

Marianna Panourgia

An/archiving con/temporary dance/ing bodies

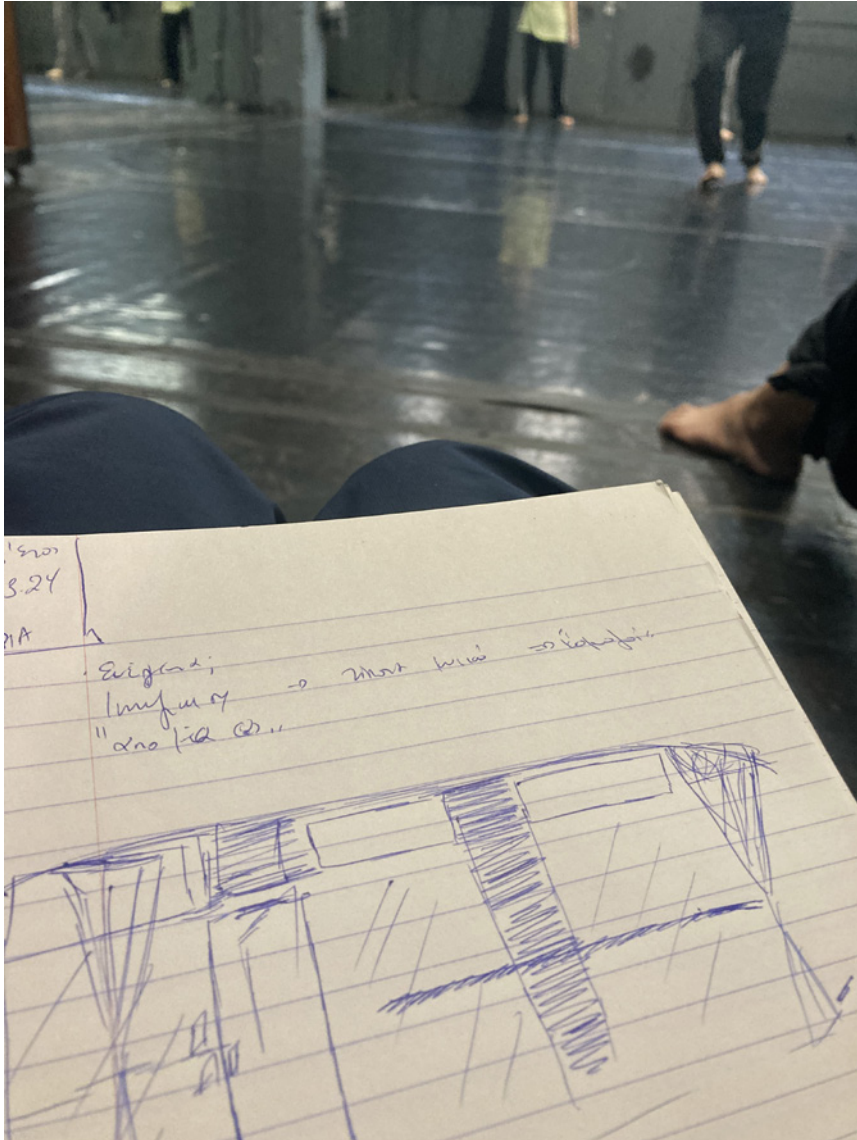
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By Marianna Panourgia

Introduction

This text derives from ethnochoreological research conducted in the field of contemporary dance in higher dance education in Greece (Panourgia 2024). It is focused on the oral traditions¹ (Finegan 1992; Yow 2005) of contemporary dance² transmission. Methodologically, the research involves engagement with relevant literature, archival investigation³, participant observation⁴ and audio/visual recordings of the everyday classes, creation of dance ethnographies⁵ and interviews with the contemporary dance educators⁶ and students⁷ of Higher Private Professional Dance Schools in Greece. The aim of the research is to include the individual partial truths and the collective corporeal experiences of the contemporary dance educators and students in an attempt “*to enhance (...) ways of knowing*” (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015, 255) and representing (MacDougall 1998; 2006) contemporary dance.

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- 1) The term ‘tradition’ is used in order to give a sense of continuance and not as a cultural reference. Although cultural references are also embedded in contemporary dance, they are not taken into consideration in this article.
 - 2) Contemporary dance includes various forms, styles, techniques and aesthetics and can differ according to time and place. In spite of that, for this particular research (and this text) I use the term ‘Contemporary dance’ in order to align with the term provided in the higher dance curriculum by the Greek Ministry of Culture. Therefore, I refer to contemporary dance as it is presented within the frame of the classes in Higher Private Professional Dance Schools in Greece. The Contemporary dance technique in these institutions is based on release techniques influenced by Jose Limon’s technique and an amalgam of the latest techniques such as David Zambrano’s (flying low).
 - 3) Investigation of archives of the Greek Ministry of Culture – Dance Department.
 - 4) Presence and partial participation of the researcher (in this case myself).
 - 5) Detailed description of the class via mapping of rituals – the everyday activities of the dancers and educators, fieldnotes of the class such as music used, rhythms, types of exercises, technical observations, dynamics between dancers and educators, hierarchies, values, goals and aims of each class, auto-reflexivity – personal interpretation and impact of my identity on the research of the field.
 - 6) Individual interviews.
 - 7) Focus groups/group interviews.



Higher Private Professional Dance School: Aktina. Athens, Greece.
Photograph by Marianna Panourgia. 26/03/2024.

However, could this type of dance archive create a dance history that is transferred from one dancing generation to the next? How is dance history written on bodies within a dance-classrooms in the twenty-first century? The questions above include the pivoting towards an anthropological/ethnochoreological

point of view of dance research in quest of the deeper human need to relate with the community and world through movement and contemporary dance education.

Confronting the con/temporality of movement and dance (Brooks and Meglin 2013; Sack 2015; De Laet 2020) seems inevitable in archiving. Multimodality in documentation and interdisciplinarity in the archiving process could be the key to a holistic form of dance preservation as “*embodied sense – making practice*” (Varvantakis and Nolans 2019). That means dance should not be researched solely by gathering kinetic data, such as dance syllabus, dance notation or scientific information, such as biomechanics or virtual motion detection (Cisneros, Stamp, Whatley and Wood 2019)⁸. On the contrary, dance should be contextualised, but more importantly, it should bring forward the insiders’ – dancers’ – view that refers to the embodied experience and embodied knowledge itself.

As new technologies arise, researchers (computer scientists, sound engineers, animation, and dance specialists) are working on capturing movement through cameras, computer cables, software, and cutting-edge algorithms to archive human movement (El Raheb et al. 2022). The ultimate goal is the advancement of kinetic knowledge, the enrichment of choreographic tools, or perhaps the preservation of dance repertoires for the next generation of dancers. Nevertheless, the absence of archiving aspects of communication and transmission processes (such as intention, message, meaning, context, and interpersonal relations) could be seen as an inhibitory factor for anthropological studies.

All these qualities are embedded in movement and dance and are considered to be qualities that are felt, perceived and transmitted by the dancer as well as felt, perceived, and received by the audience. To put it another way, movement is not only a physical product but rather indicates an action interwoven within a complex web of meaning (Cohen 1985), actions that are part of human behaviour. These parameters could change the actual qualities of a movement (temporospatial) and probably could not be transcribed into biometrics. Therefore, we end up with micro-pictures of data, but we miss the

8) See projects such as Motion Bank (<https://motionbank.org>) and WhoLoDancE (<http://www.wholodance.eu>).

mega picture of the *move-print* – the distinguishing characteristics, the cultural references, the taught and learnt behaviours, and the technical mannerisms – of the human aspect of dance; in other words, what is important for the people in the field (contemporary dance educators/students) to pass on to the next generation of contemporary dance teachers in Greece.

Searching for this human aspect of dance – for the specific movement characteristics that last through time (technical aspects/aesthetics/rituals of teaching) in other words the *movement ethos* – will provide valuable information on how the “*embodied collective memories [are] held, negotiated and expressed through dancing and their potency for different groups of people in specific socio-temporal circumstances*”, Buckland argues (1988, 341). Stretching this argument and applying it particularly to dance education, I found myself trying to connect the data (what appears in the field as dance techniques/teaching methodologies etc.) to the context (how what appears provides meaning to the insiders but also offers fertile ground for advancing dance).

Dilemmas of the I/eye behind the camera

In the contemporary dance education field, a limited number of ethnochoreological studies have been conducted, and even fewer have been conducted in the field of documentation of contemporary dance education practice. Unfortunately, the same applies to the field of ethnographic films that document contemporary dance education. Therefore, it was a challenge to define the role of this uncharted documentation via camera. In addition to this, I am not a specialist in video recordings.

After establishing my identity as a former dancer and a current dance educator; and after locating myself as a non-invasive researcher in the field, the next step was to place the filter of the camera in front of me. This tool changed the dynamics of the field. For example, the camera's presence made educators more self-aware and led them to occasionally justify their words or actions when it was on. Similarly, the students questioned their position in space or asked me if I would like to change my position in space to be able to capture more of the action. The camera was used as an audience – as another present open eye and not as an ‘active agent’ that seeks a specific action

from the people in the field. Therefore, the camera captured the position of the dancers, their dance/practice, their imprint in space and time, and the performed everyday rituals (activities) of the class (Grimes 1982). With this landscape recording, contemporary dance transmission emerged both as oral and corporeal practice.

However, a dilemma arose: how could the camera capture the senses, the emotions, the thoughts, and the overall experience of the participants? And again, are the emotions it captures the ones that the participants experienced, or do the lenses become a filter for my sense-making? In this case, the empirical substance of dance transmission is left behind.

At this point, I questioned the need for the camera and oscillated between the data received from the camera and the power of the *sensescape*⁹ (the overall sensed experience) of the class. In other words, what is seen though the camera cannot capture what the participants and I feel being present in the class. Could the camera capture more of what the participants feel and how? Could the camera give a more accurate impression without being hegemonic or the extension of the researcher's eyes, thoughts, and beliefs? (Postma 2006; Larcher and Oxley 2015). It seems that the camera can capture tiny parts of the lived event. The adaptation of the camera in fieldwork and the ethical framework in which the camera could navigate in this particular research are still under question.

Exploring and bridging dance transmission – The research

My ethnochoreological research in contemporary dance education within Higher Private Professional Dance Schools in Athens, Greece lasted four years (2021-2024) and succeeded my earlier investigation of the contemporary dance curriculum of the Higher Private Professional Dance Schools in Greece during 2016-2017 (Panourgia 2017). My research focuses on transmission (teaching and learning processes) of contemporary dance as an oral tradition, a practice that does not separate thinking from doing/performing and performing from verbalising (Sheets-Johnstone 2011). It particularly focuses on

9) For the term 'sensescape' see *Anthropology of the senses* (Howes 1991; Classen 1993). A borrowed term that refers to a common topos, a common and shared space.

the teaching and learning processes of contemporary dance practice within the institutionalised frame of tertiary dance education in Greece. Moreover, it is based on the hypothesis that dancing bodies are embedded with their past and their corporeal history (Thomas and Ahmed 2004), and simultaneously they are in constant social interaction (Cohen 1985).

The research aims to bring to light the unwritten practices of the contemporary dance world and create a vibrant archive of the individual and collective contemporary dance histories of the individuals in the field in the form of a *sensescape* – a world of sense and sensing (Pink and Howes 2010; Ingold 2011). In particular, the participants (contemporary dance students), apart from questions about the technical syllabus and teaching/learning methods of contemporary dance, were also asked to provide personal memories, intimate feelings, thoughts and maybe recall or even re-sense and describe how it felt to dance contemporary dance. This created a communal archival environment of contemporary dance transmission.

However, it is important to note that the aggregate of transmitting contemporary dance consists of the following processes 1) observe/imitate 2) verbal input/use of technical terminology 3) vocalising/counting 4) touch/sense/imagination and lastly 5) an aesthetic form of movement. All these connect, overlap, and vary per educator, per each student's perception, per school, per year, and class. Consequently, the focus is redirected from the numeric data or the list of the technical and obvious ways of transmitting movement to the realm of what is sensed to teach and learn contemporary dance; and what and/or how one feels while participating in and observing it. In a broad sense, the research investigates what it means to be part of this particular practice and community.

Focusing on intimate perspectives

The pathway from the urban and industrial spaces and classrooms of the Athenian Higher Private Professional Dance Schools to the personal sensations and kinaesthetic experiences of the participants in the field was labyrinthine. Students and educators referred to physical emotions perceived directly from the senses of the body such as muscle tension or release, workout pain,

emotions of tiredness and exhaustion. But also, they referred to corporeal thoughts, thoughts that derived from discussing the tangible qualities of their body as a dancing body. How their body transformed into a 'dancing body'. Physicality, emotions and thoughts created complex embodied manifestations, words, sounds, and testimonies emphasising the different perspectives of contemporary dance transmission in the 21st century within the frame of higher dance education in Greece.

The students/participants in the research apprehended contemporary dance learning – I quote their own words¹⁰ – as a “corporeal study”, a “new language” as well as a “mental practice”, a “mysticism ritual”, a “conscious act of understanding oneself and others” and the “quintessence of human contact”. This enormous spectrum, from ‘study’ and ‘practice’ to the ‘act of understanding oneself and others’, gives a small clue as to the variety of sense-making of contemporary dance process perception. It seems challenging to capture this since it is evident that the contemporary dance learning process is defined differently by each individual.

From a different perspective, contemporary dance educators encounter contemporary dance teaching as a safe field of “researching artistic risks” as well as a field of “diving into the imaginative and sensorial experience” and “questioning the limits and the personal kinetic identity”. Then, how are these two worlds perceived, combined, and performed through orality within a class frame?

Contemporary dance curriculum, as it is practiced in Greece, is not based on a specific technical form but rather on the educators’ personal way of understanding and teaching the complexity of contemporary dance; based equally on personal way of perceiving it (Panourgia 2017). And here orality emerges as a storytelling performance of one body (the educator’s) to another body (the student’s). Due to the lack of a written technical and analytic curriculum, contemporary dance (as it is formed and presented within Higher Private Professional Dance Schools during this specific research) passes from one generation of dancers/dance educators to another relying on what each of the educators finds important, and this can vary from the conception of

10) Quotes retrieved from group interviews with the students of Higher Private Professional Dance Schools in Athens.

technical elements, preference in aesthetics, educators' pre-existing education, mentality toward a technique and so on.

The perception and re-performance of contemporary dance can also vary due to students' neurologic, cognitive, and physical traits. While it can also be influenced by their remembrances, recollection of personal memories, and lifestyle. Like a story that is becoming something different depending on the audience, the storyteller's performance, the setting, etc. Therefore, as Vasina describes vividly, "every performance [of oral tradition] is new, but every performance presupposes something old: the tale itself" (Vasina 1985, 35). In this realm, my own pre-existing dance education in the same framework (from 2006 to 2009) and my perception, first as a dancer, then as a dance educator and now as a researcher is infused. For me, data is not enough. As Cuxima-Zwa explains:

Oral history is a simple and straight forward technique for gathering individual interpretations of events (...) which are of contemporary historical significance (...) It is a powerful procedure that captures recorded information and archives spoken history" [through an interdisciplinary approach that] "facilitates a unique articulation of the memories and life experiences of a people whose stories might otherwise have been lost or ignored. (Cuxima-Zwa 2019, 2)

Following Zwa's argument, in my research, contemporary dance transmission is treated as an oral history, in other words as a performed embodied urban tradition, as a kinetic and thinking action that creates an oral repository – a form of historical practice in Greece during a relatively short time – less than a century¹¹.

From personal orality to collective corpus and vice versa

At this moment, it is important to remember, first, that the field of research is not homogenous although it seems to have some particular traits. Second, that all information is interpreted through the lens of the research questions and the ethnochoreological methodology. That means that another researcher

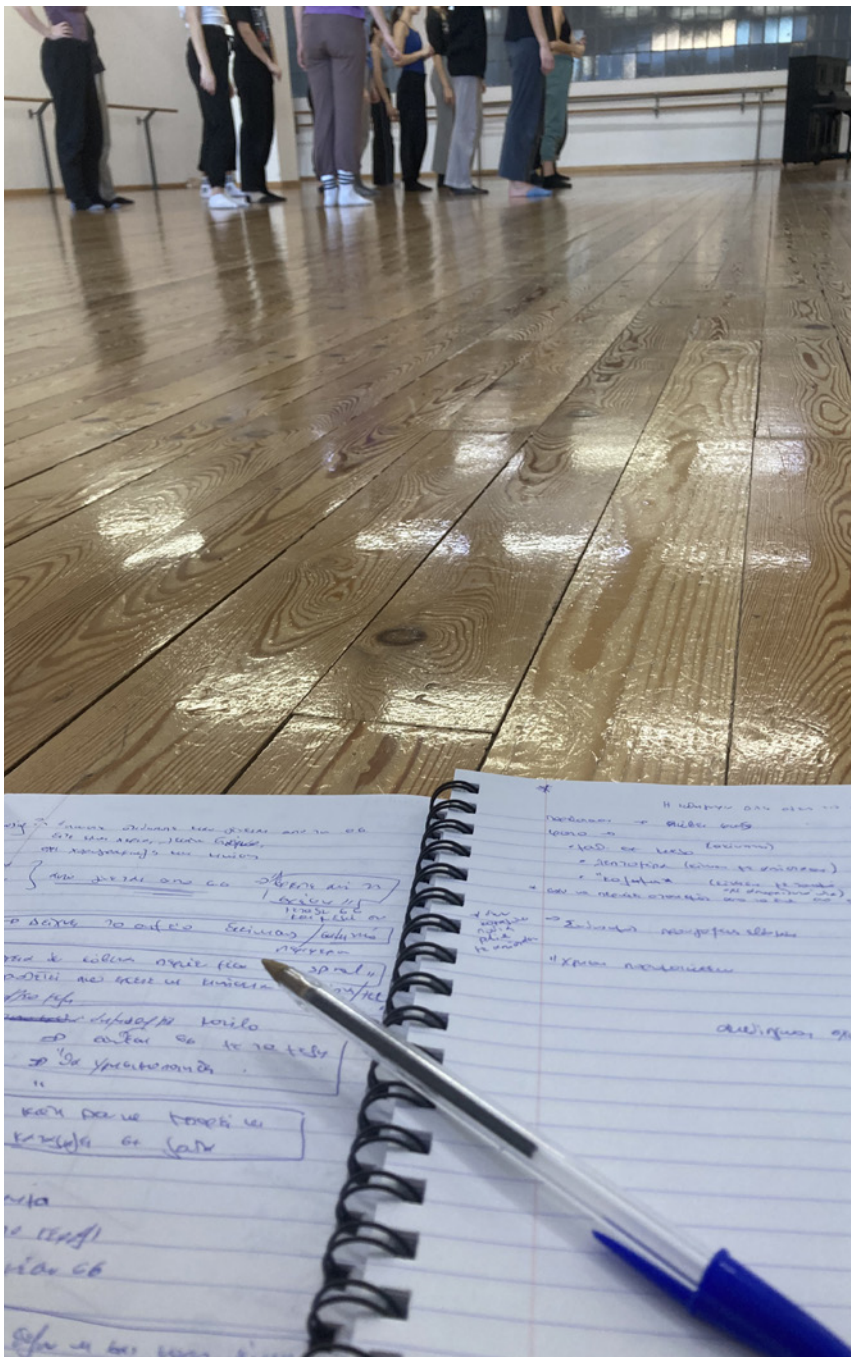
11) In 1941, the first Higher Private Professional Dance School was established in Greece.

with a different perspective, having different research questions or a different artistic, academic, cultural, national, or even linguistic background, would probably have a different understanding and interpretation of same the field. This diversity could be perceived as chaotic. However, it could potentially produce more information for the community that is researched (dance community).

The personal orality, the spoken remembrance of an embodied experience, passes from an individual corpus/body to the collective corpus through vocalizing the corporeal understanding of oneself (in this case from a contemporary dance educator to the contemporary dance students). Simultaneously and in a progressive form, the exact opposite occurs. The collective corpus of information, which is already built from individual *somatoralities* (the oral histories of the soma), feeds back to the dancing community; First, through the interpersonal relations of the dance students and the dance educators in the classes, and second, as the new dance educators start their practice of contemporary dance transmission.

Therefore, we notice the phenomenon of bifurcation and exponential augmentation of variations within the stream of what is supposed to be the tradition. These mutual and interconnected passages through time and space initiate a chain reaction that is repeated in its general form, which through the years could form the construction of a tradition. A tale that travels from bodies to words and vice versa infinitely.

I emphasise that I do not analyse the function of this tradition, but I do highlight the significance of it to the lives of the participants. Hence, the focus of this ethnographic fieldwork and research corresponds to important ongoing concerns of the field members (Nadai and Maeder in Falzon 2009). To be more precise, I do not envision reconstructing or deconstructing the history of contemporary dance transmission within higher dance education in Greece, but rather contributing to the methodology and qualitative research of dance while creating literature and hopefully an archive as multifold and multimodal as possible for further study.



Higher Private Professional Dance School: Choros. Athens, Greece.
Photograph by Marianna Panourgia. 13/11/2023.

Locating the dance ethnographer in the field

In addition to the above points of view from dance educators and dance students, my own – the researcher’s, the observer’s and the part-time participant’s perspective is also infused into the field through auto-ethnographies and self-reflections. My multifaced role and status within the classrooms were visible yet accepted and welcomed by the contemporary dance educators/students. Due to my pre-existing studies in the same environment, they considered me to be a person of understanding, a former insider who returned to understand more. That allowed my memories, thoughts, poetries, and sketches to be present and under conversation with the actual insiders.

As it is commonly said, working with people you cannot but influence and be influenced in a mutual and spiralling form of connection and communication. Spradley underlines that “Wherever the ethnographer may go and whatever the size of the social unit (...) all participant observation takes place in social situations” (Spradley 1979, 39). In my research, I consider the transmission (teaching and learning) process as one of the most distinguished forms of social interaction that creates space for inter-relations between the observer and the observed (insider and outsider).

An example of this co-existence between social interaction and observation occurred in my research (approximately five to six months in the field). As a researcher in one of the Higher Private Professional Dance Schools, I was sitting on the wooden floor at the side of the room while taking notes and having my camera on. At the end of the class, one of the students approached me and gave me a chocolate candy and engaged in a form of directing of the videorecording because I kept working while “they didn’t give their best performance during class”¹² that day and “felt sorry for me capturing something that probably is not valuable”¹³. From these statements, we could assume that this particular student attributed relatively low value to the kinetic output in class, and at the same time, attributed higher value to my presence and research. This gesture, toward me, revealed more about the actual landscape of the field than the recordings. In other words, this gesture/

12) Quoting informal conversation with a student.

13) Quoting informal conversation with a student.

interaction between the observer and the observed revealed what is perceived important in the field and worthy of recording from an insider's point of view. The videorecording directions from the student also gave a feeling of co-editing and co-work in the field. At the same time this interaction contributed a sense of belonging and a sense that we (researcher and student) both served the same purpose, which at that particular time was the recording of the class.

The multimodal ways of recording were important since my aim was an in-depth investigation. Hence, my personal ethnochoreological field notes were also tightly connected with the audio and visual recordings of the classes. This material became involved, and simultaneously highlights the human intra/interconnections and dynamics within the field while creating a web of body and mind testimonies.

An/archiving kinetic language

As De Laet (2020) argues “the body and the archive are profoundly imbricated and complementary in their ability to preserve and transmit” (De Laet 2020, 177), yet it is important to “anarchive” to “leave behind the classical archival principles of order, accessibility, and tangibility in favor of regeneration, sub-mediality, and embodied memory” (De Laet 2020, 178), to bring the archive from papers and virtual spaces back to its own materiality – the body.

To complete this argument, I use Sheets-Johnstone's article, “The Corporeal Turn Reflections on Awareness and Gnostic Tactility and Kinaesthesia” in which she states that:

What is experientially felt both in an affective sense and in a kinaesthetic sense clearly poses a challenge to language not only because such experiences are dynamic, but because language is not experience in the first place. Indeed, we experience the world and ourselves in wordless ways before we come to language our experience (...)
(Sheets-Johnstone 2009, 364).

Following these reflections, I ponder how genealogies, tales and histories of the body could be unfolded and transmitted via visual documentation and

transformed again into a(n) (academic) written text. Nonetheless, a sense of solution emerges when thinking that even though we experience wordlessly, language is always part of the kinetic experience (Krische 2018), particularly in the contemporary dance transmission process in Higher Private Professional Dance Schools in Greece.

As a result, the difficulty is located in the transformation process from what is felt to what is captured by the camera, and then to what is written on paper to provide a usable archival form for a contemporary dance practice. By way of explanation, I am puzzled about the form that will accommodate as De Laet also argues “the ever-changing nature and physicality that typify dance.” (2020, 177), and as he explains “an embodied art form such as dance can be archived in a way that is not only enduring but which can also accommodate the ever-changing nature and physicality that typify dance.” (2020, 177). This research places itself in a space between these two perspectives in the debate concerning the notions of the body as an archive and the archive of a body.

In an attempt to encapsulate in documentation and archiving all aspects of the dance/ing body (soma) during the oral process (orality) of dance transmission, I use the merged term *somatoralities*. This term refers to the multifaceted and multi-layered practices of contemporary dance transmission within higher dance education in Greece. In this research, the dancing bodies are ‘living archives’ that embody kinesthetic experiences, perform meanings, and communicate via kinetic thinking (Krische 2018) within social situations by participating in (a kind of) rituals of passage (from contemporary dance student to contemporary dance educator) and creating (unconsciously) new forms, norms, and traditions in the field. Therefore, I advocate a multimodal way of researching and archiving dance.

Conclusion

To conclude, my ethnographic research of contemporary dance transmission within higher dance education in Greece is based on a mosaic of individual somatoralities (oral histories of the dancing bodies) that surfaced through

intimate emotions, senses, and memories¹⁴. All these eventually formed a dance ethnographic an/archive of personal oral and corporeal processes within collective urban traditions of contemporary dance transmission in the twenty-first century in Greece. After all, as Buckland also advocates,

The challenges for dance ethnography, as a diverse field in the twenty – first century, are not only to employ ethnographic method to explore the individual and the familiar, genuinely illuminating though this is and can be, but also to point towards new lines of inquiry to reveal further how and why dancing may operate as discursive and affective social action of a peculiarly human order. (Buckland 2010, 342)

I am also underlining the urge not to define the field, but to work towards new lines of research, in my case by using ethnographic documentation as an empirical field-work of creativity. To this end, it became obvious that language, words, texts, images, sensed experiences, scores, poems, and audio-visual data of movement were all important and complementary parts of one whole. They create a topos in topoi (space into spaces) by enhancing the understanding and interpretation of contemporary dance transmission. Therefore, the movement documentation was treated not as a linear and liminal space of a traditional archive but as a sensed and performed multimodal an/archive of con/temporary dance/ing bodies.

Marianna Panourgia is a contemporary Dance Educator/Ethnochoreologist and a PhD candidate at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, Ireland. Latest publications: “Documenting Choreographic Practices” presented at Modes of Capture Symposium 2023, 09-10 June. “Reflecting on the Dancing Body During Covid-19” (2022) in Lucie Hayashi and Zuzana Rafajova (eds.) *Transformations of the body*, Prague: Taneční Aktuality: 34-37.

14) Through ethnographic interviews, focus groups, informal conversations, field notes, audio and visual recordings.

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