices; we also discussed diasporic dance fusions and the importance of decentering Western hegemonies—considering the impact of all of these on transmitting dance practices in higher education.¹⁰

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The event in my life story that is the most rehearsed narrative in my collection—reinforcing how central it remains to my identity—is the day that I met choreographer William Forsythe at OSU. That turning point, which redirected my life, is another surprisingly fragile moment; it almost did not happen. The week prior I had needed minor surgery, so I had taken a few days off from school to heal. I went into the studio not knowing much about Forsythe, nor whether I could participate safely. I was careful and danced mostly without using my right arm.¹¹

My memory of that day is of the busy room full of students. Forsythe gave us some proposals for improvisation, moving through imaginary geometries in space. It was new to me, though I already had experience and affinity as a dance improviser, and this sort of abstract visualization was very easy for me as a physicist.¹² Responding to Forsythe's proposals, I felt powerful, capable, and curious. It was a novel mind-in-body experience: I moved through space with intensity. I felt like the movement was moving *me*, faster than I could think—or perhaps a different sort of thinking? My friends remarked afterwards that they had never seen me dance quite like that before. In hindsight, I was very lucky to have been in the right place at the right time. After the class, Forsythe asked about my background and responded that my physics education probably helped; he could see it in how I moved. He suggested that I contact him and visit the company in Frankfurt. With some twists and detours along the way, that is what eventually happened.

This transition, which also brought with it significant setbacks and mental health challenges, is another aspect of my life story that I frequently simplify when

from multiple perspectives." See https://cscie12.dce.harvard.edu/cgi/courses/fe-courses.htm?department_code=FOLK, last accessed November 28, 2024.

10 Two of my professors at OSU, dancers and dance scholars Karen Eliot and Melanie Bales, are cited in this book for their enquiries on dance history and dance praxis. Eliot was the primary supervisor of my master's thesis. Professor Candace Feck also influenced my practice of dance writing significantly and was the second reader for my written work. Publications indicative of this discursive climate include: Bales and Eliot, *Dance on Its Own Terms: Histories and Methodologies*; Bales and Netti-Fiol, *The Body Eclectic*.

11 The surgery had been to remove a noncancerous lump in my right breast.

12 At Harvard, I had discovered improvisation in a choreography class with Elizabeth Bergmann. Improvisation opened a new door to self-examination and self-expression and would later become a cornerstone of my artistic practice.

I recount it to others—including a depressive year living in New York City, with a populace still terrified after 9/11, and a difficult apprenticeship with Shen Wei Dance Arts. Thankfully, I was persistent in emailing and calling Forsythe, and my professors at Ohio State supported me as I finished up my studies amidst all these twists and turns of professional development. Arriving in Frankfurt in 2004, I caught the tailwind of Ballett Frankfurt, participating in the final months of tours before the company closed.¹³ I was 25, full of dreams, and unprepared on many levels to be living in a foreign country. I was embedded in a new culture, a new language, and a new notion of choreography, while still embodying—in ballet—a mode of training with which I had determinedly parted company. I knew no one in Frankfurt and only one other dancer in Europe. My unfashionably wide dance pants, my practice of “floorwork,” my “downtown release” body, my scholarly and research background, were all foreign in that context. But the chance to further embody my physics education in a dancing body—to think of these pasts as scientist and dancer as coherent—was a promise that kept me returning to the studio.

As a dancer in The Forsythe Company, I reinvented myself, forging a new dancing identity within a constellation of fifteen dancers. Their bodies became seminal to mine, onstage and off. Their smells, their heights, the feeling of their individual textures of muscles, were aspects that I would learn intimately. Thankfully, the studio was a safe space with these artists. Forsythe was respectful and self-reflective, even though he challenged us relentlessly and pushed us to extremes. This rare combination of empathy and insistence made him a great artist, capable of motivating his team to pursue enormously intense and experimental ventures. The touring life and production schedule were extremely difficult. I was frequently injured—multiple ankle injuries and one injury to my left knee capsule that still limits my endurance today. The experience of this time of my life was so impactful (fascinating, yet confusing, untellable) that I searched for a productive means to reflect upon my (and the group's) knowledge and share it with a new public. This took the form of a dance studies dissertation, published ten years after I left the ensemble. This piece of writing, which became my first book as a dance scholar, is closely connected to this present inquiry on autobiography: From my perspective as a former Forsythe dancer, it explored ethnographic methodologies to articulate knowledge of dancers' practices and write polyvocal histories of performance practice.¹⁴

My memories of dancing in The Forsythe Company include few of actually performing on stage. Perhaps with the performer so alert and stressed in

13 The company closed in the summer of 2004, and Forsythe opened The Forsythe Company, working between Frankfurt and Dresden, in 2005.

14 The dissertation was turned into the book, *Processing Choreography: Thinking with William Forsythe's Duo* (2022). My supervisors were Christina Thurner and Priska Gisler.

performance there is little capacity for the body-mind to remember these individual experiences? Moreover, I was too tired at night to write fieldwork notes. I can remember better the moments before and after the performances, and our contexts and routines of rehearsing. I also recall details of the choreographic structure of pieces, the tasks and research focus in the different creations, and the sensual atmospheres of the rooms in which we worked. I remember exhaustion and muscle pain that grew with age. Because of that discomfort, I began to seek out somatic therapies. Reiki with the company physio helped me extensively. Regular osteopathy appointments also helped to repair my body from the previous night's battery.

Though there was a culturally prescribed notion that aging as a dancer should lead to a career transition at forty, many dancers in The Forsythe Company were over forty themselves, creating a field of intergenerational exchange. In my early thirties I began to consider a life transition. Most of all, the extensive pressure to perform fifty to sixty shows a year internationally was wearing me out. I could feel that the lifestyle was also eroding some of the intellectual and textual capacities I had sharpened in my youth, and I worried about my forthcoming career transition. I was excited by the prospect of trying out other modes of artistic work and working with other choreographers in a more horizontal manner. Lastly, uncertain if I wanted to have children, I was aware of my "biological clock" as a woman, and thought I should explore these options sooner rather than later.

Turning back time a little, an important influence on my practice as a dancer and my changing self-understanding as a Forsythe dancer was the artist Christine Kono (interviewed in Part II of this book), whom I met through her work as a guest ballet teacher for The Forsythe Company. Kono was first a ballet teacher, then a colleague and friend who fostered my imagination and creativity in new directions. In a kind of apprenticeship, I studied at length in her home, learning new approaches to sensing my body and performing improvisation with others (see Figure 3).

Fast-forwarding through my story of leaving The Forsythe Company: A few years later, after arriving in Bern to write my dissertation in dance studies, I met dancers Chris Lechner and later Hilary Cartwright (both interviewed here, in Part II). Lechner's contemporary dance classes restoratively reawakened my scholarly sitting body after a few years foregrounding sedentary study, asking me to bridge many layers of my body-biography (ballet, release technique, somatic practice, and instant composition). Cartwright's Yoga Narada® workshops and teacher training returned me to daily self-practice as a form of self-discovery for my aging body, which was no longer regularly performing. Cartwright also helped me to remember my prior voicework in singing as a child and raised my consciousness about the power of orality in dance transmission praxis and dance oral history.

Zooming in to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: Defending my dissertation in dance studies weeks before the coronavirus brought public life to a standstill, my plans to return to the dance field and continue work as dance maker, dramaturg,

and teacher were thwarted. Entering the empty university stealthily to pick up my dissertation advisor's handwritten notes on my manuscript, I revised my dissertation for publication at the desk of an abandoned physiotherapy office, empty of patients. During this strange time of uncertainty, I learned about a dance studies postdoc position in a scholarly project on dancer autobiography (with my dissertation advisor, Christina Thurner, at the University of Bern). Thankful for a potential new project and employment during those bleak months of isolation, I incubated my concept for this book slowly in many a Zoom call and, when civil protection measures were lifted, in live meetings with our research team and each of my protagonists for this project: Hilary Cartwright, Christine Kono, Chris Lechner, and Marcus Schulkind.

Figure 3: Dancing in Aporia (2014) a performance installation at the Athens School of Visual Art created with Christine Kono, Dimitris Kraniotis, and Stéphane Vernier.



Photo by Stelios Baklavas.

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This brief autobiographical text highlights the relationships and standpoints to be unfolded more intimately throughout this book. *Body-Biographies: Our Life Stories in Dance* considers the life-narratives of the aforementioned dance teachers: (in order of the length of our relationships) Marcus Schulkind, Christine Kono, Chris Lechner, and Hilary Cartwright, as constituted in our mutual life review process. Our life stories, as micro-histories, describe our interweaving and relational experiences of movement, dance transmission, emigration, and aging. This book presents refined

“interview performances” with these four dance teachers. In the process, I explore how my sense of my body, self, and artistry are constituted through their teaching practices and body-biographies, and conversely how their teaching and dance work are also created within networks of dance exchange. Influenced by dance studies and auto/biography research, this scholarly work considers how dance teachers make and pass on dance history, focusing especially on transmission through teaching. The biographical interviews I made with these protagonists also bring me back full circle to the autobiographical writing of this chapter, which was developed through and in response to these interview conversations. Together, this collection of body-biographies shows how dancers’ life stories are created and performed, tracing dance as a socio-culturally and historically constituted phenomena.