

# Introduction

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This inaugural Dossier of “Mimesis Journal. Scritture della performance” is one of the outcomes of the research project “Memory in Motion. Re-Membering Dance History (Mnemedance)”, conducted at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice from 2019 to 2023 by Susanne Franco.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, some of the essays collected here were first presented in 2021 at the international seminar “Performing Memory Through Dance. Anthropological Perspectives”, organised in this frame by Susanne Franco and Franca Tamisari, which aimed at bringing to the fore the centrality of the dancing body in the ongoing exchanges between dance studies and anthropological approaches focusing on experience in dance performance as well as its role and impact in specific postcolonial conjunctures.

Mnemedance aimed to explore the relationship between dance and memory, to reconceptualise dance history as a discipline with the potential to influence adjacent fields of arts and humanities. The foundational premise was that the study of memory could enrich dance history because, in dance, memory is perpetually active, encompassing the movements of both the performing and perceiving bodies. Furthermore, memory retraces the past as a continuous process rather than merely a collection of acquired knowledge. Mnemedance delves into the role of the dancing body in remembering and archiving experiences and cultures, and it examines how movement can be a means of preserving and transforming meaning. The project also scrutinises the contributions of dancers and choreographers in shaping collective knowledge and memories, including their roles in the preservation, transmission, and accessibility of these memories in the global and intertwined world in which they currently operate. During the development of Mnemedance, prioritising the incorporation of these diverse voices and experiences has involved reconsidering and potentially rewriting dance history. Lastly, the project critically examined the processes implicated in constructing canonical genealogies of artists, repertoires,

<sup>1</sup> This publication has received funding from the research project SPIN2-2018 “Memory in Motion: Re-Membering Dance History” (Mnemedance 2019-2023) based at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage).

and traditions, revealing how they are influenced by prevailing historical discourses. In particular, the research project aims to challenge the assumption of linear temporality as a neutral and self-evident framework for understanding dance histories to recognise instead diverse cultural influences, parallel developments, and non-linear but rather layered, multifaceted, and rhizomatic processes of memory. Research on the present and past of dance is therefore recognised as a complex task that necessitates the expansion and refinement of the toolkit amidst the current major transformation of epistemologies.

*Performing memory through dance. Anthropological perspectives* investigate cultural anthropology's contribution to dance studies, reflecting on the relationship between dance and memory as manifested in the diplomatic space that dance performance opens up with its complex dynamics of affective engagement, improvisation, re-appropriation, re-signification, in inventing and transmitting the past into the now. Considering dance and performance as pivotal tools in negotiating power relations and as tactics of resistance and survival (Fabian 1990, 15), especially within colonial and postcolonial contexts, this Dossier also aims to explore cultural and historical continuities and discontinuities. Dance, both as a social practice and performing art, engages embodied cognition, mobilises kinaesthetic empathy, and activates corporeal and sensory memories. As a "somatic way of knowing" (Csordas 1993) characterising a pathic way of knowing (Straus 1966), dance goes beyond communication and the referential meaning of signs, weaving complex webs of intersubjective and intercorporeal relations. Through dance, we acquire and transmit knowledge, express emotions, and remember or create stories, thereby producing lasting effects on the audience. This, in turn, transforms these experiences into personal and collective memories.

The intersection of dance studies and dance anthropology represents a rich and dynamic field of inquiry that explores the multifaceted relationships between dance, culture, and society (see David's Afterword in this Dossier)<sup>2</sup>. By integrating anthropological methods and perspectives into dance studies, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted roles of dance in shaping, reflecting, and transforming cultural practices, identities, and social realities. This interdisciplinary approach

<sup>2</sup> See also the MA course "The Anthropology of Dance" taught by Cristiana Natali, at The University of Bologna: <https://www.unibo.it/en/study/phd-professional-masters-specialisation-schools-and-other-programmes/course-unit-catalogue/course-unit/2023/478579> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

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combines the analytical perspectives of dance studies, which focus on the aesthetic, historical, and choreographic aspects of dance, with ethnographic methodologies that, without neglecting representation, and the cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions of dance practices within specific historical contexts, explore the lived here and now experience of performance.

Anthropological studies have demonstrated that body movement does not *stand for* reality but *is* reality (Best 1978, 137). Rituals and performances serve as pivotal occasions for individuals to shape their cultural practices, preserve and transform traditions, and (re)enact and (re)interpret their past by combining history and memory. Anthropology stands out as a discipline closely aligned with dance studies, having significantly contributed to challenging its theoretical boundaries and methodological assumptions. Among the aspects of anthropology that have garnered the most attention from dance scholars is the involvement of the anthropologist's body and kinaesthetic empathy in the learning process, which continue to be discussed as valuable reference points.

Another fundamental aspect of anthropological research, which has deeply enriched dance studies, is the ability to observe and document phenomena through participation in socio-cultural practices during sustained ethnographic research attuned to the cognitive, embodied, cognitive, and affective dimensions of relating. From a performative, experience-based engagement with others, anthropologists share knowledge acquired in the field through an innovative use of writing. As Fabian (1990, 6) notes, the notion of performance does not only refer to what presents itself only “through action and enactment” beyond the discourse in which the ethnographer is engaged, but it also involves “the communication of the results of our research especially through writing”. These interdependent activities have been involved in the profound reconsideration of ontological assumptions and disciplinary theoretical frameworks. Finally, anthropologists are more and more experimenting with innovative research methodologies, such as collaborative ethnography, autoethnography, and multi-sensory ethnography, to explore the complexity of dance performance as an embodied cultural, and social practice and politics (David 2013; Grau 2011, 2016; Hahn 2007; Reed 1998; Sklar 1991, 2000).

Dance studies and anthropology have been both imbued with ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. Thanks to the post-colonial critique and the ongoing pervasive process of decolonisation led by Indigenous scholars (cf. Tuhiwai 2008; on dance see Welch 2019), they have engaged in a steady course deconstructing the ethnocentric presuppositions upon which Western performance practices, narratives, and theoretical approaches are

based. For dance studies, this meant reconsidering the subject of study and methodologies, questioning whose stories one writes, from what perspective, based on which sources, and in what language. The seminal essay by dance anthropologist Johan Kealiinohomoku titled “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance” (1969) conceptualised Western classical ballet as a form of ethnic dance for the first time. This marked the beginning of a new approach to examining the pervasive ethnocentrism ingrained in Western dance history and the narratives produced, revealing their bias and limitations. Within this framework, the historicity and cultural context of dances became increasingly linked to the historical-cultural situation of their observers, prompting an inquiry into their historically and culturally determined character from an anthropological perspective. Despite the slow uptake among dance scholars trained within cultural or more specifically historical studies of these stimulating theoretical perspectives (Desmond 2000), with the new century a few publications in multiple languages have facilitated a broader dissemination of concepts, methodological tools, and translated texts, fostering the productive convergence between the two disciplines (see for instance Brandstetter and Wulf, 2007; Grau and Wierre-Gore, 2005; Del Monte 2009).

For Cultural Anthropology, from the early cultural critique to the most recent participative projects, the discipline keeps on renewing its commitment to dismantling the power of the interpreter, the strategies of Othering, as well as debunking the pitfalls of essentialism, the illusion of objective truth and the partiality of ethnography while experimenting with new forms of collaborations and engagement (Clifford 1988; Fabian 1983; Lowe, George and Deger 2020; Marcus and Fisher 1987; Rosaldo 1989; Todd 2015; Torgonvick 1991).

Dance anthropology is receiving new fuel from this paradigm shift and from performance, gender, postcolonial, and decolonial theories, to investigate how dance both reflects and shapes cultural identities, histories, and narratives. It examines the processes of dance transmission, preservation, and adaptation across generations and cultural contexts, the roles of dancers, choreographers, and communities in creating, performing, and interpreting dance, as well as the power dynamics inherent in these processes. Finally, dance anthropologists are increasingly employing embodied and sensory research methods to understand the ways in which dance engages the body, emotions, and senses, fosters kinaesthetic empathy and social cohesion within communities, and shapes cultural identities. Researchers are investigating the transnational circulation and reception of dance forms, the dynamic processes of cultural hybridisation, the impact

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of migration and diaspora on dance practices, and the many ways in which dances can transform in new cultural contexts. Digital technologies are contributing to the field offering new insights in the study of digital media and virtual realities into globally interconnected dance practices. Emphasis is given to the study of participatory dance projects and inclusive dance practices to promote accessibility, diversity, and the empowerment process of marginalised communities.

The essays collected for this Dossier aim to offer various perspectives on the intricate interplay between dance, individual experiences, and collective memories—be they shared, reinvented, or rejected. While in the essay by Waterhouse, this theme is considered within the ballet tradition, Franco and Tamisari consider dance performance not only as the embodiment, renewal, and reproduction of past memories and knowledge into the present, but also as one of the preferred and most efficacious means Indigenous people deploy to redress historical narratives, fight stereotypical representations, educate non-indigenous audiences, affirm their political presence and autonomy, and claim Indigenous sovereignty. Additionally, they reflect on the active role of mnemonic processes and transmission strategies in dance as a means to negotiate the past.

Elizabeth Waterhouse is an American dancer and researcher who participated in “Auto\_Bio\_Graphies” (2020-2024), a Swiss National Science Foundation research project based at the University of Bern under the direction of Christina Thurner. The project that developed in close dialogue with Mnemedance focussed on autobiographies of dancers as records of knowledge and experience and therefore as unique sources of information to (re)describe and (re)write dance history.<sup>3</sup> Waterhouse engages here in autoethnographic research to explore the choreography and embodied experiences of William Forsythe’s piece *Duo*. Her essay offers a comprehensive exploration of this piece blending personal experience as a former Forsythe dancer with ethnographic methodology and dance studies analysis, and from this perspective, shedding light on the complex interplay between choreography, embodiment, and artistic practice. She focuses particularly on the “showerhead”, a spiralling movement beginning with the dancers’ right hands that is a key motif in *Duo*, and its inter-

<sup>3</sup> “Auto\_Bio\_Graphy as Performance. A Field of Dance Historiographic Innovation” (2020-2024, Grant number 192436), Institut für Theaterwissenschaft Universität Bern. Direction: Prof. Dr. Christina Thurner Team: Dr. Elizabeth Waterhouse, Dr. Julia Wehren, M.A. Nadja Rothenburger, B.A. Claudio Richard, B.A. David Castillo. See <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/192436>.

section with balletic practices. She also examines the dancers' breathing movement, a hybrid medium of movement and sound that serves as a crucial element in creating movement quality and fostering partner coordination. Drawing on fieldwork notes, interviews, and videos, Waterhouse reflects on the interrelation of time, memory, and dance to understand how choreography itself embodies temporal dynamics. Her inquiry reveals how "showerhead" is cultivated over time through repeated rehearsals retracing a generational shift in the incorporation of breath scores and highlighting its significance in shaping the dancers' relational bonds and performance expressivity. From this viewpoint, Waterhouse examines not only the physical execution of the movement but also its historical context, its transmission between dancers, and its adaptation within the balletic tradition. Waterhouse explores how the dancers re-signify their bodies and challenge ballet conventions through their movements in *Duo*. Despite the reverence for balletic virtuosity, the performers subvert traditional norms by modifying steps, attire, and bodily expressions. The incorporation of non-white dancers and influences from popular culture further enriches the re-inscription of balletic codes within *Duo*. Ultimately, the study elucidates the entangled relationship between dancing *Duo* and the shaping of dancers' bodies, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual embodiment and collective choreographic negotiation. Through autoethnographic inquiry, the research illuminates the evolving nature of *Duo* as both a choreographic work and an embodied history, rooted in the collaborative exploration of movement, embodied memory, and identity.

In her contribution, cultural anthropologist Franca Tamisari, deals with the acquisition, embodying, renewing, and transmitting of knowledge in dances performed by Australian Yolngu Indigenous people in Northeast Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. Drawing from her long-term ethnographic research, and especially from her active participation as a dancer in ceremonial events, she focuses on how she learnt many aspects of Yolngu knowledge through dancing and how her body can, now, literally, *re-members* it. Her experience of dancing, recorded in veritable "bodynotes", allowed her not only an analytical, but also an empathic understanding of how Yolngu knowledge associated with country is embodied by reenacting the past in the present, how it is negotiated and transferred to the next generations, how its efficacy is reckoned by its capacity of affecting others and being affected by others, and why it is deployed to create a diplomatic space in which non-indigenous institutions and visitors, including the anthropologist, are invited to entered respecting Indigenous principles and are required to participate and respond.

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Shifting attention from the symbolism of the gestures and representation to the sensuous and affective nature of intercorporeality as well as the truth conveyed through expression, Tamisari explores Yolngu dance as a form of knowing and empathic understanding that reconfigures meaning and shapes experience. Dancing *with* and *for* others in the context of Indigenous performances and during fieldwork represents a modality of co-presence and co-presencing fostering an ever-deepening engagement with others. In local contexts, dancing can be a way of knowing and activating relations with human and more-than-human beings and the environment. In the arena of political confrontations with Australian institutions, Yolngu dance performance becomes a “performative tactic” in which non-Indigenous people are prompted to learn Yolngu ways of beings, are challenged to recognise the history of Australian race relations, and are required to take up the responsibility of redressing social injustices by acting on them.

*Performing Salome in the Pacific. Three Works by Yuki Kihara* by dance historian Susanne Franco explores a selection of dance performances and video works by the Sāmoan-Japanese interdisciplinary artist, researcher, curator, and activist Yuki Kihara. Focusing on Kihara’s portrayal of the character Salome—the artist’s alter-ego—Franco traces the historical and cultural significance of this character, and its implications for cultural and gender representations in the Western artistic tradition. Through Salome, who wielded dance as a tool for political manipulation, Kihara navigates complex intersections of Pacific and European identity constructions, disrupting colonial power structures and challenging stereotypical representations of the Pacific as an exotic and paradisiacal other. Particularly, the two video works by Kihara discussed by Franco further explore the aftermath of natural disasters, decolonizing cultural narratives and amplifying marginalised voices. Franco connects Kihara’s reenactments of *tavaluga*, a solo Sāmoan dance accompanied by choral music and percussion and usually performed in ritualised social occasions, to broader themes of indigeneity, gender identity, and the environment crisis, analysing how these dance and video works prompt reflection on the interplay between individual experiences, collective memories and the processes of re-appropriation and re-signification. Lastly, Franco discusses to what extent Kihara’s works echoing Salome challenge traditional Western perspectives on this character while exploring themes of memory, colonialism, and the role of dance in cultural expression and resistance. These works are also contributing to the most recent critique of the long-standing canonical approach to dance modernism as limited geographically to Western culture and to rethink it rather as a transtemporal and translocal phenomenon. Finally, Kihara’s



artistic research is impacting contemporary museology, particularly when she raises issues such as the role of reenactment in challenging dominant narratives, and the concept of time as fluid and multidimensional, directly addressing the museum's visitors to foster new understandings of their identities and history.

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