

“Dance is Omnipresent, Once it is Shared”¹

Writing with, alongside, and in response to four recent encounters with dance ephemera

Megan V. Nicely

Dance lives in and through bodies. While a performance often stands as the culmination of a dance idea, it is in the rehearsal studio, in written notes and drawings, in conversations, and in the experiences of students and teachers that dance travels across past, present, and future, tracing a continuous circuit of exchange. Networked connections span time, distance, form, and practice. If the body is an archive (see Baxmann 2007; Johnson 2015; Lepecki 2010), then this archive is always in process—never static, never complete. Retrospective perspectives reveal new insights; new thinking unsettles prior assumptions; a spark can reawaken a sensation to which the body archive responds. Dance is thus more than time, space, and energy organized through choreography. The life of dance emerges from an intricate weaving of influences and experiences, shaped by ephemeral traces that extend beyond moments of physical movement.

During a trip to New York in December 2024, I had the opportunity to experience the impact of dance ephemera. I engaged with dance through

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¹ Nasha Thomas, recorded interview with Will Rawls, *Parable of the Guest*, 2024.

unexpected forms: two museum exhibits (one incorporating live performance), a public talk, and a collection of written pamphlets. Each embodied “dance” in some way, yet none conformed to the conventional idea of bodily movement. As a dance artist and scholar, I am attuned to how knowledge flows in multiple directions and across different modalities. Still, these ephemera activated my body’s dance archive—reconfiguring its knowledge and opening new pathways for inquiry and growth.



Figure 1: Video Still from *Becoming Visible* (2004) by M. Nicely.

How does dance, as a mode of being, being with, and being beyond, travel through our bodies and connect us to others—even those we have never met? This essay explores these questions in four sections, each introduced by a quote from Ulysses Dove (1995) reflecting on the creation of *Vespers* (1986) for the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company and restaged one year later for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. From his words, arising from my initial ephemera encounter on this journey, I glean aspects of how dance moves through bodies and is shared across time and space.

“Not how it looked, but what it felt like”

It was after hours at the Whitney Museum. We entered the brightly lit lobby, now quiet except for a small gathering of audience members and a few guards. We waited. Soon, a large elevator door opened and we were motioned inside, traveling upward to the performance area. Audience seating on two sides framed a long rectangular floor-level stage area. Suspended from the ceiling, an illuminated “W” mirrored the emblem of the W Hotel across the river in New Jersey, which we had glimpsed while walking up the High Line. A diagonal row of low black boxes bisected the stark white stage, and at one end, a TV monitor was positioned to face the performers.

We were here to see *Parable of the Guest*, a work choreographed by Will Rawles in homage to Ulysses Dove, a choreographer and seminal performer in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from 1973 to 1980. The performance was part of *Edges of Ailey*, an exhibition on view at the museum, and was created in response to Dove’s *Vespers*. Performed by Shelby Davis and Alana Jones, with sound design by Jimmy Garver and Rena Anakwe that included samples from the original work’s percussive score by Mikel Rouse, the piece wove together elements of past and present. The black boxes functioned as both props and speakers, transmitting a layered soundscape—music blended with Dove’s voice, excerpted from the earlier interview on *Vespers*. On the monitor, archival rehearsal footage played, seeming to fuel the dancers’ powerful movement. As Davis and Jones executed strong rhythmic gestures, dynamic pauses, and intently focused gazes, I became increasingly drawn into the interplay between past and present. The archival imagery on the screen did not merely accompany the dancers—it seemed to animate their performance, infusing it with an energy emanating from the work’s prior history. *Vespers* lived on in their bodies, albeit in a different form. In that moment, I felt a visceral awakening in my body.



Figure 2: Main room of *Edges of Ailey* exhibit; foreground right: David Hammons's sculpture *Untitled* (1992), human hair and metal; above: archival video footage of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Whitney Museum, December 2024. Photo: M. Nicely.

January, 1991.²

*I graduated college with an art history degree a little
over a year earlier.*

*Intuitively—though somewhat impulsively—I had deferred
my spot in a graduate dance program and moved to New*

² Listen to audio performance of this passage: <http://liminalities.net/21-5/Memory1.mp3>

*York instead. The city and its dance world were exciting
and new to me.*

*I remember snow that winter, and a midday journey
uptown to City Center to see the Ailey company for the
first time.*

*Vespers was on the program, and its visceral impact
moved deep into my bones. The precision of the dancers'
movements and the energy and force of their conviction
created a compelling world that I had not imagined a
dance could conjure.*

*It wasn't just the aesthetics that moved me—it was the
sense that these bodies were dissolving as individuals,
guided by something beyond themselves, animated by an
unseen but shared intention.*

I felt it.

This, I thought, is IT.

That initial encounter with *Vespers* had faded over time as my dance career and training took me in other directions. However, watching *Parable of the Guest*, the feeling came rushing back. Navigating between earlier memories and the present dance, I stepped into a new space within my body's archive where the two were in dialogue. The conviction was still there in the dancers, though Rawls's work was shaped differently—two bodies instead of six, black boxes instead of chairs, an intimate setting rather than a grand proscenium. The monitor playing earlier rehearsal footage of *Vespers* continued to draw my attention. Were the dancers responding to it? Referencing the onscreen movements? I couldn't tell.

Nonetheless, the archival document felt important—a bridge between past and present, collapsing time and allowing the dance to exist in both moments at once.

Another bridge from past to present was forged in the final moments of Rawls's piece. Once the movement concluded, an audio recording of a recent interview between Rawles and dancer Nasha Thomas, a member of the original Ailey cast of *Vespers*, played. Initially Thomas seemed somewhat dismissive (she lets Rawles know she cannot attend the Whitney performance). Rawles nonetheless coaxed reflections from Thomas that illuminated the depth of a dancer's journey, one shaped not only by performance but by the rigor and perseverance of the rehearsal process. Rawls is known for his unique use of language in his works, and this piece exemplified speaking as a kind of energetic transmission. Thomas's words conveyed the message that while many may be called to dance, few truly hear, accept, and commit to that calling.³ Thomas described how Dove's voice transmitted the energy of his choreography through rhythm and musicality rather than explicit verbal instruction. Rehearsals were relentless, but it was in the studio, she explained, that a dancer is truly formed. Later that night, I rewatched the recorded interview with Dove that had played during the performance. Listening, I understood what Thomas meant about the energy of sound as dance.

“They are independent of you and are coming back to you”

In the early afternoon, we boarded the subway to Long Island City, headed to see *Ceremonies Out of the Air: Ralph Lemon* at MoMA's PS1. Lemon's career as a dancer and choreographer has led him to research Black culture, spaces, and traditions across the globe and in the American South. His most known work, the *Geography Trilogy* (1997–2004), is a series of performances and accompanying books that act as process diaries incorporating drawings, photographs, and written text. However, this exhibit included elements from Lemon's personal archive, and the collection's overarching tone was intimate, emotional, and ambivalent. The exhibit occupied many rooms in the former school building, and spanned multiple mediums that, in another context, might not be called dance—paintings,

³ The “Parable of the Guest” refers to the Biblical “Parable of the Great Banquet” (Matthew 22:1–14, Luke 14:15–24), which carries the message that the Kingdom of God is open to all, but only those who accept the invitation will reap its blessings. I read Rawls's piece and Thomas's words through this perspective: as an invitation to the realm of dance, which is open to everyone but fully embraced and realized by only a few.

drawings, sculptures, photographs, and video installations. Taken together, the array of works conveyed embodied, movement-based inquiries into race, dance practice, and processes of sharing with others, indicating that the forms a body's questions and experiences can take are both unique to particular people and situations, and can vary and transform over time.

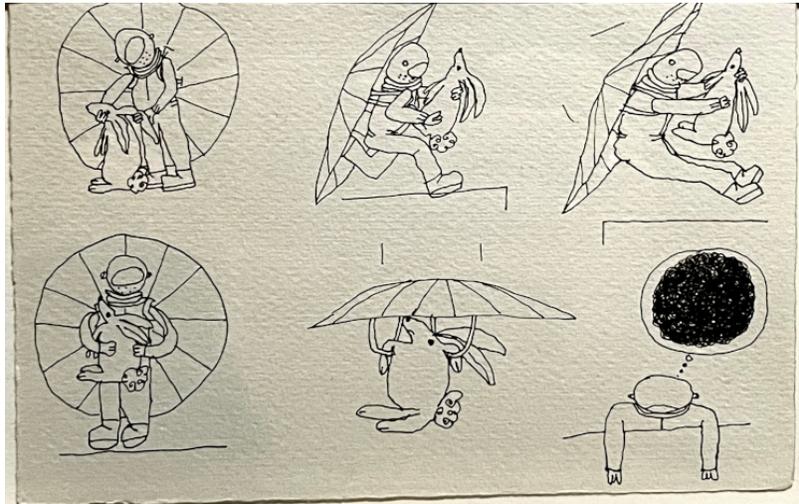


Figure 3: Ralph Lemon's Spaceman Drawings (2008-10), ink on paper. *Ceremonies Out of the Air: Ralph Lemon* exhibit, MoMA PS1, December 2024. Photo: M. Nicely.

*February, 1994.*⁴

I had left New York for the West Coast and was completing a dance MFA.

I saw the Ralph Lemon Dance Company perform at the Cowell Theater in San Francisco.

⁴ Listen to audio performance of this passage: <http://liminalities.net/21-5/Memory2.mp3>

My mind summons up brightly colored pants and tops against a white Marley floor, and exquisitely executed “abstract” movement—sparse, easy, relaxed, precise, and expressive. This is what I sought as a new dancer and choreographer—not these forms or their abstractness so much as the ease and mode of expression.

Not long after that performance, in 1995, Lemon disbanded his company and struck out in a new direction. I was curious about his rejection of postmodern dance and discontinuation of a successful company.

I was not yet aware of the racial invisibilities embedded in postmodern dance’s history, or a deeper need to explore identity through dance.

Nonetheless, Lemon’s bold choice felt important to me, and it returns to me now.

Dance can take you places you did not know you wanted—or needed—to go.

Recalling my earlier encounters with Lemon’s staged dance work, I reflected that a person can move their ideas through the body in so many ways. While the PS1 exhibit did feature a more explicitly movement-based piece, a four-channel video called *Rant redux* (2020-24) that grew out of the final work in the *Geography* series and was created with Kevin Beasley, it was the works in the *Walter Carter Suite* that most captured my attention. Starting in the 1990s until his death in 2010, Lemon befriended and collaborated with Walter Carter, a 100-year-old sharecropper in Little Yazoo, Mississippi, and his wife and family. The exhibit captured Carter’s imaginative world—videos, photos, and a spaceship—a mobile sculptural object built from materials from Carter’s garage. A compelling video of

a dog in a space suit, another of Carter driving the spaceship down a dirt road, and a haunting slow-motion video of Carter's relatives as masked figures moving through a forest still resonate in me. I felt I had entered the mind and world of this family and art practice as it was unfolding. Another impactful series was *Untitled (The greatest [Black] art history story ever told. Unfinished)* (2015–present), a series of intricate painted collage assemblages depicting artists and pivotal events in Black history. These collages are powerful and demand a viewer's focused attention—there are many images to digest in each one. These richly detailed works were activated on different days by invited guest speakers, who interpreted the works in a public forum. Throughout this exhibit, I felt the return of certain themes—dance histories, racial identities, human connections—as they continued to insist on their movement as bodily inquiry.

Later that evening, I visited the *Edges of Ailey* exhibit at the Whitney Museum, where a different curatorial approach was in play, but one equally multi-modal and thematically related. The exhibit was both commemorative and expansive, offering a broader understanding of what elements cohere to make dance happen. Staged in a single large room filled with various ephemera, the exhibit included letters and notes, paintings and sculptures, artful video renderings of data collected and analyzed, and video of performance projected close to the ceiling above. The walls were painted a deep red, and the room was alive with sound. Very little of what was in the room was a singular expression of Ailey. Rather, the exhibition communicated that it is not an individual artist but a collective gathering of energies and influences that allows certain voices and messages to surface. Most striking was that the exhibit asked attendees to grapple with how peripheral, momentary, or inconsequential encounters can combine and move to a central point and inspire artistic voice. As an attendee, I experienced a similar condensing of energies. Standing amidst the various stimuli, my body became a conduit through which the room's elements flowed. The short video clips, moving high across the wall above, drew focus in the room, halting people in their tracks. Pausing, I found myself joined by others also looking up at the footage, while the auditory narratives that accompanied them provided a sonic backdrop. The energy was flowing through us and the room. This, I felt, was not only a different experience of dance, but a novel way to engage with visual art.

Interlude: Different Eyes

Scholar Hanna Kosstrin refers to “kinesthetic seeing” as a mode whereby the body of the researcher who has a particular embodied experience is able to view archival documents with different eyes (2020). A dancer, for example, brings an embodied sensibility that allows them to notice things others might miss. For Kosstrin, the body of the researcher meets the material in ways that are visceral and sensed, creating a kind of somatic engagement. Both museum exhibits asked viewers to see differently. They assembled multiple mediums to activate cultural spaces through which bodies move, and taken together, the exhibits suggest that to “see” dance is to understand relationships between people and objects, and to feel their effects. Relationships are shaped by personal initiatives, but also by the social and political forces that render certain people and things visible, while marginalizing or obscuring others. These exhibits made tangible the less overt ways that dance expands into our bodies and lives.

In an article published in the journal *October* in 1979, art historian Rosalind Krauss introduced the concept of “sculpture in the expanded field.” In works by Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Robert Irwin, and others, Krauss identified how sculpture’s ontology had changed: what was once understood as a static object with clear boundaries had begun to move on its own, infiltrating the spaces where observers stood. Sculpture, architecture, and landscape were in direct conversation, sharing time and space in ways that made them “both/and.” This interrelationship broke down traditional distinctions between artistic forms. In the early 2010’s, the field of dance responded to Krauss’s idea, noting a similar unsettling of conventional choreographic practices. Dance, it was argued, is less discrete and more interdisciplinary in practice than is often understood through stage performance (e-flux 2012). Dance concepts influence and act beyond the confines of performed dances or particular techniques. As such, dance is increasingly understood as interdisciplinary, fluid, and less discrete, embracing practices that go beyond what is traditionally seen as dance.



Figure 4: Spaceship #1 (2007) and (Solaris water) (2004), mixed media, production: Lloyd Williams, Warren (Red) Carter, Ralph Lemon. *Ceremonies Out of the Air: Ralph Lemon* exhibit, MoMA PS1, December 2024. Photo: M. Nicely.

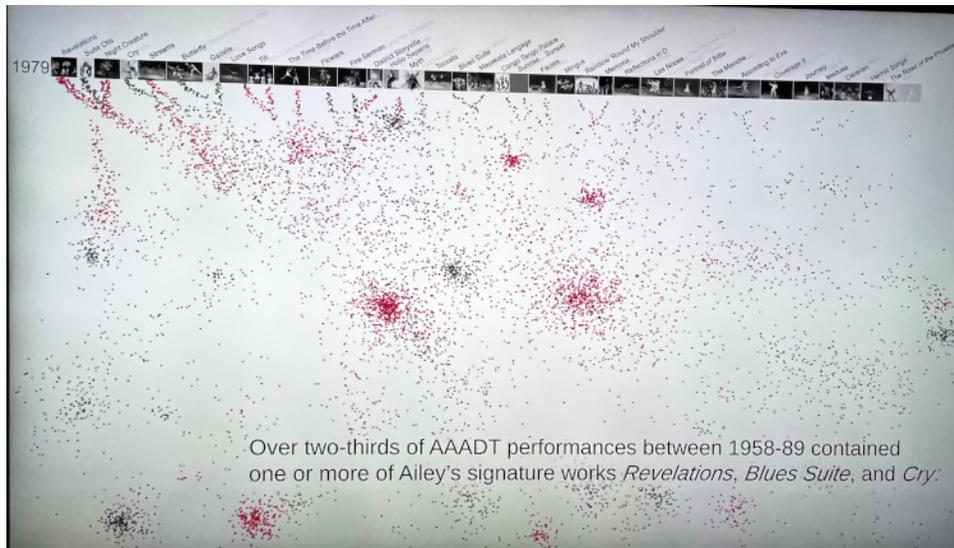


Figure 5: Digital animation of data showing Ailey touring repertory. “Generations of Embodied Knowledge,” part of the Radical Accounting Series (2024), Kate Elswit and Harmony Bench (Moving Data), with Antonio Jiménez-Mavillard and Tia-Monique Uzor. *Edges of Ailey* exhibit, Whitney Museum, December 2024. Photo: M. Nicely.

Conversations about dance in the expanded field coincided with conversations about dance in the museum. Beginning in 2011 with a height in 2014, dance videos and other objects were increasingly staged at major museums in the US and Europe, accompanied by performances. This trend sparked dialogue amongst scholars, curators, and artists about what this new venue offered to both the museum and the field of dance (Arts Research Center 2012; Franko and Lepecki 2014). Discourse centered around issues of vision and spectatorship: does placing dance in a museum offer a new way of seeing dance, or is it that museums, with their static collections, needed movement to invigorate their spaces? The intersection initially seemed to serve both museums and dancers, each in need of revitalization and new sources of income. Speaking on the dance in the museum phenomena, choreographer Mårten Spångberg states:

Dance mustn't want something from the museum, it must instead allow the museum to undo dance as we know it. Let's give the museum permission to develop all together new forms of choreography, producing all together different expressions. [...] It is important to remain a choreographer or dancer. It is in this space of tension that something potentially can happen (2014).

However, dancers did rightly want something from the museum, and tension did arise. As the conversation unfolded, it became clear that performing human bodies are not static objects on display. Performers voiced the need for fair treatment and compensation for their efforts (see Ghoraphi 2015; Graham 2013; Halperin 2015; d’Avingnon 2024). The call for labor protections, fair wages, and ethical treatment of dancers continues today, and suggests that much more is at stake in this critique than vision. As architect Juhani Pallasmaa poses, seeing involves all the senses, and thus is an embodied experience (1996), one requiring care.

“There’s a sound that the movement makes all by itself”

It was a gloomy rainy day as we made our way to the New York Public Library Performing Arts Division for a panel discussion celebrating the 50th anniversary of Danspace Project. The panel included Cynthia Hedstrom, Judy Hussie-Taylor, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Carol Mullins, and Wendy Perron, who shared their experiences as artists and curators at St. Mark’s Church in-the-Bowery, the dance home for the project’s many classes and performances. They recounted their individual histories with the space, a fire in 1978 that rendered the space unusable for a time, and the bold risk-taking programming that the venue fostered. Houston-Jones recalled an untitled duet created with Fred Holland in 1983 known as *Oo Ga La Dance* that countered the tenets of contact improvisation.⁵ The idea of doing dance “wrong” resonated with me, a fantastic challenge to norms that drew me to study contemporary art-performance as an undergraduate. Houston-Jones also reflected on a festival of Black dance, which his duet was part of, aimed at countering the more mainstream image of Black dance represented by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Artists like Blondel Cummings and Bebe Miller were also featured in this earlier program, which is being reprised in Spring 2025. When I looked at the upcoming programming, I was surprised to see that Miller’s piece was/is called *Vespers*, but created in 1982—years before Dove’s piece by that name. Miller’s is a solo, currently being recreated for six dancers.

⁵ Excerpts published as the “‘Wrong’ Contact Manifesto” in *Contact Quarterly* included statements beginning with “We are Black,” “We will wear heavy boots,” “We will play a loud, abrasive sound score,” and “We will stay out of physical contact as much as possible” ([1983] 2022).

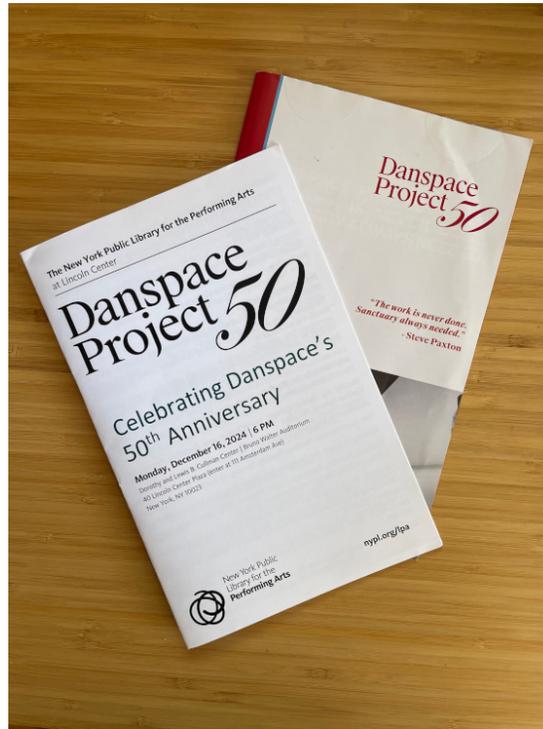


Figure 6: Program and brochure for Danspace Project 50th Anniversary events, December 2024. Photo: M. Nicely.

July, 1990.⁶

It was my first time at a dance festival, and I felt a bit out of place.

I was studying repertory with Bebe Miller and her company at Bates Dance Festival. The movement was exciting, full of off-balance moments recuperated through relations with other dancers.

⁶ Listen to audio performance of this passage: <http://liminalities.net/21-5/Memory3.mp3>

After hours, I witnessed contact improvisation for the first time. Miller and her company members, along with other festival attendees, rolled, rose, and fell in a sweaty, intimate exchange of weight and motion.

Moving in silence, their exchanges created their own logic and musicality.

*The following May 1991, I saw Miller's piece *The Hendrix Project* at St. Mark's Church and understood more fully how sound is a somatic, connective thread linking bodies.*

One year later, Miller was a guest artist at my new school on the West Coast, recognized me, and I had the opportunity to interview her. I also begin studying contact improvisation.

Soon after, I started studying Japanese butoh. I noticed striking similarities between this and contact.

The states of awareness, qualitative energy shifts in the body, and the speed of thought moving through my body felt just right.

The Danspace panel concluded, and we headed out into the night. The rain had finally stopped. As we walked, I fondly recalled the many times I have lain on the church floor, moved through that space, performed, sweated in the summer heat at the MELT festival, and felt the winter chill as I waited outside to see a performance. The energy of the space is present in my body—toward others, toward life. How do webs of dance knowledge form, interconnect, and align? For a long-time dancer these small encounters are not unusual, yet they continue to pull the threads of my past through this December journey.

“To translate age as energy, as opposed to lack of it”

Some weeks after returning from New York, the threads connecting my life in dance manifested in another format. I was reading *Dance History(s)* (2024), a series compiled by choreographer Annie-B Parson of Big Dance Theater and scholar Thomas DeFrantz. In this nonlinear, personally narrated series of pamphlets, a more embodied sense of how dance lands in bodies emerged. Each written by a different artist, the pamphlet collection chronicles the diverse ways people engage with and understand dance on both personal and cultural levels. The series makes clear that dance history is anything but singular, calling attention to what has been left out, made invisible, or excluded, while demonstrating how artists live through their practices to counter normative or monolithic narratives. Each pamphlet is simultaneously a dance history, a dance story, a life connected to many other lives, and a critique of linear, predominantly white Western dance canons. Their disruptions are at times gentle, and at others more pronounced.



Figure 7: *Dance History(s)* pamphlet series, Thomas F. DeFrantz, and Annie-B Parson, ed., 2024. Photo: M. Nicely

September, 1991.⁷

In my first semester of graduate school, I learned dance history through a series of oral lectures with uncited sources.

This history was in fact only modern dance history, and it was presented as fact.

Having studied undergraduate art history using sources, I sensed something was off about this approach, but it nonetheless took root in my data bank.

It was not until I started my PhD that I became interested in this history again, with a different focus—less on dates and people, more on social politics, values embedded in movement techniques, and the legacies of certain seminal dance figures.

How does one carve out a life in dance, and remain in a state of open curiosity?

Can one make a living in dance?

Why do people need to claim ownership on practices that were developed as open-source collective enterprises?

I do know why, though.

⁷ Listen to audio performance of this passage: <http://liminalities.net/21-5/Memory4.mp3>

Peppered throughout the series were names and experiences I recognized from living in both New York and the Bay Area for many years, and others that were new to me. Each history was unique and told through a different vantage point. The stories of lives in dance asked me to update my archive, and to be humble with my body's expertise. The stories energized me as I followed the voices on the page and filled in gaps in my knowledge. As I read pamphlets by Eiko Otake, Bebe Miller, Keith Hennessy, and others, I expanded my understanding of dance history—and of my own dance history. People and events I have known, studied, or attended to in various ways orbited at different proximities to my embodied archive; some were outside my sphere, and I sought to bring them closer. The stories intersect with my own, but not always directly. We live this dance life through each encounter.

Can we piece together the tangible and the intangible as a dance archive? How does the embodied archive evolve and get updated? On this trip, my embodied dance archive deepened and my primarily white dance education expanded through encounters with the experiences of Black artists. Still, much remains missing or absent from my experience, and from larger dance histories as well. It is an ongoing process, this archiving. As Nasha Thomas so eloquently puts it: "Dance is omnipresent once it is shared." By forging new connections and re-energizing past ones, dance continues to extend, expand, and include all those who heed the call and participate.

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