

# Immigrants' Dance Practices: Suggestions for a Collecting Archive

---

JEANETTE MOLLENHAUER

*Jeanette Mollenhauer is an independent dance scholar and community dance teacher. Her publications include two books Dancing at the Southern Crossroads (2020) and Cultural Dance in Australia: Essays on Performance Contexts Beyond the Pale (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2022), along with numerous peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters.*

Although multicultural, Australia has not adequately documented the traditions of its immigrant communities, such as culturally specific dance styles. This article calls for an immigrant dance archive to be established. Perusal of existing archives reveals an Australian preference for Western theatrical dance. Oral histories are recommended as a data collection method and are an ideal means for relating somatic experiences and performance contexts. Accounts of migration, resettlement and resumption of dance practices in a novel environment can also be documented. Various issues relating to the proposed collection, including the fluidity of 'community' and the construction of subjective meaning through oral accounts, are addressed. Innovative strategies for presentations include combinations of oral, visual and performative data to formulate multi-modal narratives. Overall, the article advocates for collaborative collection building and describes potential benefits of the proposed archive for participants and the public.

If a scholar asked for advice about locating information on the history and development of dance genres which are unique to a particular immigrant community in Australia, the only reply can be 'you will need to spend a lot of time collecting data yourself'. Australia has not adequately documented the choreographic pathways followed by the multiple forms of dance which are practised amongst its

non-Indigenous population.<sup>1</sup> The demographics of Australia's multicultural social fabric have been recorded at governmental level.<sup>2</sup> Yet this information does not communicate the activities and emotions of the individuals who make up each community. Collections of materials that document the history and subjective experiences of migration, with a particular focus on traditional arts such as dance, music, art and literature, are sparse.

The term 'immigrant' is used throughout this article in its broadest sense, meaning any non-Indigenous person. While this definition includes Anglo-Celtic immigrants, the proposed archive excludes Western dance. The term 'Western concert dance canon' is well known to dance scholars, meaning the genres that are performed in theatrical and cinematic contexts.<sup>3</sup> The United Kingdom is a Western nation, and its nationally representative dance genre is classical ballet, a genre that is promoted as 'somewhat "universal" and "acultural"', rather than uniquely English dance forms such as Morris dancing.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, I advocate for a collecting archive to record the experiences of immigrants who learn and teach the autochthonous dance genres of their own cultural heritage and argue for the centrality of oral histories within that archive. On the whole, these practitioners are not professionals and usually perform at community events or multicultural festivals rather than on proscenium stages. In suggesting this approach, I draw on Ruth Finnegan's ethnography of amateur musicians in England.<sup>5</sup> Finnegan writes about the various 'musical pathways' along which her participants progress as

---

1 There is an archive, Paradisec, an important collaboration between the Universities of Melbourne and Sydney and the Australian National University, which is dedicated to collecting music, song and dance from Indigenous groups around Australia. See Paradisec, [www.paradisec.org.au](http://www.paradisec.org.au). Accessed 8 October 2021. However, this article is solely concerned with non-Indigenous dance forms.

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census*. Available at <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/Home/Census?OpenDocument&ref=topBar>. Accessed 19 September 2021.

3 Julie Kerr-Berry, 'Counter-storytelling in Concert Dance History Pedagogy: Challenging the White Dancing Body', in Amelia Kraehe, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández and B. Stephen Carpenter (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 137–156.

4 Andréa Grau, 'Dance and the Shifting Sands of Multiculturalism: Questions from the UK', in Urmimala Sarkar Munsri (ed.), *Dance: Transcending Borders* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008), 239.

5 Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

they engage in their leisure pursuits.<sup>6</sup> Such undertakings, by those she calls 'hidden' musicians, form part of the town's social fabric.<sup>7</sup> Immigrant communities' dance groups are amateur in nature but that does not detract from their ability to act as social lubricants for those communities and, if given the opportunity, for the broader population in multicultural Australia. The proposal, then, is a strategy for 'archiving the ordinary',<sup>8</sup> rather than the publicly spectacular, because the latter has already been substantially catalogued.

This article provides some initial reflections about the need and potential usefulness of such a facility and considers the kinds of materials that should be sourced, but it is not intended to provide either an exhaustive appraisal of the topic or a comprehensive plan for a future repository. I am a dance scholar who has consulted rather than collected oral histories and thus I discuss methodological parameters from a theoretical rather than experiential perspective. I begin by offering a consideration of the principle of archiving dance, noting the usefulness of dance in the exploration of various socio-cultural situations, especially migration. Next, I describe Australian catalogues, observing their preference for Western dance styles and briefly depict noteworthy archives beyond our shores. I then advocate for the primacy of oral histories, drawing on ethnographic research and extant literature to demonstrate their value within a dance archive. Finally, I present some benefits of establishing an archive of immigrants' dance practices, both for the immigrants and for the wider community. Here, I draw on extant scholarship concerning community archiving and discuss pragmatic aspects of collecting oral histories among diasporic communities. I also present examples of innovative strategies for presenting oral accounts in exhibition contexts, especially those relating to dance.

---

6 Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians*, 305.

7 Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians*, 4.

8 Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley, 'Is Archiving a Feminist Issue? Historical Research and the Past, Present, and Future of Television Studies', *Cinema Journal* 47, No. 3 (2008): 56.

## ARCHIVING DANCE

Dance studies has long debated the simultaneous physicality and ethereality of dance and the ways in which it may be preserved. Dance reveals the subjective experiences of its participants because ‘the very ubiquity, naturalness, complexity and malleability of dance and its relationship to other ways of moving and engaging in society is what makes it an ideal object of study’.<sup>9</sup> A dance performance, no matter the genre, extends beyond the practitioner’s body and is ‘an exchange between the audience member, the observed performer, and the choreographer(s), designers, and composers’.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, archives should support ‘the idea of the dancework’ from the perspective of the choreographers, performers, additional contributors, audience members, journalistic critics and scholarly theorists.<sup>11</sup> However, archiving dance may never be a complete process, because ‘dance, as an embodied art form, can never be fully contained within documentary formats (such as drawings, photographs, videos, or – more recently – digital visualisations or annotations), for the body supposedly eludes each of these media’.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, verbal items are absent from this list, yet they represent a vital form of recording data about dance. Elizabeth Bell notes that ‘long before the written word, information was stored in bodies, in cultural memories, and in oral traditions, enacted only in their performances’.<sup>13</sup> Oral history would be the ideal method for continuing a custom of verbal transmission of knowledge, thus complementing other records of embodied knowledge.

The focus in this article is on culturally specific dances, which embody long-standing, highly venerated heritage and customs. Costumes and the musical accompaniment are some of the most obvious modes for dissemination of cultural knowledge. Dancers’ bodies are also endowed with knowledge, embedded in unique postures,

---

9 Susan Elke Spalding, *Appalachian Dance: Creativity and Continuity in Six Communities* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 225.

10 Arike Oke, ‘Keeping Time in Dance Archives: Moving Towards the Phenomenological Archive Space’, *Archives and Records* 38, no. 2 (2017): 97.

11 Arike Oke, ‘Keeping Time’.

12 Timmy De Laet, ‘Expanding Dance Archives: Access, Legibility, and Archival Participation’, *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 38, no. 2 (2020): 209.

13 Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2008), 57.

steps and motifs and thus, 'the invisible culture of a society is made visible through its representations in its dance and movement systems'.<sup>14</sup>

In the context of migration, dance possesses further salience, because both migration and dance involve the movement of human bodies, and so 'dance studies is uniquely poised to contribute to migration studies and the foremost topics within its terrain'.<sup>15</sup> Among immigrant communities, dance has 'a particular propensity to foreground cultural memory as embodied practice'.<sup>16</sup> Dance also carries out the vital function of transmitting cultural heritage knowledge between generations; 'for immigrants...dance is a repository of cultural knowledge to be imparted to their children'.<sup>17</sup> Finally, dance also promotes community bonding due to its ability to 'offer nostalgia and simultaneously enable the processing of migration experiences and new social positions'.<sup>18</sup> First, it facilitates transnational links with the former homeland by embodying traditions and memories. It also catalyses interpersonal connections with others who have shared similar experiences in leaving, arriving and re-settling. In summary, dance can be archived in multitudinous ways, and is an ideal activity by which to record culturally specific experiences.

## AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES

The existence of collections described in this section is significant, since any opportunity to promote social cohesion within and between immigrant communities and indeed, among the entire Australian populace, is important. Recognising non-Western dance styles as being worthy of both collection, preservation and

---

14 Ann David, 'Ways of Moving and Thinking: The Emplaced Body as a Tool for Ethnographic Research', in Peter Harrop and Dunja Njavadi (eds), *Performance and Ethnography: Dance, Drama, Music* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 45–66.

15 Paul Scolieri, 'Global/Mobile: Re-orienting Dance and Migration Studies', *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 2 (2008): V.

16 Theresa Jill Buckland, 'Dance, Authenticity and Cultural Memory: The Politics of Embodiment', *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 33 (2001): 1.

17 Ketu H. Katrak, 'The Gestures of Bharata Natyam: Migrating into Diasporic Contemporary Indian Dance', in Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (eds), *Migrations of Gesture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 221.

18 Hannah Lewis, 'Music, Dancing and Clothing as Belonging and Freedom among People Seeking Asylum in the UK', *Leisure Studies* 34, no. 1 (2015): 54.

presentation to the public, and demonstrating that these practices are crucial components of the overall narrative of every immigrant community which is part of the Australian population mosaic, are vital aims. The current government policy about multiculturalism suggests that diversity should be viewed as a sign of national strength and one significant means of promoting this strength would be to increase representation of immigrants' stories and practices within the nation's educational institutions and public archives.<sup>19</sup> Arasaratnam describes the concept of 'cognitive complexity', whereby acceptance of the concept of difference within the population is encouraged.<sup>20</sup> She argues that exposure to situations of cultural miscellany serves to encourage attitudes of inclusiveness. As such, an organised archival collection would have the potential to at least begin to educate members of the public in the manner she proposes.

While these benefits are encouraging, the intricacies of inaugurating such collections should be acknowledged. Light highlights requirements such as financial capacity and the support of multiple stakeholders from governments and community groups.<sup>21</sup> Ethical considerations include determination of the length of time spent with community members before commencing formal collection processes,<sup>22</sup> and how to determine the ways in which communities conceptualise what may be made publicly available and what should remain sequestered.<sup>23</sup> Defining community boundaries and deciding whether to use the community's original language

---

19 'Australian Government's Multicultural Statement: Multicultural Australia-united, strong, successful', Australian Government Department of Social Services, Available at <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/mca/Statements/english-multicultural-statement.pdf>. Accessed 17 October 2021.

20 Lily Arasaratnam, 'A Discussion of Multiculturalism in Australia from Educators' Perspective', *SpringerPlus* 3 (2014): 41.

21 Helen Light, 'Beyond Museums: Multicultural Material Heritage Archives in Australia' in Amy K. Levin (ed.), *Global Mobilities* (London: Routledge, 2017), 351–69.

22 Miranda Miles and Jonathan Crush, 'Personal Narratives as Interactive Texts: Collecting and Interpreting Migrant Life-Histories', *The Professional Geographer* 45, no. 1 (1993): 84–94.

23 Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd, 'Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream', *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 71–86; Viv Szeke- res, 'Representing Diversity and Challenging Racism: The Migration Museum', in Sheila Watson (ed.), *Museums and Their Communities* (London: Routledge, 2007), 142–52; Melanie Shell-Weiss, 'Good Intentions: Grappling with Legacies of Conflict and Distrust Surrounding a Native American Oral History Project One Generation Later', *The Oral History Review* 46, no. 1 (2019): 104–33.

can be contentious issues.<sup>24</sup> Expected outcomes of exhibited archives should also be carefully formulated. The collecting facility administers the archive but cannot be responsible for attaining community-related benefits such as fortifying cultural identity.<sup>25</sup> Collections are not disconnected entities, but exist within broader socio-cultural, political and institutional frameworks.<sup>26</sup> As such, there is the potential for perpetuating notions of immigrants always being 'others',<sup>27</sup> and even the risk of marginalising certain groups.<sup>28</sup>

Some of these issues become even more critical for a collection focused on immigrants' dance traditions. Light records that second-generation immigrants are more focused on 'becoming Australians' than recording their collective past,<sup>29</sup> but my doctoral ethnography reveals that for those engaged with dance, perpetuation of choreographic traditions is paramount.<sup>30</sup> Light also remarks that various sectors of a community have different preferences about what is recorded, and thus, it is possible that a focus on dance may disenfranchise those who do not share the dancers' passion.<sup>31</sup> Beyond the community represented in a collection, the imputed 'otherness' of non-Western dance genres is also embedded in public consciousness,<sup>32</sup> and care is needed when presenting collections about styles that are unfamiliar to

---

24 Andrew Flinn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 151–76; Gracen Brilmyer, Joyce Gabiola, Jimmy Zavala and Michelle Caswell, 'Reciprocal Archival Imaginaries: The Shifting Boundaries of "Community" in Community Archives', *Archivaria* 88 (2019): 6–48.

25 Light, 'Beyond Museums'.

26 Shell-Weiss, 'Good Intentions'.

27 Andrea Witcomb, 'Oral History and First-Person Narratives in Migration Exhibitions: Tracking Relations Between "Us" and "Them"', in K. Darian-Smith and P. Hamilton (eds), *Remembering Migration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 210.

28 Joan Sangster, 'Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History', *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 5–28.

29 Light, 'Beyond Museums', 332.

30 Jeanette Mollenhauer, *Translated Traditions: A Comparative Ethnography of Traditional Dance in the Irish and Croatian Communities in Sydney, Australia* (Unpublished PhD thesis, The Sydney Conservatorium of Music, The University of Sydney, 2017).

31 Light, 'Beyond Museums'.

32 Jeanette Mollenhauer, "'What's in a Name?'" Taxonomic Choices in the Field of Dance Studies', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 39, no. 1 (2021): 89–105.

most Australians. However, oral histories can be used as a means of ‘informing the interpretation strategy’ and may ameliorate perceptions of difference.<sup>33</sup>

Numerous archival projects featuring specific immigrant groups already exist in Australia and such efforts deserve commendation here. The University of New South Wales has established an archive, initially featuring oral histories, to document Greek settlement in Australia;<sup>34</sup> the Archive of Australian Judaica, Sydney, the Australian Jewish Historical Society and the Estonian Archives in Australia are further examples.<sup>35</sup> The State Library of New South Wales holds the textual materials of The Ukrainian Australian Archive Project.<sup>36</sup> Giese outlines the work of collecting oral histories from Chinese Australians, noting the increasingly proactive engagement of participants,<sup>37</sup> and the State Library of New South Wales also has a collection from the same community group.<sup>38</sup> The National Library of Australia (NLA) also has culturally specific oral history collections such as those relating to the Maltese and Polish communities.<sup>39</sup> There are also variegated archives including the ‘Making Multicultural Australia’ collection, in which oral accounts collected over several decades are located.<sup>40</sup> Currently, the Settlement Council of Australia intends to train 30 immigrants to share their stories and liaise with the media, thus ‘enabling an

---

33 Witcomb, ‘Oral History and First-Person Narratives’, 210.

34 University of New South Wales, ‘Archive Preserves the History of Greek Migrants in Australia’. Available at <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/general/archive-preserves-history-greek-migrants-australia>. Accessed 15 March 2022. See also ‘Oral History Interviews with Members of the New South Wales Greek Community for the Greek Australian Archive, 12 May 2018–17 March 2021 with Related Photographs’, Record Identifier 9gk0pmm9, The State Library of New South Wales.

35 Australian Society of Archivists, ‘Community Archives’. Available at <https://directory.archivists.org.au/index.php/repository/browse?types=1040&sort=alphabetic>. Accessed 15 March 2022.

36 ‘The Ukrainian Australian Archive Project’, Record Identifier 93QXWGq1, The State Library of New South Wales.

37 Diana Giese, ‘Chinese Australian Oral History: A Project of the National Library of Australia’, *Asian Libraries* 8, no. 3 (1999): 92–94.

38 ‘Oral History Interviews with Members of the New South Wales Chinese Community and Related Photographs’, Record Identifier 9NarQAmY, The State Library of New South Wales.

39 Maltese Australian Folklife and Social History Project, Bib ID 2170977, National Library of Australia; Polish Australians Oral History Project, Portraits of Interviewees [picture] / Barry York, Bib ID 3044853, National Library of Australia.

40 Andrew Jakubowicz, ‘The Voices of Diversity in Multicultural Societies: Using Multimedia to Communicate Authenticity and Insight’, in Darian-Smith and Hamilton, *Remembering Migration*, 185–202.



ethical relationship to promote diverse narratives and perspectives'.<sup>41</sup> However, for each of the examples provided here, one would need to specifically search for interviewees who are dancers or references to dance in other interviews.

In relation to immigrants' artistic narratives, some initiatives have been made but there is room for many more collections to be inaugurated. The Immigration Museum in Melbourne has featured dance traditions in its exhibitions and events, including a 'special season of dance-inspired events' over the 2019–2020 summer.<sup>42</sup> The NLA has several non-Western dance collections in its catalogue.<sup>43</sup> The papers of Margaret Walker articulate how she established a professional folk character troupe, *Dance Concert*, in the 1960s and set up the Margaret Walker Folk Dance Centre.<sup>44</sup> Other broader collections are also curated by the NLA. The Rob and Olya Willis Folklore Collection includes oral histories of important figures in the Irish social dance network in Australia.<sup>45</sup>

Informal archiving is also an ongoing project. Photos and videos exist on various Australian-based dance groups' Facebook and Instagram accounts, but the primary purpose of these collections is to provide an emic record for group members. YouTube features numerous records; for example, the dance of champions at the annual Australian Irish Dancing Championships is regularly posted.<sup>46</sup> Individual groups whose performances are documented on this website include the Croatian dance group *Vukovar* and pan-Balkan dance group *Dusha Balkana*.<sup>47</sup> The existence of these videos indicates interest in preservation and broader dissemination of performance events.

---

41 Settlement Council of Australia, 2022, 'Stories of Multicultural Australia'. Available at <https://scoa.org.au/multiculturalvoicescampaign/>. Accessed 21 March 2022.

42 Museums Victoria, 'Shimmy Into the Immigration Museum This Summer As We Celebrate Dance'. Available at <https://museumsvictoria.com.au/media-releases/shimmy-into-the-immigration-museum-this-summer-as-we-celebrate-dance/>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

43 The NLA has more dance collections but space does not permit disclosure of all of them.

44 Margaret Walker Dance Archive, Bib ID 561487, National Library of Australia.

45 Rob and Olya Willis Folklore Collection, Bib ID 1862849, National Library of Australia.

46 Anh Pham, Australian Irish Dancing Championships 2019 Parade of Champions. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjT5VKKa01g>. Accessed 18 October 2021.

47 Iva Buconjic, CFE Vukovar's 30th Anniversary Concert 1/11/2014 at NIDA Parade Theatre, Sydney. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9widk6aHw>. Accessed 18 October 2021; Australian Dance Festival 2010 Dusha Balkana. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_aAjX3TpnMM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_aAjX3TpnMM). Accessed 18 October 2021.

Formal dance repositories also exist. The Australian Performing Arts Collection (APAC) in Melbourne has three main foci.<sup>48</sup> The first relates to prominent touring artists and ensembles, including Adeline Genée, Anna Pavlova and the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo; the second relates to prominent Australian companies such as Borovansky Ballet, Ballet Guild and Bodenwieser Ballet, while the third addresses some works that were developed in Australia, including Sir Robert Helpmann's *The Display* and productions by the Sydney Dance Company. As such, it provides a broad-ranging catalogue of theatrical performances in this country, but is focused on documents and material items. The National Museum of Australia holds items from the Bodenwieser Ballet and has also documented the development of ballet in Australia.<sup>49</sup> The NLA maintains a dance collection and while there are user-generated lists relating to Polish dance and Indian dance, along with various social genres, the collection also privileges Western concert dance.<sup>50</sup>

From the descriptions provided above it may be discerned that currently, formal dance archives do not reflect the variegated composition of Australia's population. Documentation of culturally specific dance practices is required to address the imbalance within artistic collections in Australia. The absence of non-Western people groups and customs from museums and archives is problematic and well-referenced in existing scholarship.<sup>51</sup> Many institutions have acted as purveyors of 'the coloniality of knowledge and being',<sup>52</sup> thus playing a significant role in

shaping and supporting an orientalist – racist world view – through a celebration of western culture as progressive and superior, showcasing the nation's

---

48 Margot Anderson, 'Dance Overview of the Australian Performing Arts Collection', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 38, no. 2 (2020): 149–67.

49 National Museum of Australia, Gertrud Bodenwieser Dance Collection. Available at <https://www.nma.gov.au/explore/collection/highlights/gertrud-bodenwieser-dance-collection>. Accessed 29 March 2022; National Museum of Australia, First ballet. Available at <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/first-ballet>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

50 National Library of Australia, Dance. Available at <https://www.nla.gov.au/collections/what-we-collect/dance>. Accessed 29 March 2022.

51 Gina Schlesselman, *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science. Series on Critical Race Studies and Multiculturalism in LIS; No. 2.* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017).

52 Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 199.

treasures and national or imperial might, displaying the non-western other as primitive and exotic, etc.<sup>53</sup>

A focus on theatrical dance is not unique to Australia. Most facilities privilege artists with high public profiles, which serves to further promote the work of these people while coincidentally diminishing the achievements of those who are not featured.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the typical practice has been that the items selected for public display represent those whose work is already known and celebrated, rather than those who would benefit from greater recognition within prominent repositories.<sup>55</sup>

Archives of theatrical dance are valuable, but only represent part of the history of dance in Australia. The absence of immigrants' dance genres is problematic because it skews the concept of 'dance' within the public consciousness, restricting it to being an activity that is only performed by highly trained artists in prominent venues. Moseley and Wheatley argue that 'access to research materials is a major shaping factor in the kinds of television histories that are undertaken' and the same observation could be made about dance.<sup>56</sup> Histories of dance in Australia should reflect all genres, practitioners and events, not just the professional practices and an archive of immigrants' dance would facilitate the writing of broad-ranging, inclusive accounts.

Australian dance archives also tend to privilege the material and textual. For example, the APAC collection in Melbourne documents a rich history but its impact would be enhanced with the addition of dancers' oral histories. Admittedly, performers from the early twentieth century are now deceased and that opportunity has been lost. A lavish costume or elaborate printed concert program brings visual pleasure to archive visitors but, in common with many material collections, their encounter would be enriched if a record of its provenance and performance history were also available.

---

53 Anupama Arora, 'Decolonizing the Museum: Leila Aboulela's "The Museum"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 57, no. 1 (2021): 122.

54 Harmony Bench, 'Mapping Touring: Remediating Concert Dance Archives', *Dance Research Journal* 51, no. 3 (2019): 5.

55 Ekaterina Haskins, 'Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 402.

56 Moseley and Wheatley, 'Is Archiving a Feminist Issue?', 153–54.

The ideal format for such records is a catalogue of oral histories with links to other items in a collection.

### ORAL HISTORIES IN DANCE ARCHIVES

Oral histories provide a link between the somato-sensory experiences of those who dance and other interested parties. Paula Hamilton observes that oral histories are able to focus on ‘what is known as “situated knowledge” and embodiment; that is, sensorial understanding related to a particular place and time’.<sup>57</sup> There is an increasing level of acknowledgement of the value of oral history collection among dance scholars. Reflecting on practices for archiving numerous forms of dance, Susanne Foellmer writes about ‘a mode of transfer that is usually missing when visiting a conventional archive: the aspects of language and or oral transmission in the sense of Oral History’.<sup>58</sup> This lacuna is unfortunate, because ‘language plays an important role as a complementary medium for reconstruction and re-enacting dance’ and gives participants ‘the chance to articulate and explain the bygone not only corporeally but verbally as well’.<sup>59</sup> In a comment that resonates with Finnegan’s argument for the value of research among amateur practitioners,<sup>60</sup> Geraldine Morris and Lorraine Nicholas make the observation that oral histories include ‘the many whose names are not “writ large” by conventional histories’.<sup>61</sup> Nicholas later reinforces this concept in her statement that an oral history ‘reveals how people evaluate their lives and ascribe meaning to their experiences, and shows how the past infiltrates the present through personal recollection’.<sup>62</sup> Further to this, De Laet

---

57 Paula Hamilton, ‘Oral History and the Senses’, in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2015), 110.

58 Susanne Foellmer, ‘The Archival Turn in Dance Studies: Reflections on (Corporeal) Archives and Documents’, in Ann R. David, Michael Huxley and Sarah Whatley (eds), *Dance Fields: Staking a Claim for Dance Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Binstead: Dance Books, 2020), 262.

59 Foellmer, ‘The Archival Turn’, 262.

60 Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians*.

61 Geraldine Morris and Lorraine Nicholas, ‘Introduction to Part One: Why Dance History’, in Geraldine Morris and Lorraine Nicholas (eds), *Rethinking Dance History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 4.

62 Lorraine Nicholas, ‘Memory, History and the Sensory Body: Dance, Time, Identity’, in Morris and Nicholas (eds), *Rethinking Dance History*, 13.

argues that oral histories should be collected from 'a diverse range of actants (such as choreographers, dancers, artistic directors, curators, dramaturges, or spectators)'.<sup>63</sup>

Oral histories are particularly relevant in relation to the dance genres of cultures that have long relied on verbalised traditions across multiple life domains. Writing about the Chokwe people of Angola, Chikukwango Cuxima-Zwa notes that 'their cultural tradition, cosmology and worldview has a great influence in the country; particularly their oral history, which plays an important role in the understanding of the Angolan history of the pre-colonial era'.<sup>64</sup> In this situation, individual oral accounts could preserve the collective history to which Cuxima-Zwa refers. In the context of immigrant dance genres as practised in Australia, oral histories would mean that 'community members have access to recalled memories which enable them to interpret their unique historical situations'.<sup>65</sup>

Oral accounts can also play a complementary role; verbal information about material items enlivens the presence of such pieces. Catherine Foley, in establishing the NDAI, inaugurated 'Conversations from the Archive' in which she interviews people who donate items to the collection.<sup>66</sup> Each conversation 'complements existing *historical records* and gives a sense of the subjectivity of historical experience'.<sup>67</sup> Interviewees vivify inanimate objects, thus revealing meanings embedded within each item and describing motivations of the people who created and used those objects.

A specific example of the use of oral histories in the context of migration and resettlement comes from an exhibition at *Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration* (CNHI) at the Palais de la Porte Dorée in Paris.<sup>68</sup> One set of displays focused on

---

63 De Laet, 'Expanding Dance Archives', 215.

64 Chikukwango Cuxima-Zwa, 'Performativity of Body Painting: Symbolic Ritual as Diasporic Identity', in Adesola Akinleye (ed.), *Narratives in Black British Dance: Embodied Practices* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 139.

65 Carol McKirdy, *Practicing Oral History with Immigrant Narrators* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, Inc, 2015), 22.

66 Catherine Foley, 'Postcolonial Agency, Proactive Archiving and Applied Ethnochoreology: The National Dance Archive of Ireland', *Český Lid* 103 (2016): 631.

67 McKirdy, *Practicing Oral History*, 16, original emphasis..

68 Carol Ann Dixon, 'Decolonising the Museum: Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration', *Race & Class* 53, no. 4 (2012): 78–86.

migration accounts within disparate temporal and cultural contexts. Items included quotations from oral histories, personal effects such as photographs, musical instruments and craft items, and audio-visual installations. Through these methods, Carol Ann Dixon argues that by decolonising the museum space and diversifying the nature of the items presented, the multifaceted nature of migration and resettlement was represented in a more nuanced fashion. While no items specifically related to dance were included, personal accounts, costumes, props, concert programs and videos could easily be added to a display of this nature.

My argument that oral histories should form the basis for the proposed archive also stems from experiential reflection. My doctoral research featured dance groups from the Irish and Croatian communities in Sydney. Much useful information emerged about the ways in which the various dance genres were transported from the former homelands and perpetuated in multicultural Australia. However, the most important data came from participants' recollections and expressions of affective connectivity with those former places of residence during semi-structured interviews. First- and second-generation immigrants provided valuable insights into the meaning of dance as they grapple with the complexities of simultaneity (being either Irish or Croatian *and* Australian).

Thus, Irish immigrants reported that dance elicited emotional nostalgia for Ireland:

I think for me it actually means I feel like I have a connection with my heritage.<sup>69</sup>

I remember the first day coming and hearing the music and I was just – oh, it was lovely and it was just a real connection to home, I guess.<sup>70</sup>

Croatian dancers expressed similar notions:

---

69 Jessica, interviewed by author, Sydney, 26 February 2014, tape and transcript held by author. See Mollenhauer, *Translated Traditions*. Pseudonyms are employed for research participants.

70 Deirdre, interviewed by author, Sydney, 18 March 2014, tape and transcript held by author.

When someone asked 'Why the hell are you still doing this?' I answered 'Because I love it. Simple: it's in my blood'.<sup>71</sup>

One night when I was dancing, everything became blurry, and through the dance I could see these three little girls holding hands and they were, like, looking at our feet and they were trying to copy our steps and I swear to you from the deepest part of my heart I heard God say 'You see that? That's why you do it! You do it for the next generation'.<sup>72</sup>

It is possible for a participant observer to note the joyous faces and boundless energy of the dancers at their weekly rehearsals, but oral input affords a far more nuanced description of the role of dance in fostering transnational affective bonds. Both the truncated statement 'simple: it's in my blood' and Sandra's description of her vision provide vital clues to what participation in dance means to them and would not have been collected without oral input.

However, the design of the interviews (and indeed, of the whole project) was broad rather than deep and featured 92 interviews of between 15 and 45 minutes, among members of six dance groups.<sup>73</sup> This enabled me to present an account of the multiple types of transnational connection forged by first- and second-generation immigrants through dance, including emotional, pedagogical and material links with the relevant former homeland. While my interviews focused on events and actions, the questions about cultural identity and why people continue participation in dance following migration demonstrated the presence of a vast reservoir of experiential knowledge. Hindsight led me to wish I had spent longer with those who had been born overseas and had experienced migration first-hand.

If I were to revisit the dance groups from my doctoral research, I would employ oral histories for first-generation immigrants, especially those who engaged with dance in any way in their former homeland. I spent hours of observation and, where appropriate, participated in various dance genres, but it was the polyvocality of the

---

71 Peter, interviewed by author, Sydney, 20 June 2014, tape and transcript held by author.

72 Sandra, interviewed by author, Sydney, 4 March 2015, tape and transcript held by author.

73 Some interviewees were children and for them, interviews were brief.

interviews that illuminated the complexities of moving across the globe, becoming a member of a minority population group and maintaining transnational connections through engagement with dance. Childhood recollections of dance events, which could include a mother dancing in the kitchen, formal dance training in adulthood, the experiences of migration and the motivation for resuming dance in Australia, are just some of the topics that would be fruitful to explore through an oral history.

The context of migration also requires investigation of specific effects of individual and community mobility. A significant Australian example in this field is the project in which Alistair Thomson collected accounts of the migration and re-settlement experiences of four British-born women.<sup>74</sup> Thomson's work highlights the kinds of nuanced descriptions of those experiences that can be elicited through prolonged and in-depth engagement with research participants. I noted earlier that the experiences of diasporic life and cultural identity would be highlighted through oral histories. Questions about cultural identity reveal that there is not 'a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial or cultural blocs'.<sup>75</sup> Greg Noble describes a spectrum along which identities may be situated;<sup>76</sup> a similar metaphor is the 'calibration' offered by Tina Ramnarine which, although developed in reference to diasporic music, would be useful here as it 'moves away from bipolar models' of cultural identification.<sup>77</sup> Even those in my research who solidly self-identified as 'Australian' still allowed themselves to perpetuate their previous national affiliation through dance, thus demonstrating that transnationalism and acculturation are not mutually exclusive practices.<sup>78</sup> Such aspects of life cannot be discerned through other research methods; a comprehensive verbal account is required and, certainly

---

74 Alistair Thomson, *Moving Stories: An Intimate History of Four Women Across Two Countries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

75 Rogers Brubaker, 'Ethnicity Without Groups', *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 164.

76 Greg Noble, 'On Being Lebanese-Australian: Hybridity, Essentialism and Strategy Among Arabic-Speaking Youth', in Ghassan Hage (ed.), *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 128–44.

77 Tina K. Ramnarine, 'Musical Performance in the Diaspora: Introduction', *Ethnomusicology Forum* 16, no. 1 (2007): 11–12.

78 Takeyuki Tsuda, 'Whatever Happened to Simultaneity? Transnational Migration Theory and Dual Engagement in Sending and Receiving Countries', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 4 (2012): 631–49.



for first-generation immigrants, an oral history should be the preferred means of collecting data that provide information about the issues described here.

The value of including oral history in the catalogue of data collection methods is widely acknowledged. Generally, since 'throughout most of human history, telling the stories of lives has largely been an oral tradition', the collection of oral histories should be a principal aim of ethnographic research.<sup>79</sup> In particular, because oral histories reveal 'less about *events* than about their *meaning*', they make an ideal accompaniment to participant observation.<sup>80</sup> They are a means for

discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.<sup>81</sup>

For an ethnography of dance (or other arts), the inclusion of oral histories represents an opportunity to thicken the description of the phenomena being described.<sup>82</sup> The oral history interview with Australian 'ethnic dancer' Beth Dean, located at the NLA, provides several pertinent pieces of information about Dean's life and her conceptualisation of various dance genres.<sup>83</sup> In it, Dean describes the dance genres of Indigenous Australians and South Pacific Islanders as 'ancient' and 'preserved through many generations'.<sup>84</sup> Such comments indicate that Dean believed she had discovered dances of antiquity and demonstrate her adherence to an outmoded anthropological theory of dance evolution. When analysing her dance texts and performances,

---

79 Ken Plummer, 'The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research', in Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Lofland (eds), *Handbook of Ethnography* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 395.

80 Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2015), 52, original emphasis..

81 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meanings of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 188.

82 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1973).

83 Beth Dean, interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Sydney, 4 December 1975, ORAL TRC 1/902, National Library of Australia.

84 Beth Dean, 4 December 1975.

such information proved vital to understanding Dean's choreographic strategies and underlying epistemology.<sup>85</sup>

Other scholars have employed oral histories to formulate nuanced descriptions of immigrants' experiences and activities. Gail M. Nomura notes in the introduction to an edited volume that 'in order to learn the history of Asian American and Pacific Islander women, we need to hear these voices'.<sup>86</sup> Co-editor Shirley Hune writes that

forms of storytelling, including oral history, often in conjunction with ethnographic studies, interviews, life and self-histories, multimedia materials, memoirs, and autobiographies provide findings on Asian American and Pacific Islander women in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from a historical perspective.<sup>87</sup>

Oral histories are foundational throughout the various contributions in that book; a noteworthy chapter in the context of cultural identity is that of Cathy J. Tashiro, who finds that 'doing focused life histories of older mixed-race adults provided rich narratives demonstrating the extent to which mixed-race identity was shaped by historical circumstances at key points in the respondents' lives'.<sup>88</sup> She then describes 'five distinct dimensions of mixed-race identity' that emerged during her research. These examples illustrate the rich, compelling data that could be drawn from oral histories conducted with immigrants in Australia.

Further practical consolidation of my belief in the discursive value of oral histories in dance archives came when I recently attended a Zoom workshop for representatives of immigrant communities in Seattle, USA. I was impressed by the profound insights expressed through three testimonials that were presented and Daniela

---

85 Jeanette Mollenhauer, 'Beth Dean: Aspects of the Work of an Australian "Ethnic Dancer"', *Dance Chronicle* 44, no. 3 (2021): 246–83.

86 Gail M. Nomura, 'Introduction: Our Voices', in Gail M. Nomura and Shirley Hune (eds), *Our Voices, Our Histories: Asian American and Pacific Islander Women* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 5, 6.

87 Shirley Hune, 'Introduction Our Histories', in Nomura and Hune, *Our Voices, Our Histories*, 13.

88 Cathy J. Tashiro, 'History, Identity, and the Life Course: Mixed Race Asian American Women', in Nomura and Hune, *Our Voices, Our Histories*, 141.

Ivanova-Nyberg, dance scholar and teacher of Bulgarian language and dance in that city, was one of the speakers. Some of her observations were

I want to start by addressing this tiny little hyphen connecting my Bulgarian family name, Ivanova, to my American husband's name – Nyberg. I think of this hyphenated name as the greatest metaphor of my life. A mission, maybe. This is like sizing the bridge in the name, walking back and forth on both sides, cooking a Bulgarian dinner, and presenting it on the American table. Or teaching Bulgarian music and dance to Bulgarian children born in the States and communicating in English among themselves. Or teaching the Bulgarian language to American women adopting Bulgarian children, or to American Bulgaria music and dance lovers who would like to know the meaning in the texts of the songs they love singing.<sup>89</sup>

In the workshop, each speaker's time was limited, but a wealth of experiential narrative emerged even in the ten minutes allotted to each panellist. Admittedly, this was not an oral history as such, but nevertheless, demonstrates that recorded oral reflections about dance are discursively potent. Importantly, the use of vernacular rather than academic vocabulary in Ivanova-Nyberg's speech rendered it user-friendly. A scholar could turn to the theorists cited earlier in this article, and develop a rigorous exegesis about cultural identity from the excerpt provided above.<sup>90</sup> Yet, the experiences and accompanying emotions relayed through the above excerpt are certainly evident to the lay audience member.

Issues of embodied cultural knowledge, the foregrounding of cultural memory, modes of intergenerational transmission and community bonding may be discerned to some extent through observation and audio-visual documentation, but meaning may only be attributed through the addition of individual subjective accounts. The power of dance stories in supplying information about migration and cultural

---

89 Daniela Ivanova-Nyberg, *Culture Creates Community: Rethinking Cross-Cultural Spaces: EastHUB and Ethnic Heritage Council*, 30 September 2021. Available at [https://www.academia.edu/55994177/To\\_the\\_discussion\\_on\\_Culture\\_Creates\\_Community\\_Rethinking\\_Cross\\_Cultural\\_Spaces](https://www.academia.edu/55994177/To_the_discussion_on_Culture_Creates_Community_Rethinking_Cross_Cultural_Spaces). Accessed 17 October 2021.

90 Noble, 'On Being Lebanese-Australian'; Tsuda, 'Whatever Happened to Simultaneity'.

identity is immense. They offer the best source of information that is at once incisive and emotive, thus complementing other items in a collection. In recent publications, I repeatedly emphasise that it is the personal stories of dancers, dancers' parents, teachers, musicians and others who are affiliated with dance, that should be foregrounded. In concluding one article, I note that the 'principal purpose has been to recount the experiences of Croatian immigrants and their dance practices in Sydney and to let their stories be recorded'.<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere, I comment on the 'nuanced and multi-faceted' nature of the migration stories of the immigrants who brought their dance practices across the globe and perpetuate them in their adopted homeland.<sup>92</sup>

Stories also personify the narratives of activities and reinforce the intertwining of the 'pathways' about which Finnegan speaks.<sup>93</sup> Each potential participant contributes to the account of dance as a hobby, a passion and a profession; the final sentence in my history of one culturally specific genre in Australia reads 'this book has recounted some of the early part of that account, and it is a story that is still being told now, in the present day, and will continue to be told well into the future'.<sup>94</sup> I wrote this to foster a sense of inclusivity in the narrative of dance, and some readers have subsequently contacted me, wishing to share their stories. Oral histories, especially from those who are amateur aficionados rather than dance professionals, are the most likely means to encourage others to recount their own experiences.

However, an archive of immigrants' dance practices should not consist solely of verbal accounts. Dance is an activity of the body and to provide a holistic record, materials relating to somatic movements, items worn and held during a performance, promotional ephemera and information about the temporal and spatial contexts of dance performances should also be collected. The remainder of the article examines

---

91 Jeanette Mollenhauer, 'Dancing Transnationally: Croatian Immigrants in Sydney, Australia', *Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 144.

92 Jeanette Mollenhauer, 'Dancing Bodies, Living Memories: Irish Immigrants in Sydney', in Jonathan Wooding and Lorna Barrow (eds), *Memory and Foresight in the Celtic World: Perspectives from the Late Medieval Through Modern Periods* (Sydney: Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 19, Sydney University Press, 2019), 254.

93 Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians*, 305.

94 Jeanette Mollenhauer, *Dancing at the Southern Crossroads: A History of Irish Step Dance in Australia 1880–1940* (Sydney: Anchor Books Australia, 2020), 139.

these facets of a dance archive and begins this process by reviewing the present state of Australian catalogues and then examining current collections beyond Australia.

### **THE PROPOSED ARCHIVE: DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

The various culturally specific archives described earlier could be used as starting points for the pursuit of a topical focus such as dance. The foundation of existing physical and digital materials would provide evidence of emic and etic interest, thus encouraging additional contributions to those collections. However, a given topic can also be the catalyst. Beginning with the subject of diasporic dance, an internet search of only two hours led to the production of the table in Appendix 1, which lists some of the immigrant dance groups currently operating in the city of Sydney. It is not intended to be comprehensive, but it demonstrates the breadth and depth of dance activities that are operational in Australia's largest city. The table lists dance groups from 42 nations, along with two multi-national troupes.

The websites listed in Appendix 1 provide contact details for a teacher, committee secretary or other public-profile individual who could either act as a gatekeeper themselves or find someone from the dance group who will assume that role. It is quite likely that some further dance groups and significant individuals would then be discovered through snowball sampling.<sup>95</sup> For example, there may be dance troupes who do not choose or are unable to have a website, and individuals who have retired due to poor health. Leaders of various dance groups are ideally positioned to act as gatekeepers, can recommend significant interview subjects and can suggest strategies for engaging those subjects with the project.<sup>96</sup>

Still, along with engaging the leadership, a strategy of according agency to all prospective contributors is likely to encourage people to provide oral histories, come forward with their personal memorabilia, including photographs, video footage of

---

95 H. Russell Bernard and Gery W. Ryan, *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 367.

96 McKirdy, *Practicing Oral History*, 23.

performances and programs from concerts and festivals, all of which could be either donated or copied in digital form for addition to the collection.

Until recently, ‘public memory was constructed and disseminated for the people but not by the people’ and this [archival] practice should be eschewed in favour of greater cooperation between lay and scholarly architects.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, Arora suggests that it is ‘important to continue to exert pressure to decolonize museums through ethical and inclusive practices’.<sup>98</sup> The establishment of reciprocity from the outset is more likely to result in active engagement of individuals and dance groups, allowing dance participants to conceptualise the collection as ‘their’ archive. As also observed by Light, a collaborative strategy also decolonises the collection process and is likely to hold greater appeal than a request to donate to an institution, where the benefit to donors may be obscured by notions of philanthropic prestige.<sup>99</sup> Facilitating access would further enhance this team-based process and practical suggestions include ‘more user-friendly opening hours, consultations about service delivery, support for community archives and the use of volunteers in structured projects, awareness-raising events and online access to archival content’.<sup>100</sup>

The ‘professionals’, in the case of this collection, should include both dance scholars and archivists, whose purpose is to ‘create holes...that allow in the voices of our users. We need descriptive architectures that allow our users to speak to and in them’.<sup>101</sup> Those ‘holes’ can be filled by engaging an emic perspective about experiences of migration and dance, which ‘can bring a level of understanding, knowledge, sensitivity and recognition of significance that an outsider might not possess’.<sup>102</sup> More specifically, the proposed collection would ‘require engagement with the marginalized and silenced...[and searches for salient]...sub-narratives and counter-narratives’.<sup>103</sup>

---

97 Haskins, ‘Between Archive and Participation’, 403.

98 Arora, ‘Decolonizing the Museum’, 129.

99 Light, ‘Beyond Museums’.

100 Newman, ‘Revisiting Archive Collections’, 59.

101 Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, ‘Stories and Names’, *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 285.

102 Jon Newman, ‘Revisiting Archive Collections: Developing Models for Participatory Cataloguing’, *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 33, no. 1 (2012): 62.

103 Duff and Harris, ‘Stories and Names’, 285.

How better to obtain emic experiences and offer a voice to a broad range of participants than through the collection of oral narratives?

However, collectors should be aware of various socio-cultural, political and ethical issues. Collecting oral accounts implies gathering viewpoints from members of a community, and 'community archives' mean those 'collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control'.<sup>104</sup> However, the conceptualisation of 'community' must be addressed, since a community can 'encompass not only shared identities but also shared ideologies',<sup>105</sup> and is therefore open to 'multiple interpretations'.<sup>106</sup> An awareness that 'conceptual understandings about ownership, knowledge, community, and chronology also differ' between communities and thus, fluidity in the approach to collection processes, exhibitions and levels of access is required.<sup>107</sup> Otherwise,

community or group identity becomes the object of regulation through the heritage management process, not only reinforcing the power differentials in community–expert relations, but also ensuring the legitimacy of essentialist notions of 'community' and their continual misrecognition.<sup>108</sup>

Still, there is much optimism about the benefits of community archiving. They may 'change the nature of what can be known about a community's history and how it can be known'.<sup>109</sup> They also 'offer an important and empowering assertion of community resistance to otherwise exclusionary and (often) marginalising dominant narratives'.<sup>110</sup>

---

104 Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd, 'Whose Memories', 73.

105 Brilmyer, Gabiola, Zavala and Caswell, 'Reciprocal Archival Imaginaries', 22.

106 Flinn, 'Community Histories', 153.

107 Shell-Weiss, 'Good Intentions', 108.

108 Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith, 'The Recognition and Misrecognition of Community Heritage', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 11.

109 Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci and Marika Cifor, "'To Be Able To Imagine Otherwise": Community Archives and the Importance of Representation', *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 17.

110 Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd, 'Whose Memories', 83.

For a collection relating to immigrants, this can catalyse ‘a profound ontological change, from a position of loneliness and despair to one of solidarity and hope’.<sup>111</sup>

In spite of the fluidity embedded in the notion of ‘community’, oral histories serve as discrete means by which subjectivity construction and the co-creation of meaning can be facilitated. They offer ‘a degree of depth, flexibility, richness, and vitality’ that cannot be gleaned from standard interviews, promote participant reflexivity about past activities and expose the effects of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors on those activities.<sup>112</sup> To that end, the aim is for the interviews to be ‘worthwhile for...[the]... narrators and, ideally, empowering’.<sup>113</sup>

Witcomb proposes a ‘pedagogy of listening, as the priority is to highlight different voices in order to represent history “from below”’.<sup>114</sup> For participants, a process of collaborative construction may serve to define the boundaries of a given community. For collectors and curators, the oral narratives may independently inform exhibition themes and the selection of supplementary materials. Such a strategy is more likely to avoid essentialism by emphasising intra-community variations, so that the histories, ‘rather than being simply contradictory and ambiguous, or individual representations of memory, are reflections of, and active rejoinders’ to people’s experiences.<sup>115</sup>

In order to privilege insider perspectives, practical approaches may include the use of languages other than English, to acknowledge important linguistic characteristics of a cultural group.<sup>116</sup> Some collectors have chosen to utilise group members as co-researchers because ‘they may have access to word-of-mouth networks (and therefore to material that even the most dedicated outreach officer would find hard to reach), but also because they are more likely to be trusted by community

---

111 Caswell, Migoni, Geraci and Cifor, ‘To Be Able To Imagine Otherwise’, 17.

112 Miles and Crush, ‘Personal Narratives’, 85.

113 Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, ‘Who’s Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety about Ethics’, *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 2 (2016): 354.

114 Witcomb, ‘Oral History and First-Person Narratives’, 210.

115 Sangster, ‘Telling Our Stories’, 23.

116 Brilmyer, Gabiola, Zavala and Caswell, ‘Reciprocal Archival Imaginaries’.



members'.<sup>117</sup> These strategies would serve to distinguish between notions of private and public, as defined by immigrant communities, in relation to selection of materials for display.<sup>118</sup> However, there is also a potential disadvantage: insider research may catalyse intense affective responses for the interviewer,<sup>119</sup> and thus both collectors and their co-researchers would need to be adequately prepared for this eventuality.

The proposed archive adopts a different boundary to the Australian-based collections identified earlier; it would address the practice of culturally specific dance in a diasporic context.<sup>120</sup> Topical archives have already been evaluated as successful, for example, at the Migration Museum in South Australia.<sup>121</sup> By focusing on the act of dance, individual identities would be decentred as all potential contributors focus on their choreographic experiences. Privileging a shared activity may also have a mediating role where there are 'competing versions of history amongst communities'.<sup>122</sup> Instead, the 'analysis of social patterns', particularly those that are generated by oral accounts, may reveal similarities of choreographic experience, such as having been subjected to colonialist tropes in the former homeland and/or in Australia.<sup>123</sup> The idea of a 'dance community' based on a shared activity offers latent possibilities to foreground connections (while still acknowledging collisions) between immigrant groups.

A creative pursuit such as dance would benefit from innovative modes of collection and curation, and recent projects affirm that oral accounts need not be restricted to voice recordings alone. Andrew Jakubowicz notes that 'in developing histories in multicultural societies the voices of diversity are greatly enhanced through

---

117 Mary Stevens, Andrew Flinn and Elizabeth Shepherd, 'New Frameworks for Community Engagement in the Archive Sector: From Handing Over to Handing On', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 66.

118 Szekeres, 'Representing Diversity'.

119 Christos Peristianis, 'The "Uncanny" Present: Reflections from an Intimate Oral History Encounter', *Academia Letters*, Article 1894 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL1894>.

120 It may be possible to define the boundaries; for example, in my doctoral ethnography, I restricted my investigation about transnational dance activities to first- and second-generation Irish and Croatian immigrants. See Mollenhauer, *Translated Traditions*.

121 Szekeres, 'Representing Diversity'.

122 Szekeres, 'Representing Diversity', 145.

123 Sangster, 'Telling Our Stories', 22.

audio-visual approaches'.<sup>124</sup> This strategy was adopted by the Immigration Museum in Melbourne for the 'Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours' exhibition.<sup>125</sup> A video-recorded interview was divided into sections with which visitors could interact through a touch table. Thus, 'visitors are not learning about a specific moment in history but are being challenged to engage critically with collective understandings of people's identities'.<sup>126</sup>

Dance archivists are increasingly turning to collections in which artists 'deeply participate', not only by corporeal performances but also through verbal narratives.<sup>127</sup> Australian-based dance scholar and practitioner Priya Srinivasan has an extensive record of multi-modal presentations featuring the concept of 'neighbouring', the paradox of which 'lies in its offers of help and its implicit demands for a reciprocal counter-gesture through the gift, which can be accessed through the intersubjective encounter'.<sup>128</sup> Practically, this means

to sit, stand, flow, exist, move, sing, talk and listen alongside one another; sometimes in odd juxtapositions of personal, mythological and political fragmented narratives and non-narratives that created an experimental and experiential model of engagement for ourselves and audiences when we all participated in the event at Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Melbourne Museum.<sup>129</sup>

The use of singing here is a reminder that narratives need not only be spoken. The 'potential of migrant songs as an expressive mode' exemplifies pertinent and culturally appropriate intertextual collaboration between practitioners of various artforms.<sup>130</sup>

---

124 Jakubowicz, 'The Voices of Diversity', 196.

125 Witcomb, 'Oral History and First-Person Narratives', 213.

126 Witcomb, 'Oral History and First-Person Narratives'.

127 Bench, 'Mapping Touring', 6.

128 Priya Srinivasan, 'Decolonising Moves: Gestures of Reciprocity as Feminist Intercultural Performance', *South Asian Diaspora* 11, no. 2 (2019): 209.

129 Srinivasan, 'Decolonising Moves', 216.

130 Miles and Crush, 'Personal Narratives', 92.

Another impressive exhibit was located at the Shepparton Art Museum, Victoria, earlier in 2022. First Nations artist Amrita Hepi had

edited together short cuts of videos featuring people and animals dancing, sampled from social media, dance history and her own previous artworks... She tells us stories of why she loves to dance and encourages us to think about the ways we encounter dancing in unexpected places every day.<sup>131</sup>

Hepi's presentation insightfully seeks, first, to engage the public with dance, an activity in which only 8 per cent of the population participates.<sup>132</sup> It also facilitates a cross-cultural encounter as visitors see her dance and hear her account of her experiences as a First Nations dancer. The examples of Srinivasan and Hepi illustrate the benefits of 'an encounter with both the voice and face of the person giving the oral history, rather than through a written quote... because of the importance of mimetic communication which establishes infectious connections between people and which demands attention'.<sup>133</sup>

Finally, several potential benefits of the proposed archive should be recorded. Archives can affirm immigrants and their communities as valued members of Australia's population. Interviews with founders, volunteers and staff at 12 community archives in Southern California show that such repositories offered considerable impact to marginalised population sectors in three domains:

ontological (in which members of marginalized communities get confirmation 'I am here'); epistemological (in which members of marginalized communities get confirmation 'we were here'); and social (in which members of marginalized communities get confirmation 'we belong here').<sup>134</sup>

---

131 Shepparton Art Museum, 'A Call to Echo'. Available at <https://sheppartonartmuseum.com.au/whats-on-now-showing/amrita-hepi-a-call-to-echo/>.

132 The Australia Council for the Arts, 'Creating Our Future: Results of The National Arts Participation Survey'. Available at <https://australiacouncil.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/creating-our-future>. Accessed 22 March 2022.

133 Witcomb, 'Oral History and First-Person Narratives', 213.

134 Caswell, Migoni, Geraci and Cifor, 'To Be Able To Imagine Otherwise', 6.

Expressing the same ideas in a different manner, Tonia Sutherland describes the aim of a proposed archive for African diaspora dance forms as follows:

By expanding archival notions of record, provenance, representation, custody, and preservation to include praxes around gesture, orality, plurality, self- and community-determination, and non-custodial consultancy relationships, it becomes possible to imagine the archives of the African diaspora: an archive of embodied records held in concert with other tangible records described in culturally affirming terms and cared for – with dignity and trust – by the people and communities who created them.<sup>135</sup>

These community-centred descriptions should provide inspiration for any Australian-based collection. Professionals are operationally requisite for inauguration, perpetuation and representation in scholarly outputs, but significant agency should be accorded to the archival subjects. Srinivasan even suggests that ‘a decolonising praxis would necessitate women of colour to engage with each other without mediation via a white centre’.<sup>136</sup> While she is speaking about performances here, the same principle may be applied to archive formulation.

The proposed repository would illuminate the broader activities of the various dance groups which, in both regular private rehearsals and public engagements, act as community focal points and loci of interpersonal connectivity as individuals combine their efforts to produce a terpsichorean performance. They would also illustrate important components of the many social rituals which have become part of the fabric of Australian society, including St Patrick’s Day, Lunar New Year and the Blessing of the Fleet.<sup>137</sup> Oral histories that reference such events would mean that ‘community members have access to recalled memories which enable them to

---

135 Tonia Sutherland, ‘Reading Gesture: Katherine Dunham, the Dunham Technique, and the Vocabulary of Dance as Decolonizing Archival Praxis’, *Archival Science* 19 (2019): 167–83.

136 Srinivasan, ‘Decolonising Moves’, 210.

137 This festival represents the continuation of a Mediterranean tradition. WA Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Office of Multicultural Interests, ‘Fremantle Blessing of the Fleet 2020’. Available at <https://www.omi.wa.gov.au/events-and-training/events-calendar/event/2020/10/18/community-calendar/fremantle-blessing-of-the-fleet>. Accessed 17 October 2021.

interpret their unique historical situations'.<sup>138</sup> Thus, the 'pathways' of both individuals and dance genres would be identified and contextualised within Australia's broader socio-cultural historical narrative.<sup>139</sup>

As already discussed, there is a need to foster interaction between all sectors of the national population. In particular, the cherished customs of immigrant communities that have been transported to Australia and propagated in a new environment should be deemed worthy of formal recording and preservation. Greater parity of representation in institutional collections would promote the ideal of celebrating Australia's diversity. It would also have an educative function, albeit rudimentary, though presenting the public with examples of difference in various aspects of life, such as the performing arts.

The archive described here would also inform the public about the presence of multiple dance genres in Australia that are beyond the Western concert dance canon and enable basic introductions to those dance forms. Beyond localised multicultural festivals, there is little opportunity for Australians to witness non-Western dance, and the proposed archive would address that void. Indeed, both live and digital performances could be supplemented by audience participation sessions, adding kinaesthetic experience to the catalogue of activities available to archive visitors.

## CONCLUSION

This article has described how archival collections can benefit those who dance, educate the wider community and provide fruitful sources of data for dance scholars. My own experience has led me to argue here for the inclusion of oral histories along with the various concrete and tangible items that may be attached to a performance or dance practice. Additionally, a strategy of polyvocality would tease out the intersubjectivities of migration and dance. Oral histories succinctly enunciate salient topics including the plasticity of dance, the relationships between modes of movement, social engagement and the effects of migration on dance and dancers.

---

138 McKirdy, *Practicing Oral History*, 22.

139 Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians*, 305.

They could focus on issues of cultural identity, transnational connections and the joys and challenges of transplanting and reinterpreting traditional customs within the context of multicultural Australia. Oral histories would also provide background information to inanimate objects such as costumes and illuminate the people, places and activities shown in photos and videos. The connections, and even an occasional collision, between oral accounts and other materials would offer a well-granulated experiential narrative about dance in a diasporic environment.

I have presented relevant scholarship surrounding the notion of ‘community’ and the establishment of community archives. I have also discussed various practicalities of oral history collection and have addressed some socio-cultural, political and ethical issues that may arise. The proposed archive focuses on an activity – dance – and I have described advantages of this approach for promoting cross-cultural relationships and collaborations. I have also illustrated several innovative exhibition strategies for presenting oral materials, especially in the context of dance.

The development of a dance archive for all immigrant groups in Australia, whether those groups began to arrive with the first British ships in 1788 or as recently as the twenty-first century, would serve to provide a representation of dance in Australia which accurately reflects the diversity that characterises both the nation’s population *and* its dance landscape. Collections of all types gather ‘what is selected to be of value or worth to an individual, group, or institution’.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, the absence of an archive devoted to the traditional dance practices of Australia’s immigrant groups is problematic, because it represents a means through which Australia can privilege pan-cultural, theatricalised genres to the exclusion of all other forms. There has been insufficient documentation of the dance practices of the nation’s many immigrant communities, resulting in a choreo-musical gap within the settlement stories of these groups. The same comments could be applied to immigrants’ musical, visual arts and literary practices as these, too, are underrepresented in Australian archives.

---

140 Foley, ‘Postcolonial Agency’, 625.

Oral histories, as suggested in this article, will reveal much about the somatic translation of dance to a new geographic context. They will also demonstrate aspects of life in a multicultural society, thus contributing to the understanding of difference and the promotion of tolerance and inclusivity. To paraphrase Moseley and Wheatley,

archiving is a [cultural] issue, given the relative absence of texts traditionally coded as [culturally specific] from publicly accessible archives, and this is an absence that needs to be addressed by and for future archivists and historians.<sup>141</sup>

It is noted by Vasudevan et al. that 'perhaps the most difficult absence of all is the researcher's confrontation with the fact of mortality, the failure to speak to people and record their experience in time' and unless an archive is established, Australian researchers will be faced with the loss of opportunities to engage with individuals whose memories are filled with stories about the perpetuation of traditional dance genres in an Australian context.<sup>142</sup> In addition, historians must 'account for absence, both of those who have been "unarchived" and of those who have chosen to be absent'.<sup>143</sup> The existence of 'unarchived' dance practitioners, genres and performances represents both a skewing of the national dance landscape and a disservice to the cause of diversity, understanding and tolerance. Hopefully, this article will catalyse the *presence* of immigrants' dance praxes, featuring rich and fruitful oral accounts about dance, within Australian archives.

---

141 Moseley and Wheatley, 'Is Archiving a Feminist Issue?', 156.

142 Ravi S. Vasudevan, Rosie Thomas, Neepa Majumdar, Moinak Biswas and Stephen Putnam Hughes, 'Editorial: Archives and Histories', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 1.

143 Kathryn M. Hunter, 'Silence in Noisy Archives: Reflections on Judith Allen's "Evidence and Silence – Feminism and the Limits of History" (1986) in the Era of Mass Digitisation', *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91–92 (2017): 210.

## APPENDIX 1

COUNTRY	NAME AND WEBSITE OF DANCE GROUP OR SCHOOL
Argentina	Tango Synergy <a href="https://tangosynergy.com/">https://tangosynergy.com/</a>
Armenia	Hamazkaine Armenian Sydney Dance Company (ASDC) <a href="http://www.asdc.com.au/">http://www.asdc.com.au/</a>
Austria	Hubertus Modern Folk Dance Group <a href="http://www.austrianclubsydney.com/">http://www.austrianclubsydney.com/</a>
Bolivia	The Bolivia Marka dancers <a href="https://www.bemac.org.au/">https://www.bemac.org.au/</a>
Brazil	Sambase Ire <a href="http://sambaseire.com.au">http://sambaseire.com.au</a>
Bulgaria	Rodina <a href="http://www.rodinasydney.org.au/">http://www.rodinasydney.org.au/</a>
Chile	Danza Montun <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Danza.Montun.Australia">https://www.facebook.com/Danza.Montun.Australia</a>
China	Yau Kung Mun <a href="http://www.ykm.com.au/">http://www.ykm.com.au/</a>
Columbia	Colombian Cultural & Folkloric Organisation <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ccfosydney">https://www.facebook.com/ccfosydney</a>
Croatia	Croatian Folkloric Ensemble Vukovar <a href="https://www.facebook.com/cfevukovar/">https://www.facebook.com/cfevukovar/</a>
Cuba	Havana Dance <a href="https://www.havanadance.com.au/">https://www.havanadance.com.au/</a>
Cyprus	Kimata Dance Troupe <a href="https://www.facebook.com/KimataDanceTroupe/">https://www.facebook.com/KimataDanceTroupe/</a>
Egypt	Farrah – Fananat al Raks al Masri <a href="http://www.farrahegyptiandance.org.au/">http://www.farrahegyptiandance.org.au/</a>
England	Sydney English Country Dance <a href="https://englishcountrydancesydney.com/">https://englishcountrydancesydney.com/</a>
Estonia	Virmalised <a href="https://sydneyeestiselts.org.au/">https://sydneyeestiselts.org.au/</a>



Ethiopia	Samrawit <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Samrawit-722203961128419/">https://www.facebook.com/Samrawit-722203961128419/</a>
Fiji	Duavata Fiji Dance Group – Sydney <a href="https://www.facebook.com/duavatafiji/">https://www.facebook.com/duavatafiji/</a>
Germany	St Raphael's German Folk Dancing Group <a href="http://www.straphaelsdancegroup.com/">http://www.straphaelsdancegroup.com/</a>
Greece	Institute of Hellenic Dance & Culture <a href="https://www.greekdancing.com.au/">https://www.greekdancing.com.au/</a>
Hungary	Kengugró Australian-Hungarian Folklore Ensemble <a href="http://kengugro.org/">http://kengugro.org/</a>
India	Bharatalaya Dance Academy <a href="http://www.bharatalaya.com/">http://www.bharatalaya.com/</a>
Indonesia	Suara Indonesia Dance Group <a href="http://suaraindonesiadance.com.au/">http://suaraindonesiadance.com.au/</a>
Iran	Persian Dance Group <a href="https://www.facebook.com/PersianDanceGroup/">https://www.facebook.com/PersianDanceGroup/</a>
Ireland	Sydney Irish Ceili Dancers <a href="http://www.sydneyirishceilidancers.com.au">www.sydneyirishceilidancers.com.au</a>
Israel	Israeli Dancing Sydney <a href="http://www.israelidancingsydney.com.au/">http://www.israelidancingsydney.com.au/</a>
Japan	Sydney Japanese Dance <a href="https://japanesedancesydney.com/">https://japanesedancesydney.com/</a>
Latvia	Jautrais pāris <a href="http://www.slb.org.au/">http://www.slb.org.au/</a>
Lebanon	Cedars of Lebanon Folkloric Group <a href="http://www.cedarsoflebanonfg.com/home.htm">www.cedarsoflebanonfg.com/home.htm</a>
Macedonia	Ilinden <a href="https://www.facebook.com/MKUDIinden/">https://www.facebook.com/MKUDIinden/</a>
Poland	Lajkonik <a href="https://lajkonik.com.au/">https://lajkonik.com.au/</a>
Romania	Romanian Folk Dancing – Sydney Dance Rhythms <a href="https://sydneydancerhythms.com/about-sdr/news-and-events/">https://sydneydancerhythms.com/about-sdr/news-and-events/</a>

Samoa	Samoa Siva <a href="https://www.facebook.com/SamoaSivaTaupouClassesWithMaryjaneMckibbinSchwenke/">https://www.facebook.com/SamoaSivaTaupouClassesWithMaryjaneMckibbinSchwenke/</a>
Scotland	Scots on the Rocks <a href="http://www.sotr.org.au">www.sotr.org.au</a>
Serbia	Sv Sava Serbian Folkloric Dance Group <a href="https://www.stsava.org.au/school-folklore/">https://www.stsava.org.au/school-folklore/</a>
Slovakia	Stonožka <a href="http://slovakcommunitysydney.com/en/stonozka/">http://slovakcommunitysydney.com/en/stonozka/</a>
South Sudan	South Sudanese Twic Mayardit Dance Group <a href="https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2017/10/10/meet-south-sudanese-dance-group-helping-youths-stay-connected">https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2017/10/10/meet-south-sudanese-dance-group-helping-youths-stay-connected</a> This provides evidence of the existence of the dance group but no website for group was located.
Spain	The Spanish School of Dance <a href="http://www.spanishdance.com.au/">http://www.spanishdance.com.au/</a>
Thailand	Siam Classic Dance Studio <a href="https://www.siamdancestudio.com/">https://www.siamdancestudio.com/</a>
Ukraine	Veselka Ukrainian Dance Ensemble of Sydney <a href="http://www.veselka.com.au/">http://www.veselka.com.au/</a>
Multi-Regional Group 1	Dusha Balkana (the Balkan countries) <a href="https://www.facebook.com/dusha.balkana">https://www.facebook.com/dusha.balkana</a>
Multi-Regional Group 2	Matavai Pacific Cultural Arts (Pacific Islands) <a href="https://matavai.com.au/">https://matavai.com.au/</a>