

Dancing Archives of Experience: Surfacing Histories, Staging Subjectivities

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The body never stops accumulating . . . every gesture, every word involves our past, present, and future.

—Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*

For if choreography knows something, it is that the archive does not store: it acts.

—André Lepecki, “The Body as Archive: Will to Re-enact and the Afterlives of Dances”

Withdrawing her name from consideration for a New York Performance Award (better known as a “Bessie”) in the “Performer” category, contemporary American dancemaker Jennifer Monson explained that she does not conceive of herself as a performer in her solo *Live Dancing Archive* (2012), the work for which she had been nominated. Instead, she perceives herself as dancing an archive of choreographic and sensorial histories, an embodiment of a kinesthetic record. In an open letter to the nominating committee, Monson (2013) elaborated:

[With this work] I am proposing that dance has the capacity to function as an archival container of the experiences of a range of phenomena that can only be collected through the perceptual research inherent in the practices I have developed. . . . It is not something that I “perform”—it is the way in which those places, experiences, and states live in my dancing.

In her configuration, Monson’s embodiment of the movement renders visible the kinesthetic knowledge gathered in her years of improvisational practice.¹ The choreography of this work expands on her research into ecological systems, returning her site-specific investigation of environmental structures and changing landscapes to the stage. For Monson, her dancing materializes the often-ignored knowledge of space, temporality, and experience that is archived in her physicality.

Positioning the body’s capacity to register information about systems and places in this way, Monson’s solo returns to the movement material that was generated in her original sites of primary research. The foundational source material for *Live Dancing Archive* draws on dance phrases created during *BIRDBRAIN: Osprey Migration* (2002), an eight-week journey along the Atlantic flyway, specifically reenacting movement from a shared improvisational structure initiated on a beach on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina. In the initial improvisational score, Monson and her collaborators

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created a series of solos, both “mapping” the landscape around them and dancing each other’s “maps.”² These instantaneous dances, echoing both the geography of their location and the individual physicalities of their creators, generated layers of corporeal information about both place and identity. In *Live Dancing Archive*, Monson animates this information, reembodying the improvisational actions that these spaces prompted and reinhabiting the physical gestures that she and her collaborators crafted.



Jennifer Monson, *Live Dancing Archive*. Photographer: Ian Douglas.

Essential to her conceptualization of this archival investigation, however, is Monson’s rejection of her role in this reenactment as one of “performer.” Identifying her appearance in this piece as such, she suggests, undermines its archival intent. Assigning her appearance with this label, separates her dancing from the work as a whole: the body is divided from the archive it is materializing; the movement is removed from the knowledge it is creating. The dancing in this work, she contends, does not visually recreate a series of steps or performance states. It does not re-present a movement vocabulary for the audience to recognize and consume. Instead, it engages a specific, cultivated practice that renders visible a bodily way of knowing. The dancing doesn’t signify this knowledge: it enacts it. The dancing materializes the histories of her body and registers information about the places it has inhabited.

This insistence on the archival possibilities of her dancing body and its capacity to make visible the knowledge it holds provoked many viewers to respond to Monson’s work as a reckoning with her own history and sense of identity. Appearing next to more traditional archives, including video of Monson’s site-specific dances and an online catalogue of documents from those journeys, critics met the work on the terms of its presentation—as a physicalized record of Monson’s experience.³ Critic Eva Yaa Asantewaa (2013) typified the reaction, writing that *Live Dancing Archive* “serves as a way for Monson to embody a decade of her history of research and making, her sensitive and searching relationship with ecological systems of environments and communities, and her understanding of herself within all of this as a queer woman, activist, and artist.” Though not explicitly

autobiographical, then, the work has been seen as an articulation of Monson's identity and positionality, with the reenactment of movement material serving as both document and embodiment of an archive of subjectivity. It is this capacity for choreographic reenactments to render visible history, subjectivity, and constructions of identity that this essay explores. To this end, I ask: How can contemporary autobiographical theory illuminate these stagings of the archives? How does the conceptualization of the dancing body as archive re-imagine stagings of selfhood? How does the process of reenactment inform the subjectivities embedded in the archives?

Responding to these queries, I examine two works that engage these very ideas: Jennifer Lacey's *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event* (2004) and Meredith Monk's *Education of the Girlchild* (1972). Both of these solo works, created and performed by American (post)modern dancemakers, contain movement material that the artists have returned to at various times in their careers. With *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event*, Lacey returns to the ideas and movements of her 1995 solo, *Skin Mitten*, in order to reengage the movement and rework the meanings made from that movement. With her multiple returns to *Education of the Girlchild*, Monk reinhabits the actions and impetuses that generated the work, reflecting on her relationship to the material and its images over the course of nearly forty years. Situating my discussion of these works in conversation with recent scholarship about performance archives and autobiographical theory, I propose that these choreographic reenactments allow the artists to reimagine their relationship to an authorship of selfhood, generatively reenvisioning their own subject positions. Further, I suggest that in returning to their own performance works, these dancemakers are creating archives of (kinesthetic, psychic, emotional, and intellectual) experience, continually producing sites for the crafting, staging, and enacting of subjectivity.

Traces, Reenactments, and Performance Archives

Performance theory has long been invested in examining the ways in which “live” performance is documented, the methods by which performance enters historical accounts, and the means by which it resists traditional archiving practices. Following Peggy Phelan's (1993) influential assertion of performance's essential ephemerality, ontological debates around its possible residues have continued. With scholars countering performance's impermanence through operations of the “repertoire” (Taylor 2003), and the return of performance as both “surrogation” (Roach 1996) and “haunting” (Carlson 2003), conceptualizations of the artifacts of performance have particular potency for considering the efficacy of performance in cultural production and the rethinking of historical legacy. For example, in her rich examination of the possibilities of reenactment, Rebecca Schneider (2011) compellingly argues for an examination of the “remains” of performance. Exploring theatrical and artistic works alongside historical reenactments (largely of Civil War battles), she unearths material traces of performance and the remnants of embodiment. In these discussions, she suggests that the potential for the repeatability of performance is, in fact, its profound theoretical intervention, as the possibility of return necessarily complicates notions of temporality and historicity. Schneider writes:

reenactment art poses a certain challenge to our longstanding thrall, fueled by art-historical analysis of performance, to the notion that live performance disappears by insisting that, to the contrary, the live is a vehicle for recurrence—unruly or flawed or unfaithful to the precedence as that recurrence may threaten to be. (29)

With this, she proposes that the possibility of historical/artistic reenactment allows for a reconceptualizing of the functioning of time and the seemingly fixed nature of the past, especially of concern for seemingly evanescent performing arts practices like dance. In this opportunity for recurrence, what becomes prescient, then, is that the past is always already returning. Reenactments not only call attention to the precariousness of historicity but also illuminate understandings of both the present and the future. Through the repetition and reiteration of embodying actions, reenactment, Schneider concludes, “is not remembering the past as if it were only behind, but pitching and stitching forward” (2011, 123).

Issues around the repeatability of performance have been central to many ongoing discussions in dance scholarship. In theorizing the varied ways in which dance works come to the stage and remain in the repertoires of companies or individual bodies, scholars also negotiate the possibilities and limitations of bringing a dance work “back to life.” Early discussions around the efficacy and rationale for reconstructing, reviving, and recreating historical works were often guided by what Helen Thomas (2004) calls “assumptions (implicit and explicit) regarding authenticity, reproducibility and interpretivity” (39). The resulting discourse was often anchored in debates about the relationship between reenactments of work and the “original,” assessing and demarcating the possibilities for success in reproducing a dance production as it was initially staged. Acknowledging the limits of this approach—as both a theoretical and theatrical practice—allowed for a reimagining of what might be offered by bringing a historical dance work to the stage. As Mark Franko (1993) notes, “In the 1980s we began to see reconstructions conveying something closer to the theatrical force of the original choreography: a force, moreover, that potentially influences new work rather than merely animating a historical artifact” (134). Advocating, instead, for the practice of “construction” (as opposed to reconstruction), Franko suggests that restaging archival work aims to reproduce “the effect” of the work rather than replicating specificities of the work itself (136). Reframing the practice of restaging historical dances as an investigation of the sociopolitical space of creation, the reproduction of the particular steps, styles, and performance qualities becomes less precious.

In recent years, many dance theorists have again taken up an interest in reenactments and re-performance as they consider a new “turn to the archives” by many contemporary choreographers (Burt 2003; Hardt 2012; Elswit 2014). Investigating artists who are revisiting the work of other makers to bring works from another era or another body to the stage, these discussions have contemplated both the interest in and the implications of such a move. Central to this discourse has been a debate about the driving forces of these “impulses,” to borrow the term from Hal Foster (2006), toward the embodiment of the historical. André Lepecki (2010) has engaged this concern, arguing for an understanding of this interest in the past as a “will to archive” that manifests in contemporary reenactments of dances from the past. Lepecki suggests that articulating the strategic approaches undertaken in these reenactments—this will to archive—does not arise from a desire for replication or historicization, but from a desire to bring these dances into the present. In this configuration, the body is always already an archive that simultaneously illuminates difference (from an “original”) and creates something new. Repetition is situated as generative, constituting a new work, a new approach, or a new understanding. The kinesthetic turn to the past becomes instigation for the future.

In Lepecki’s elaboration, the capacity for “newness” in reenactment unfixes the notions of authorship that are often associated with choreography. Discussing the “will to archive” within the

projects of Martin Nachbar, Julie Tolentino, and Richard Move, artists who are, each in their own way, reembodying the choreographies of other artists (and other times), Lepecki argues for understanding these returns as undermining the authority attached to choreographic notions of authorship. He positions these reenactments as choreographic and political interventions that subvert the modernist discourse that reifies the power of the individual creator. To this end, he suggests,

the political-ethical imperative for re-enactments not only to reinvent, not only to point out that the present is different from the past, but to invent, to create—become of returning—something that is new and yet participates fully in the virtual cloud surrounding the originating work itself—while bypassing an author’s wishes as last words over a work’s destiny. This is one of the political acts re-enacting performs as re-enactment: it suspends economies of authoritative authors who want to keep their works under house arrest. To re-enact would mean to disseminate, to spill without expecting a return or a profit. It would mean to expel, to ex-propriate, to excorporate under the name of a promise called giving. In other words, re-enactments enact the promise of the end of economy. They make dance return, only to give it away. (Lepecki 2010, 35)

The choreographic tactics of the turn to the archives, as Lepecki explains them, do not fix a dance in its historical time and space, aligned with the power of a sourced author. Instead, they undermine the rigid structures of naming, making compositional structures and identifiable choreographic entities available for reimagining and resituating. Reenacting undercuts the singularity of the choreographer-as-author to position dance as something that is perpetually being “passe[d] around” (Lepecki 2010, 39).

Building on these generative conceptualizations of the turn to the archives, I am suggesting that Lacey and Monk are similarly producing new relationships to the material, movement, and meaning that they are reinhabiting. Their choreographic returns reimagine associations to work they created at earlier times and under different conditions. As such, revisiting their own choreographic archives provides opportunities for reflection on personal and artistic histories, positioning these choreographic returns as negotiations of selfhood. In investigating their experiences of embodiment and reconfiguring their notions of creative production, these solos mine the movement of the past in order to offer new understandings of (and for) the present. As the works to which they are returning are their own, these reenactments do not extricate themselves from the complicated relationship between author and archivist, as Lepecki outlines it. They do not seek to undermine the authority of the choreographic name, but reveal the potential tension between the archive and the subject. In so doing, these choreographers transform the authoritative implications of reembodiment. In returning to these solos, a form that often seems to collapse the notion of creator and performer, these artists further unravel rigid notions of authorship, as their choreographic returns insist on evolving ideas of what is produced. Situating choreographic composition as process rather than as static product, these works insist on undoing the assertion of authority often assigned to the solo form.⁴ Using different choreographic and performance tactics, both of these works mark differences from their previous iterations, acknowledging these works not as replications of some previous lionized “original” but offering them as something new. In this way, they prioritize fluidity and process over fixed concepts of choreographic constancy. The compositions are allowed to be continually remade, developing perpetually evolving relationships to the material presented.

Reproduced without valorizing replication, these reenactments render difference visible. They propose a way of understanding the performance of being. In so doing, these choreographies allow us to consider these returns as investigations into bodily archives, which reveal the staging of subjectivity and the act of performative self-making.

In situating Jennifer Lacey's *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event* and Meredith Monk's *Education of the Girlchild* as stagings of subjectivity and performative acts, I am drawing on feminist autobiographical scholarship that locates women's self-representation in a variety of artistic projects, which do not always (or perhaps even often) provide a singular or stable referent unified around an explicit "I."⁵ Projects that are identified as self-representational are unified by their continual negotiation of internalized conceptions of selfhood, embodied experiences of existence, and perceived constructions of identity. These articulations of subjectivity acknowledge that "the past is not a static repository of experience but always engaged from the present moment, itself ever-changing" (Smith and Watson 2002, 9). As such, women's self-representations often position themselves as conditional and continually constructed, crafted through experience. As Joan W. Scott contends, "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (1991, 779). It is along similar lines that I locate these works, which negotiate the knowledge of the kinesthetic archives, as intersecting with feminist autobiographical theory. As longtime choreographers and performers, Lacey and Monk—at least in part—understand themselves in relationship to their experience of making, embodying, and repeating movement. As dancers, they understand themselves in relationship to their experience of their bodies, which, as Smith and Watson remind us, hold knowledge "because memory itself is embodied" (2002, 10). Dancing then can generate, contain, and surface memories.

Mining bodily histories through dance reenactments recognizes the multiple layers of subjectivity embedded in the bodily archive. In this way, these choreographic returns can be understood as autobiographical gestures, as the act of reenactment necessarily negotiates the performativity of experience—the generative possibilities of redoing and the necessity of foregrounding the present in the revisiting of the past. While this could perhaps be argued for all choreographic returns to previously performed work, the returns to these particular solos are particularly potent as stagings of experience, as the material to which they are returning wrestles, in different ways, with notions of identity, self-presentation, and personal histories. The works do not present singular autobiographical narratives, offering unified reflections on already assembled senses of self. However, their choreographic conceits position them as exploring the self-referential, and their re-performance histories allow these dances to create a generative version of selfhood. As a result, these two solos offer fertile ground for examining how these theatrical reenactments provide their choreographers with sites to frame their understandings of experience and stage their own subjectivity. Exploring the archives of their own movement, these artists are authoring provisional versions of selfhood that are always in process.

Two Discussions of an Anterior Event

Revisiting previously presented work is the central premise of Jennifer Lacey's *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event* (2004). In this solo, Lacey returns to the movement material of her solo *Skin Mitten* (1995). Essential to this return is not just a reenactment of the movement vocabulary, but also a revisiting of the representations of its initial performance. In *Two Discussions*, a live reembodyment of the movement from *Skin Mitten* and a running textual commentary that subtitles the initial solo are

offered alongside, over top of, and bookending a video projection of the earlier work. In layering each of these elements, Lacey's 2004 composition reveals a multiplicity of artifacts connected to the initial solo. Mining these artifacts to create a new choreographic work, the composition presents multiple—sometimes divergent—enunciations of Lacey's experience, uncovering the temporal complexity of the body as archive. The different mediums, each marked by their own historical context, allow Lacey to return to the previous material without attempting to recreate its performance intentions or perceived meanings. Built in relationship to the earlier composition, the new work theatrically examines Lacey's shifting relationship to her body and its history. The return is choreographed into the production so as to reveal its sites of difference and reimagine the relationships generated in the process.

Deeply invested in interrogating the process of dancemaking, Lacey understands performance creation as an “ontological pursuit” (Doris Duke Performing Artist Awards 2014). Developing specific choreographic processes for each project she pursues, her recent creative work has been primarily developed and performed in Europe. A US citizen, her early career was established in New York, dancing with a number of postmodern dance choreographers, including Randy Warsaw, Yvonne Meier, Jennifer Monson, and John Jasperse. Inspired by these affiliations, she began to perform her own choreography at various “downtown” New York venues in 1991. In 2000, she relocated to Paris, France. Often collaborating with visual artist Nadia Lauro, her subsequent work has been shown at many international venues, including ImpulsTanz, The Tate Modern, the Biennial de Lyon, and Centre Pompidou. Her decision to expatriate—and the circumstances surrounding that choice—is discussed early in the textual narrative of *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event*.

Before that discussion, however, the 2004 solo begins with Lacey talking, describing her attachment to the initial solo and her ambivalence about returning to the material. She then matter-of-factly begins to reenact the movement material. This iteration, though, is pared down from the 1995 solo; the enactment no longer includes the extensive props included in the first version. Once her live performance is underway, the videotaped version, played in its entirety, is projected onto a screen behind the performance space. An ongoing textual commentary appears in subtitles at the bottom of the video frame. The textual “voice,” which is framed by the time of its creation, is most often a familiar first-person narrative but occasionally adopts an analytical third-person mode. The overlapping and combination of each of these elements and the “voices” that they each present allow Lacey to simultaneously perform multiple iterations of her subjective archive.



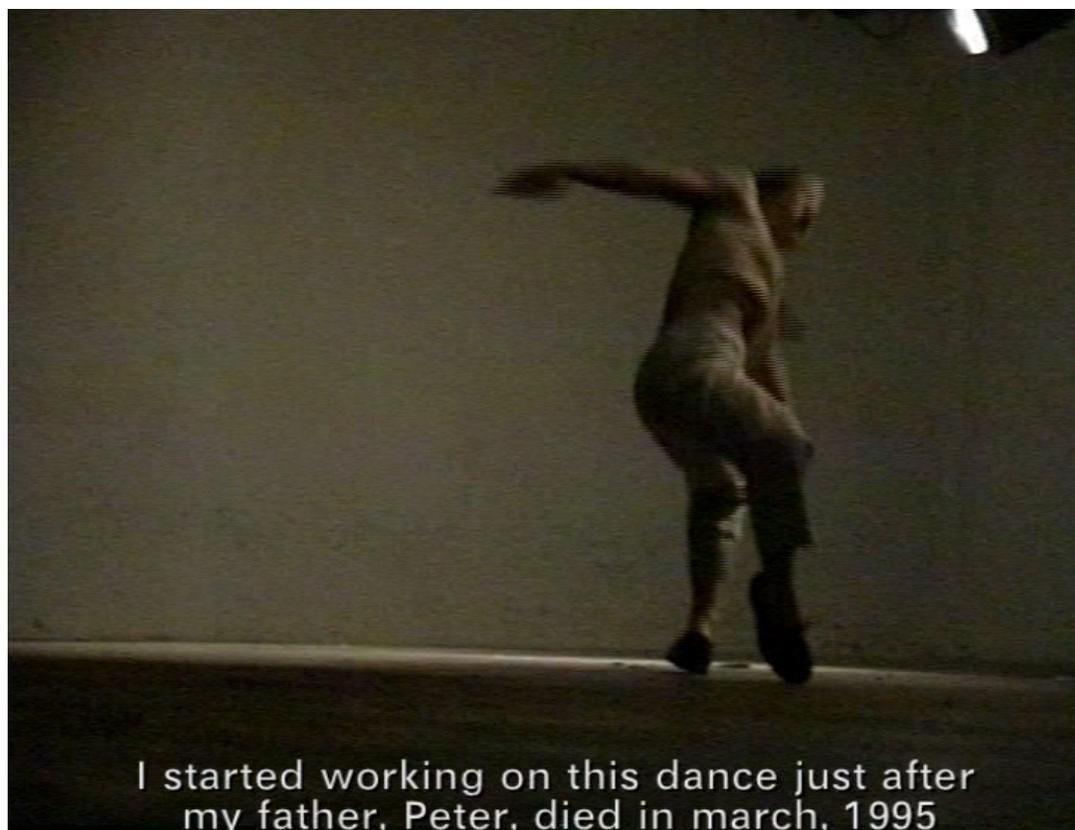
Jennifer Lacey, *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event*. Photographer: Bertrand Prevost.

By not “re-mounting” or “reconstructing” the piece, Lacey stages her initial vision as essential to—though not defining of—a new incarnation of the work. The return is necessarily in conversation with her first solo. This strategy of return is similar to the choreographic practice of “reworking,” as Vida Midgelow explains it. Under this rubric, Midgelow examines a wide variety of “dances that might broadly be perceived to depart from a source text (or texts) in order to give rise to a new dance that has a significantly different resonance, while evoking a purposeful extended and intertextual relationship with that source” (2007, 3). While her study primarily focuses on reworkings of canonical ballets, which have their own complex relationships to perpetuating tradition, securing cultural positioning, and artistic interpretation, several of the theoretical issues Midgelow identifies are useful to this discussion. Reworkings, as she positions them, actively reject the implication of authenticity that often plagues any labelling of different “versions.” In fact, compositional reworkings actively separate themselves from the authentic in order to mark their difference and engage in a dialogue with the resonances of the source itself (11). In this way, Midgelow suggests, the project of choreographic reworkings “implies a process, a rethinking, a reconceptualizing, and a revising of the source text in order to bring about some new resonance” (13). Engaging the process

of reworking demands that new resonances surface and that choreographic returns unfix perceived meanings. Choreographic reworking inherently destabilizes authorship and implied assigned authorities. For Midgelow, these new resonances are found in contemporary choreographers returning to iconic works of earlier generations. In these returns, she argues, contemporary choreographers are rethinking relationships to the ideologies embedded in ballet's narratives and practices, such that its dominant cultural force and representations of bodies can potentially be redirected. While Lacey is not approaching a canonical text or a work of a different era, her reworking of *Skin Mitten* does illuminate the shifting of meanings that is built into work with extant material.

Two Discussions of an Anterior Event can be seen as a staging of those shifting meanings. Lacey's return does not seek to replicate, but to resituate. The multiple experiences with the work—as a creator of the movement, as a performer of the actions, as an individual who remembers the embodiment, as a writer reflecting on the circumstances of that embodiment, as a maker exploring her interest in returning to that physicality, and as the dancer inhabiting the movement in the space of the performance—are all made available in the choreographic return. In this staging, the body is revealed as archive—a site of kinesthetic documentation and subjective experience. It is, as Rivka Syd Eisner notes, “the material location where memory actively lives, where it is played and re-played—synchronously and diachronically—within and across individual lives and larger social fields” (2013, 129). In Lacey's composition, the synchronic and diachronic subjectivities exist concurrently. Each, however, continually references back to Lacey's body—as an initiator of movement, a site of representation, and a source of memory. Her dancing is, thus, positioned as the primary mode of understanding experience.

In order to wrestle with this sense of experience, Lacey's reenactment returns to and reconsiders the movement vocabulary of the earlier solo, a movement vocabulary that stemmed from what Lacey (2006) has called “a pre-adult sexuality where it's not about . . . anything outside your own body.” This movement, she explains both within the work and in discussions about the work, was generated in response to a general frustration with her kinesthetic and choreographic habits. In integrating experiential tasks with a series of evolving movement phrases, the actions invoke play with physicality, sexuality, and sensation. With ever shifting syncopated timings, her body twists, turns, writhes, and doubles back on itself, shifting the initiation of movement from her hips to her shoulders, her hands to her head. Seamlessly and frequently descending to the floor and ascending to an upright position again, the movement phrases alternate between muscular force and exploratory sensuality. Lacey's corporeal language, which engages a somatic approach to reenactment, seems to probe the limits of her physical capacities. In reenacting that language, then, Lacey reflects on her relationship to this material. In the subsequent piece, she does not abandon the invocations of the original solo. Instead, she engages multiple responses, reflecting on the implications of the work and her representation of selfhood nearly a decade later.



Screenshot from projected video of *Skin Mitten*.

The specificities of the previous solo are integrated into the new work, marked by both the time and space of its creation and initial enactments. A performance of *Skin Mitten*, taped at the Menagerie de Verre (in Paris) in 1995, is projected at the back of the performance space during *Two Discussions*. This projection, which hovers over the “live” Lacey, is immediately historicized. Not only does it present a younger version of Lacey but also the video, which is a wash of brown tones, includes minor glitches familiar in analog technology. These elements give the video itself a sense of age, a suggestion of the past. Its “pastness” is firmly situated by the subtitled commentary that has been added to the video. The text begins with a specific reference to the time that has transpired and the spaces Lacey has since inhabited. In textual sections, accompanying the first movement material, the screen reads: “In between the time this video was made and now / I moved out of New York, the city where I grew up and moved to Paris / the city where this video was shot.” Similar tone and content returns throughout the commentary, alerting the audience to these differentiations. By commenting on her life situation when she was first making the solo, Lacey’s text similarly situates the original solo in a personal time frame. Late in the projected performance, she mentions the then recent discussion of the Super Bowl Half-Time “scandal” of 2004. The text reads: “Last week . . . / I bought the herald tribune a few times on the way to rehearsal / the news was full of janet jackson’s breast popping out during prime-time at the superbowl / it seems as if it was a very big deal.” The mention of this news story firmly situates the commentary itself in time. While the piece has continued to be performed in the intervening years, she locates the writing of the text in 2004, therefore situating this element in a set past. Lacey gives this writing a time and place. With this move, her written responses come to signify more than a generalized reference to experience, a sense of pastness; they crystallize a moment in cultural history to which her audience can potentially

relate. She defines the time of this layer so that her commentary is no longer atemporal but fixed in a specific historical moment. The subtitled discourse and its assertion of subjectivity are also located in time, which is temporally distanced from the performance of selfhood present on the stage.

This fixing of an “other” time becomes essential to defining the moment of performance. The “live” version of Lacey offers the present-tense enactment of the compositional author. With this enactment of her own selfhood, performing in the clearly defined theatrical space, she seems to embrace a more casual version of her own comportment. In fact, in her live performance of the solo, Lacey sometimes stops dancing, removes her socks, takes a drink of water, and watches the video along with the audience. The props that helped to create the vivid images of *Skin Mitten* are absent in this version. Lacey notes, in her subtitles, that “when I set about redoing this solo it seemed impossible to do it with all the sticky frilly props.” So she performs the movement without those visual aids. She marks that difference, though, making explicit reference to their absence. Early in the solo, Lacey identifies the spaces where the props should be with yellow tape. She interacts with those spaces in the same way as she would with the props, but in this enactment the actions of the tasks become more abstracted movement. Magnified by their relationship to the video representation, traces of the images remain. They do not, however, contain the same overt sexual and gendered play and performance as in the original solo. The movement is haunted by the previous enactment but allowed its own, newly created resonances. With echoes of other meanings appearing on the screen, this reenactment becomes charged with a somatic exploration of movement and an investigation of the capabilities of Lacey’s body.⁶

As the live section unfolds, there are pauses in the movement and the action. Often there are three things happening at once—the live dancing, the videotaped dancing and the text—and very occasionally there is hardly anything happening at all. Once underway, however, there is a consistent awareness of at least three voices, three temporalities, and three spaces represented. The choreography of this piece—its simultaneous reference to the past and enactment of the present—forces the audience to acknowledge the multiple subjectivities present in the performer. It allows for the multiplicity of representations, in both movement and text, to exist without privileging one as more authoritative or more authentic. Each of the sometimes differing voices, all attributable to Lacey, are located in their experience. The video of Lacey circa 1995 exists alongside the textual response of Lacey located in 2004, and both are seen in relationship to the ever-present performing Lacey. The work, which has each compositional element exist at the same time, does not then trace a history but allows them to reflect and refract against each other all at once. By allowing these elements to be defined by time and to be included in the performance simultaneously, Lacey does not compress her experiences to equal the immediate moment. These representations of self do not “add up” to her current understanding of selfhood but exist in tandem with the self articulated in the present moment. The structure of the work does not feign seamlessness of meaning but allows resonances and representations to play out separately, creating another understanding in their overlaps, convergences, and disjunctions.

The construction of the composition allows Lacey to enunciate different versions of selfhood over time and space, situating them in proximity to one another. By firmly establishing the distance of time from her initial work, Lacey is both the woman who created that work—concerned with her location, her physical experience, etc.—and no longer that woman. Similarly, in creating (and recreating) the spaces of action in which the dance is performed, she calls attention to the difference. She repeats the movement of previous spaces without the definition of the spaces determined by her

additional props. She defines herself in relationship to these representations but does not require that their articulations be seamlessly unified.

By invoking the implications of temporality and defining them spatially within the performance, Lacey offers clearly differentiated versions of selfhood that have developed in the intervening years. Her choreographic score—revealing each medium and narrative of temporal experience and response—does not collapse her experience into a unified “self,” a strategic representation of subjectivity. Instead, Lacey’s composition lingers in the multiplicity, allowing experiences to exist separately, so as to inform, undermine, and complicate each other. Because she stages these elements at the same time, the audience is often forced to choose what perspective they will pay attention to with each passing moment. They are, therefore, responsible for the meaning they make, what they privilege, and the way in which they cobble together a narrative of Lacey’s subjectivity. In the performance of the work, Lacey is able to reembody the material with her own present moment, whatever that might be and however that shifts over time, without silencing the past that has informed that moment or even suggesting that that past creates a direct explanation for the experience of the present.

It is this layering of elements that confounds simple assertions of authority in both the authorship of choreographic product and the defining of experience. *Skin Mitten* is simultaneously the “source” text and an accompaniment to the remade work. The movement it contains is both located in the past and reverberating in the present. In *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event*, Lacey’s body is offered as an archive, in which her present body reflects on and is reflected by her past body, as much as the other way around. In returning to this physical history, Lacey does not seek to replicate the movement of the earlier work, reclaiming authority in its reenactment. She does not aim to recreate its earlier resonances, or the experience of its performance. Instead, returning to the movement becomes material to mine for new understandings of the self. It becomes a site of reflection that reveals knowledge of the choreographer’s body, her sense of self, and her present moment. In reenacting the movement, Lacey situates its historicity without fixing the original incarnation as somehow authentic. She unfixes the assertions of authorship in the initial choreographic work, suggesting that the dance is always already in “discussion” and in process of becoming something new. In so doing, she provides a way of staging her subjectivity, revealing discordant and overlapping senses of selfhood. Offering her performance of the archive as constantly shifting and reframed, her reenactment of previous dancing both animates her kinesthetic history and cultivates the possibilities of the present. In returning to *Skin Mitten* in order to make it new, Lacey engages a feminist autobiographical practice that does not simply reiterate the past but imagines subjectivity into future incarnations of performance.

Education of the Girlchild

In reenacting the movement of *Skin Mitten* in *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event*, Lacey insists on staging difference within her representations of experience. In returning to the movement of *Education of the Girlchild* over her various reenactments, Meredith Monk does not choreographically visibilize the shifting or conflicted versions of experience that its re-performance offers. However, I argue that her continued reenactment of the material over a nearly forty-year period provides another way of understanding the ways in which this archival exploration can stage subjectivity and offer the resulting choreography as a manifestation of experience as processual and provisional.

Meredith Monk has returned to the solo from *Education of the Girlchild*, a work created in 1972, multiple times since its premiere. Emerging from the Judson Dance Theatre, Monk has dedicated her career to exploring performance at the intersection of music and dance, establishing prominence as both a composer and a postmodern dancemaker. Pioneering what is now called “extended vocal technique,” her work has developed sound as an embodied practice, often bringing vocalization into her stylized movement patterns and movement into her evocative soundscapes (Monk 2015). Monk’s interdisciplinary work has been performed around the world, including at the Brooklyn Academy of Arts, Lincoln Center Festival, and Barbican Theatre (London).

Although the solo from *Education of the Girlchild* was initially made independently, in 1973, it became the second section of an evening-length group work, which utilized the same title. Employing Monk’s now definitive style, combining voice and movement in non-literal expression, the “opera,” as Monk calls it, depicts a symbolic and metaphorical narrative of journeying. Dense with evocative images of the mythic and the pedestrian, the evening-length work begins with a female-centred community embarking on a shared, undefined quest through choreographic space. The second section, Monk’s original solo, then traces the life of one of these individual women in a solo journey through time. After not being performed for over a decade, the complete piece was remounted (with many of its original performers) for a limited engagement in 1993. In 2008, Monk resurrected just the lauded solo, performing it in subsequent years as part of a program entitled *Education of the Girlchild Revisited*. As the composition has remained essentially unchanged, Monk’s return to this work can be seen as more closely related to a “remounting” or “reconstruction,” rather than a “reworking.” However, Monk’s engagement in reenactment, I argue, deeply informs this potential to stage subjectivity that is found in the dancing archive. While the structure and movement material have remained largely the same in each iteration, Monk’s approach to returning to the work signals a desire to understand how its embodiment informs the present moment.⁷ In this, I suggest, Monk’s presence—her aging body, her shifting sources of knowledge, her changing physicality—alters the work’s relationship to its choreographic content. Her desire to reimagine this work within these contexts allows the work itself to evolve and to remain perpetually in process.

The narrative content of *Education of the Girlchild* invokes an impulse for reflection and an understanding of the work as a staging of experience. Through repeated gestural phrases and a sung musical motif, the solo unravels the life of an individual woman, physically journeying from age to youth. It is from the space of stillness—perhaps of contemplation—that the solo begins. When Monk finally begins to move, it is with deep, visible breaths, lingering in the act of inhaling and exhaling. In establishing the gestures and postures of an aged body, movement comes slowly, performed at a deliberate pace. Several minutes in, the music begins—a haunting piano melody, with which Monk begins to perform bigger gestures and to sing repeated patterns of syllables. Although not immediately or explicitly defined, these gestures signal a specific kind of domesticity—weaving, folding, making, accompanied by the undulating sounds of her rich voice. Only after establishing these motions does Monk descend from the platform, and begin to travel—with short, shuffling steps—along the winding piece of cloth that curves downstage from the platform to the front of the space.



Meredith Monk, *The Education of the Girlchild: Part II* (1973). Photographer: Lorenzo Capellini. Courtesy of Meredith Monk/The House Foundation for the Arts.

At the first turn in the fabric, she introduces new vocal patterns and movement rhythms, a more upright gate, and motions indicative of caring for children and making a home—the movements that come to signify Middle Age. The performance and specificity of these movements conjures a vision of a younger woman, an “earlier” time for this developing figure. Moving to the end of the trail of cloth, Monk repeats some of her now established gestures—smoothing, making, pointing; this time it is with an unencumbered exuberance. The childlike enactment has a more emphatic rhythm, a lighter weight and a more expansive kinesphere, but her pacing is largely the same. Monk closes the piece in this downstage space, pointing outward, directing her focus beyond this path. Dressed all in white, in this work Monk appears as part ghost, part memory, part representation of recognizable Eastern European yesteryear. Evocative of both place and time, she is familiar without being specific. The choreographic path carries her forward, bringing her ever closer to the audience, but the life this dance illustrates unfolds—like a memory—in reverse. Its structure renders visible the materiality of the body, and the way it is inscribed by its history. As such, its subject matter invokes the notion of “reenactment,” with the compositional structure accentuating the body as a physicalized site of memory and reiteration as implicit to manifesting memory.



Meredith Monk, *The Education of the Girlchild: Part II* (1973). Photographer: Lorenzo Capellini. Courtesy of Meredith Monk/The House Foundation for the Arts.

Although the images created in this work are evocative of Monk's personal and familial history, it is not this metaphorical meditation on the staging of life that instigates my conceptualizing of this work as a staging of subjectivity. Instead, it is Monk's continuing return to this work that seems to offer her most provocative negotiation of self-making. In the setting out to reenact the solo, she has approached the reinhabiting of the material as an exploration of the body as an archive. In Leslie Satin's discussion of Monk's process to remount the work in 1993, for example, Satin noted that Monk was not engaged in reconstructing steps, but in revisiting the thoughts and feelings that had generated the movement and lived in its performance. Satin explains: "Monk describes her experience of performing the piece again in terms of her interior journey to recover the depth and openness of the earlier performances rather than to attempt to copy what she had done, or been, before" (1995, 124). While Monk repeated the steps of the initial performance, her return to the work, then, was not to reiterate or reproduce this choreography so much as to (re)explore experience, excavating her memories of the emotions engaged in prior performance and investigating their contemporary resonances. Similarly, she has discussed her 2008 return to the work as "more intense in its transformative aspects," as she has been "revisiting particular concerns [of that time]" and "revisiting a certain level of intensity" (Kourlas 2011). Her continued

investigation of the work, then, has focused not on how to replicate the action, but on how to reenter the world of memory that it creates. The reenacting of the work becomes one of practice—the practice of doing, the tracing of memory. In these re-performances, the archive of the body is revealed in its practice, rather than cultivated as a product.



Meredith Monk, *Education of the Girlchild Revisited*. © Photo by Patrick Berger.

The contemplative narrative of the work provides a forum within which Monk is able to continually reassert her subjective experience and consider how that experience has been charted, built, and understood. Reinhabiting the work creates a site for reflection, for embodying the past as a manifestation of the present. For Monk, the reenactments are both generative and performative. The work is allowed to evolve in her aging body and changing sense of self. In fact, by continuing to re-perform the work, she is necessarily altering its meanings and the authoritative claims of a single version. Although the composition is reenacted by the same “author,” the author is different—physically, emotionally, experientially. In this way, the work itself is made different, allowed to surface in a body in process. In her reinhabiting this work across so many years, Monk undoes any fixed notions of what the work is, how it looks, and what it must mean.

Equally important in this consideration is the way in which the work has been reframed within a concert program. Although the content of the composition has remained largely the same, in its recent enactments the solo has resituated in its performance. What was initially the resolution of the larger ensemble opera has become, in its most recent performances, the introduction to an evening-length retrospective. The solo has been staged as the first half of a program that features “Shards,” as Monk has called them, of other earlier (primarily vocal) work. With Monk performing alongside her newer ensemble, the reenacted performance is followed by sections of other compositions that Monk created in years around *Girlchild*’s initial creation and performances. The fragments of these other earlier works have been re-formed and rearranged, complementing—and informing—this choreographic return, such that *Education of the Girlchild Revisited* reflects this prism of previously embodied moments. It emerges from a larger narrative of Monk’s performance history, making this reenactment both a return and conclusion, both past and future.

Looking at this dance work as a negotiation of the archival also allows for consideration of this choreography as a space for the embodiment of subjectivity and the manifestation of experience. For the performer, I suggest, this has profound potential for self-conceptualization. Through the reinhabiting of the choreography, Monk can ruminate on the experience of being, of aging, of continually asserting a simultaneously stable and evolving sense of self. The subjectivity created in the doing not only acknowledges but also reifies the experience of the body, allowing repetitions to be continually informed by previous enactments, as well as earlier expectations. In a 2011 interview, Monk noted how the sensations of the gestures and postures have changed with the various reenactments. “How at that age [twenty-nine] could I get into my body that postural thing of an older person?” she asks. Answering herself, she continues: “Now, it’s quite hard for me. I’m closer to that character in age, but to get into that body . . .” (Kourlas, 2011). What she imagined at the age of twenty-nine about the feeling of aging is again performed by a fifty-year-old body, then again by a sixty-something body. Her movement reflects—and is reflected by—her own changing body, her own physical embodiment of hunching over, straining to stand, and travelling slowly. Likewise, her body has been informed—and shaped—by this structure; it has been created in part by the repeated performance of the work. The choreographed gestures are a part of Monk’s physical and experiential vocabulary, colouring how her body has been made, shaped, changed, and aged.

In returning to this performance piece over the course of her career, and specifically attending to the experience of each reconstruction, Monk has created a space in which the specificity of the present is crystallized alongside a historical trajectory of kinesthetic and contemplative memories. In this choreographic frame, Monk has created a score for reflecting on experience, investigating both how her body is inscribed with meaning and how meaning is inscribed through her body. In the process of reinhabiting the work, her continually developing reflections—past and present—are able to coexist, creating an archive of experience with each enactment.

Returning, Reenacting, and Reimagining: Revisiting Live Dancing Archive

Using their previous compositions as platforms for contemplating personal histories, both Lacey and Monk foreground the evolving nature of assertions of selfhood, insisting on both their enunciations of experience and their choreographic work as always in process. In their choreographic returns, these artists consider and reimagine their shifting subject positions, reinscribing meaning within and through their dancing bodies and performance presences. Staging the body as an archive, these dancers explore their own understandings of subjectivity and

manifestations of experience. Reenacting what they previously created, these dancemakers unfix the meanings of their initial performances. Visibilizing difference in the returns, either in altering the choreographic structure or in the dancing body itself, these choreographers offer the dancing of these works as a method for staging experience. In so doing, the choreographic returns claim subjectivity—and perhaps even insist on a particular notion of authorship—without simultaneously evoking a singular conceptualization of authority in the project of self-definition. Experience is traced and made in these choreographic returns. Reenactment is both relational and performative.

Examining the positioning of reenactments in this way allows for continued consideration of how bodies can claim subjectivity in and through the act of performance. With this frame, I return to the project of Monson's *Live Dancing Archive* and her resistance to the notion of claiming to be the "performer" of the work. This reluctance deeply informed how she understood the choreography to be functioning as an archival project. Drawing on her extensive experience as an improviser, she insisted that her dancing was not movement reinscribed in her body but produced by it. In this situating of her project, Monson is, in many ways, echoing the theoretical ideas offered in Lepecki's "will to archive." Positioned alongside other manifestations of the archive, namely a video installation of footage from the *Osprey Migration* project and a digital database of documents from her travels, Monson's desire to return to this movement material was not to fix its historicity, but to bring it into the current moment. Its staging was not about presenting a fixed document to the audience, but about creating a space in which her dancing could reveal a multiplicity of knowledges. As a result, the physical reenactments offered in *Live Dancing Archive* created, as Lepecki suggests, something new that exists within the present moment of doing. Further, Monson's interest in returning to these kinesthetic documents from *BIRDBRAIN* was not to claim the choreographic authority of authorship. It was not to fix the improvisational movement and its patterns (which had not initially been presented before an audience), retitling them to assert ownership over their meaning. Instead, it was to surface the traces of experience and explore the capacities granted to her body because of those (environmental, site-specific, improvisational) experiences. In so doing, the "performance" of this work was also very much tied to her own subjectivity, her perceptions of the world, and her place within it. More than just procreative of new performance work, then, it also became an excavation of the body's archiving and producing of self. The process of developing and staging this choreographic return was, I argue, not just generative but performative.

For Lacey, Monk, and Monson, investigating the archives of their dancing bodies implicates the autobiographical. Reenacting previous work provides space for reckoning with the experience of being, of making, and of (however temporarily) understanding the self. Returning to previous movement allows for—perhaps even necessitates—a negotiation with the staging of subjectivity. In a published conversation with artist DD Dorvillier, Monson suggested as much: "I think the piece kind of demanded from me that I bring in the subjective understanding of the self—the simultaneous way that many of my concerns as an artist are a part of this piece in ways that perhaps at first I wasn't so aware of. But they became extremely relevant" (Dorvillier 2013). In materializing her bodily archives and explicating the resulting resonances, Monson's work became a way of navigating a multiplicity of subjectivities. The process of staging this reenactment demanded her various senses of self and varying sites of identification to be in conversation. In this way, this work, which did not set out to be self-representational, illuminates the very possibility for the body as archive to reveal a kind of feminist autobiographical practice, which values the experience of the body and the shifting nature of understanding that experience. In revisiting previous compositions and compositional practices, experience is situated, complicated, and enacted. In turning to the

history of their bodies, these choreographers are, to paraphrase Joan W. Scott, constituted in and through their experience of their dancing archives (1991, 779). Returning to the movement the body has generated, the choreography can “reconstruct” a performative and provisional version of selfhood that can be reimagined and remade into the future.

In revisiting previously enacted movement, *Two Discussions of an Anterior Event* foregrounds the multiplicity of subjectivities present in the archival body. In returning to the compositional structure over the course of decades, *Education of the Girlchild* insists on the staging of experience as perpetually in the present tense. In these returns, reenacting choreography becomes an exploration of self-definition, not a singular act of definitive self-making. The repetition reveals the ways in which the enactment is continually changing the body, and the body is continually changing the performance. The authority of authorship is complicated by an insistence on subjectivity as conditional and archiving as temporal. Embodying the movement, the choreographers reflect on the past but reimagine it anew with each subsequent iteration. Central to these embodied archival practices is a continual insistence on the “here and now” of such negotiations. These reenactments, then, belie the notion that performance is ephemeral, as they—perhaps ironically—foreground the residues of performance, and of experience more generally.

Notes

1. For the last fifteen years, Monson has engaged in several large-scale performance projects that employ the environment as both the subject and the site of staging. This interest was initiated by her instigation of *BIRDBRAIN*, an extensive, durational exploration of migration patterns (specifically those of gray whales in 2001, osprey in 2002, ducks and geese in 2005, and northern wethers in 2010). To support this kind of work, Monson established iLAND (Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art, Nature, and Dance), a funding and presenting organization that pairs artists and scientists. Encouraging interdisciplinary collaborations and integrated research methodologies, iLAND is a forum for the creation of performance/research projects that can inform the understanding of climate change, urbanization, and environmental sustainability. Through this organization, Monson has, for example, developed extensive work for—and within—the Ridgewood Reservoir (2007) and the Mahomet Aquifer (2008–2010), as well as funding the work of other artists in this vein.
2. Video documentation of the dancing of this improvisational score on the beaches of Ocracoke Island can be found via a link on the *Live Dancing Archive* website:
http://www.livedancingarchive.org/providence/pawtucket/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/75.
3. The additional archival elements included with *Live Dancing Archives* were created by others. Robin Vachal edited the extensive footage from the site-specific journey to craft a three-hour video installation that was offered in conjunction with the performance. An online searchable database of various documentations from the project, including photos, journal entries, and written dance “scores,” was designed by Youngjae Josephine Bae. A link to the online archive can be found here:
<http://www.livedancingarchive.org/providence/pawtucket/index.php>.
4. In “Solo Solo Solo,” Rebecca Schneider (2005) unpacks these ideas, challenging the relationship between solo performance and the authority of the singular. While her argument cannot be discussed at length here, her analysis is useful in dismantling the implicit assumption of authority that can surround the solo form.
5. Many feminist autobiographical scholars have challenged the authority granted to the “I,” understanding it as a fiction that supports the autobiographical supposition. According to Sidonie Smith (among other feminist and poststructuralist scholars), the assertion of seamless subjectivity that autobiography seems to offer reveals the ways in which the traditional autobiographical project confounds its own intentions. The drive to narrate our own history, Smith argues, is a manifestation of our inability to hold on to a unified sense

of self. She contends, “The very sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss of consciousness of fragments of experiential history” (1998, 108). Utilizing political theorist Benedict Anderson’s notion of “estrangement,” which suggests that “a conception of personhood, identity . . . , because it cannot be ‘remembered,’ must be narrated,” Smith demonstrates how the process of writing one’s life manufactures the sense of interior selfhood (Anderson quoted in Smith 1998, 108). Rather than preceding the narrative of experience, the sense of interiority organized around the “I,” often seen as the essence of unified subjectivity, is thus a product of the act of storytelling. As such, the act that aims to articulate the experience of being and explain the process of becoming actually serves to demonstrate the slippages between the cohesive self inscribed on the page and the experience of selves that formed that understanding. As Shari Benstock writes, “autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction” (1988, 11). In this way, the traditional autobiographical product reveals the very artifice of the autobiographical project.

6. In both her subtitling and her live performance, Lacey shares how her relationship to her body and the movement has changed. In the video, she notes how her physicality has changed since the recording was made: “In between the time this video was made and now, my left arm has developed a / weird tremor that makes it a little scary to do the opening material. / I have to be very careful not to imagine that I have to do the movements just like we see / on the tape. If I have too many expectations, I will just fall on my nose.” In this admission, the audience is made aware of how the movement has changed in Lacey’s body and how Lacey’s body has itself changed in the intervening years. She is both the woman who performs this feat and no longer that exact woman.

7. Knowing, of course, that no repeated performance is ever “the same.”

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