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# Researching Spontaneous Doing: Random Dance as Decolonial Praxis in Dancing Grandmothers

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Article abstract

How are “hunch” and “intuition” passed on, and what kinds of knowledge are they? This essay examines *Dancing Grandmothers* (2011), a contemporary dance piece by Eun-me Ahn Dance Company, to study the piece’s production and transmission of embodied knowledge. The work’s dramaturgy of imperfection foregrounds makchum (random dance) as an important site of knowledge. The raw aesthetic of makchum revives the connection with the physical unconscious by decolonizing cognitive and embodied knowledge. I borrow from Ben Spatz’s epistemology of embodiment to analyze the “amateur” dance portion of *Dancing Grandmothers*, a section of the work that goes on stage without a rehearsal, and its invitation for the audience members to respond in embodied listening. *Dancing Grandmothers* is a form of decolonizing from within, where knowledge shifts mainly through remapping the perceptual rhetoric. It attempts to let the bodies speak for themselves, in equal authority with the dancers who co-create the piece. On top of contributing to a cognitive turn, the joy of dancing central to the performance conveys that animation, vitality, and revival are essential parts of knowledge, generating new energies by stimulating the senses.

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## **Researching Spontaneous Doing: Random Dance as Decolonial Praxis in *Dancing Grandmothers***

Minu Park

South Korea is known for immense popular support for dance as entertainment, exemplified by the growing K-pop business that includes dance as an important part of the music. However, under the hyper-visual presence of dance as a commodity lies its diminishing accessibility and utility as a practice (Ahn 2019). Modern Korea suffers from dance deprivation; most people in contemporary Korea relate to dance through viewing rather than doing. Dance as doing exists as an exclusive opportunity for the courageous few, practised by the small number of people who choose dancing as a profession, despite an uncertain future and no income. As a consequence of valuing the carefully choreographed dance routines in popular media, under-practised or untrained movements in everyday contexts are frequently rendered as funny and shameful. The more dance becomes a subject for consumption, the more the viewing bodies become immobile as they sit still to watch.

In this essay, I examine *Dancing Grandmothers* (2011), a contemporary dance piece by Eun-me Ahn Dance Company, to study the piece's production and transmission of physical knowledge. Elaine Scarry famously analyzes the un-transmissibility of pain in *The Body in Pain* (1985), taking note of the inexpressibility of pain and its materialization through various social, political, historical, and cultural channels (3–11). And yet, this raises the question of how senses and bodily experiences are transferred. For instance, how are “hunch” and “intuition” passed on? My analysis of *Dancing Grandmothers* answers this question by arguing that this dance performance revives connection with the physical unconscious by decolonizing cognitive and embodied knowledge. I employ performance as research (PAR) as a helpful frame to inspect the decolonial effects of the performance, which is also considered a work of Body Anthropology by critics to indicate the ethnographic focus of the project (Ahn 2011, 9; 2016; Jeon 2020, 135). I borrow from Ben Spatz's (2015) epistemology of embodiment to analyze how the “amateur” dance portion of *Dancing Grandmothers*, a section of the work that goes on stage without a rehearsal, reciprocates with both intuitive and learned physical memory. I then investigate the work's dramaturgy of raw imperfection, foregrounding the live body as a rich site of research and practice.

### ***Dancing Grandmothers*: Enacting Korean Grannies' Club Dance on a Proscenium Stage**

The performance is already underway as the audience enters the Yeongdeungpo Art Hall, located west of the National Assembly Building in Seoul. A vast screen hanging upstage plays travelogue footage, delivering the raw texture of its having been shot in the Korean countryside from a moving vehicle. No sound accompanies the images, as the vividness of the journey is conveyed by the shakiness of the camerawork, which induces mild dizziness in the viewers.

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Without lights dimming, Eun-me Ahn, choreographer and artistic director, appears on the stage in front of the unprepared audience. She walks alongside the bottom edge of the screen, still projecting the video, at first with bent shoulders and scurrying steps, echoing the cinematography and implying she's travelling along with the images on screen. Ahn seems almost unconscious of the stage setting, with her gaze fixed in front as if engaged with the day's routine. Occasionally Ahn looks up, opens her shoulders, and breathes confidently. These small moments gradually connect to replace the bent posture she assumes at the beginning. Then, slowly moving away from the screen, Ahn blows performative energy into the space through gradual shifts in her movement. Through dance, she shifts the ground-gazing and drooping everyday body into one of open arms, shoulders, movement, and joyful eyes that gaze toward the audience members and the sky.

Once the energy is ready, Ahn's company members appear onstage in brightly coloured apparel that represents senior women in Korea and proceed to fill the space with wacky motions (Jeon 2020, 260). They emit exploding energy through powerful stretches and extensions of arms and legs, sometimes even with jumps and somersaults. This hectic dance sequence continues for a while, during which the dancers change their costumes several times with almost unnoticeable continuity. The dancers' motions are disorganized and unidentifiable, but the application of colourful flower patterns across the changing costumes, along with loose-fitting trousers and red long johns, attire emblematic of Korean grannies, indicate that the dance is inspired by the grannies. This claim of embodying the old body creates a discord with the dancers' energetic jumps. In effect, the dancers paint a scene in which countless numbers of senior women flock on and off stage with extraordinary cheerful energy. Throughout this sequence and for the rest of the show, a disorderly and jumbled quality—tinted with Ahn's signature neon lights, brilliant colours, and bouncy yet uneasy music—sets the unique, otherworldly tone of the performance.

After this joyful energy has filled the space for some time, all dancers gather on the stage and start repeating simple movements. The dancers roll on the ground, lying on their sides and folding their bodies frantically back and forth. What began as merriment now transitions to a deep agony that puts physical capacity to the test as stark red light floods the stage, dyeing the scene with a bloody tint. Although the dancers pop up from the floor from time to time, as if to jump out of the pain, they fail and fall again to the ground. It takes a long time before the dancers, one by one, stop their movements and stand up.

The dancers exit, and the screen runs another set of videos, this time featuring actual senior women dancing at different locations in the Korean countryside. While each filmed dance lasts less than a minute, the entire video sequence runs for almost twenty minutes, and is thus a significant part of the performance that commands audience's attention. The grannies' movements, shown without music, consist of simple arm hovering and knee bending. The raw emotion of the grannies captured in the video exhibits a combination of awkwardness, shyness, cheerfulness, and carelessness, conveying their confusion at the anomaly of filming such random movements.

After the video sequence, the stage comes awash with bright lights again, this time with the grannies depicted in the video appearing in person. Coupled with the young dancers, they begin a slow blues dance, making small steps while facing their partners, holding both hands. A series of short skits follows, featuring various interactions between the younger dancers and the grannies, such as the dancers cheering the grannies with playful movements. A main part of this sequence spotlights the grannies performing solo or in groups, dancing to the pop music of their generation, bringing the video-streamed dance alive.

The performance ends with a club dance scene that invites audience members onstage. If the show starts slowly, then this last scene is a culmination of blasting energies comparable to an after-party, blowing the generated power out across the auditorium. The agents of dance exchange now include audience members, who become co-creators of the piece, equipped with their own stored embodied repertoires. They are called in to take part in active listening, which translates to responding, imitating, and exchanging movements. Ahn has remarked on how the energy in this concluding section would build up to the point that people would continue dancing even after the music ended (Kim 2011, 222).

### **Decolonizing *Makchum* Historically**

*Dancing Grandmothers* embodies rigorous on-site research the company conducted throughout the country. Due to the difficulty of meeting grannies in the cities, Ahn and four dancers journeyed across the country for three weeks to meet, interact with, interview, and record 220 senior Korean women (Jeon 2020, 257; Gladstone 2020). This research comprises an essential backbone of the performance, appearing in the pre-show travelogue, the recorded videos of grannies' dancing, and the grannies invited from those locations to perform live in Seoul. *Dancing Grandmothers* is a response to modern Korean history and culture and an attempt to counter the stiffening of bodies under public shaming. The project began with Ahn realizing she did not know how to understand her mother's dance. She found this ignorance stemmed from an absence of knowledge about the quotidian body's movement language (Gladstone 2020). Indeed, the grannies' free dance represents what is called *makchum* in Korea, a derogatory term for random dance. By investing serious attention toward and appreciation for *makchum*, *Dancing Grandmothers* resists dismissing "unartful" bodies as devoid of substance.

*Dancing Grandmothers* remaps the concept of dance in modern Korea by demonstrating the presence of dance in every body. Resisting the dismissive undertone in *makchum*, Ahn reframes it as the valuable primordial language inherent in the body. *Mak* is a Korean colloquial adverb indicating a manner of carelessness, spontaneity, or randomness, often of a wild and rough quality. When combined with *chum* (dance), *makchum* translates to "random dance." *Makchum* describes the dance styles that reflect no sense of expertise, congruity with the music or rhythm, creating the effect of a physical comedy. Because *makchum* is the opposite of mastery, Eun-me Ahn's nickname, "master of *makchum*," invites spectators to challenge their preconceptions, to mull over the seeming incompatibility of the conflicting terms. Ahn describes *makchum* as a dance that comes out of a person without learning: "It is a real dance, a dance of life, the dance people do because they want to live, a desperate one. . . . *Mak-chum* is about right now, on time, this very moment" (Ahn 2016). Here, Ahn positions *makchum* as a natural language of survival, reflecting life in its spontaneous expressions. According to Ahn, *makchum* is a language most intimate to the essence of one's being as it retains the vibration of the childhood body. She says, "[*Makchum* is] swaying when there is wind instead of standing unyielding. . . . A language that does not compel, that recognizes the other, and notices the beautiful eyes" (Ahn 2019).<sup>1</sup> A sense of bareness and rawness lies in Ahn's interpretation of *makchum* as she places emphasis on the stripping down of restrictions imposed on bodies, enabling instinct and acceptance to take precedence.

Critical analyses of *Dancing Grandmothers* characterize this unlearning process as bodily liberation, historicizing *makchum* in modern Korea (Chun 2011; Kim 2011; Seo 2019; Jeon 2020). For example, cultural critic and sociologist Dong-jin Seo examines the phrase "dancing wind" from 1970s Korea

to explore the historical unconscious associated with amateur dance culture in relation to Ahn's work. "To develop dancing wind" means too much immersion in dancing, resulting in debauchery and neglect of familial and social duties. The phrase reflects a sense of fear and anxiety around dance, which is portrayed as a destroyer of the normal life cycle, potent with deviant or subversive power (Seo 2019, 76). Additionally, it mirrors the expression "to develop wind," a phrase for cheating on one's partner, acquiring a further sense of indecency. The 1970s was also a time of compressed modernity, when devotion to labour was imposed on the nation's constituents (Chang 1999, 43). Folk dance disrupts modernity by progressing against labour. For instance, folk dances of the '70s and '80s were labelled "tour bus dances," bearing the demeaning connotation associated with Korean group tour culture indulging in revelry. The fear of un-labouring bodies gradually stigmatized folk dance as immoral and profligate (Kim 2019, 142). Ahn repeatedly evokes this anti-labour quality of *makchum* in her lectures, saying that her duty is to "take [people] to the time of life that is free of labour" (Ahn 2016). According to Ahn, Korean folk dance involves spreading the arms wide and facing the sky. While labour compels one to engage the front muscles by bending forward, folk dance opens the chest and the body, releasing the tightened muscles (Lee 2011).

Dong-jin Seo (2019) interprets *Dancing Grandmothers* as an archaeological work that not only listens to the grannies but also redeems their long-censored bodies through proper acknowledgement (78–79). The word *taenssen* in the Korean title, *Taenssen Dedicated to the Ancestors*, is a term closely connected to "dancing wind." *Taenssen* is a Korean dictation of the English word dance, with an exaggeration of the Korean accent delivering a sense of crudity. It gives dance a lighthearted, funny, and shallow nuance. This Korean title makes a deliberate choice not to include *chum* (dance) or *muyong* (the more dignified word for dance), which are more "proper" words to use in a title. Rather than adjusting *makchum* to obtain *muyong*'s elevated status, *Taenssen Dedicated to the Ancestors* modifies dance semantics so that *makchum* would become legible as is.

I read this stretch for liberation through unlearning public movement protocols to be grounded in a decolonial imperative that is simultaneously a practice-based inquiry. The significance of this cognitive shift enabled by accessing the knowledge of doing echoes what Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh call the "decolonial cracks and praxis of fissures" in *On Decoloniality* (2018). Mignolo and Walsh understand "decolonial cracks" as incoherences within the colonial system of thought and the "praxis of fissures" as the process of exploring and expanding those cracks (82–83). In their words, "The cracks . . . enunciate, reflect, and construct another place and postulate of decoloniality in/as praxis" (81). Mignolo and Walsh's idea of decoloniality centres on a praxis that illuminates the strength of drawing new forms of thought through being in action. Implementing praxis means to "think with," not "study about," social movements, actors, and thinkers (93). While Mignolo and Walsh focus primarily on decolonial pedagogies in the university context, they also introduce tracing and cultivating ancestral knowledge as an effective example of decolonial praxis. For instance, Juan Garcia Salazar's Afro-Andean Document and Archival Project recognizes the presence of Afro-Ecuadorians through documenting the communities, "giv[ing] lived presence to collective memory and ancestral knowledges" (85–86). In this example, the process and act of documentation is a praxis that creates a new map of cognizance through which underrepresented communities can explore and enrich their own knowledge and experience.

Mignolo and Walsh's emphasis on praxis evokes PAR's endeavour to involve practice as an essential part of academia. Praxis functions to address the nonlinear and process-based quality of decolonial projects, not unlike how practice centres on ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Considering decoloniality as "the ongoing serpentine movement toward possibilities of other modes of being,

thinking, knowing, sensing, and living; that is, an otherwise in plural,” Mignolo and Walsh identify the decolonial project as unending and constantly in action (81). They also alert readers to the danger of becoming blind to the cracks when locating decoloniality only on the outside of coloniality. This call for reconceiving the conventional thought system from within echoes Spatz’s demand that PAR engage actively in new knowledge production, without fear of reproducing academic conventions, assuming practice as a radical new methodology that gains significance through dismantling academic principles. Spatz (2015) writes, “To demand of embodied practitioners that they produce stable, transmissible documents of the technique . . . opens the door to a radical transformation of academia, not through the dismantling of its standards but through an extension of the logic of scholarly epistemology itself” (234–35). Likewise, the example of Juan Garcia Salazar shows that praxis does not have to be caught up in the enigma of the research-practice binary. Knowledge stemming from the perspective of invisible or marginalized communities, which foregrounds continuity and variation, is already decolonial because it involves the praxis of working with the community.

By introducing an alternative way of processing *makechum*, with the *makechum* carriers at the centre of knowledge production, *Dancing Grandmothers* returns bodily sovereignty to the grannies. When *makechum* turns into a cherished asset to be transmitted to the younger generations, the grannies recover respect for ancestral wisdom. In the following sections, I investigate *Dancing Grandmothers’* dance dramaturgy through PAR perspectives to investigate its somatic decoloniality.

### **Kinesthetic Knowledge for Body Anthropology**

*Dancing Grandmothers* is an iconic piece in the Eun-me Ahn Dance Company repertoire and is its most performed piece out of over one hundred and fifty of Ahn’s works. It is the first in a series of works featuring various social groups at the centre. Critics have identified the series as a work of Body Anthropology, as the projects are interested in documenting the movements of certain bodily collectives. After featuring the grannies, middle-aged men, and teenagers, respectively, in the first set of works, Ahn continues the project with more diverse minoritized groups.<sup>2</sup> When considering the dance company’s performance history, there is ample room to conclude that the Body Anthropology series has played a crucial role in defining their public image. Monographs compiling or interpreting Ahn’s works are notably recent, released a few years after *Dancing Grandmothers’* success. *Scoring the Space: Eun-me Ahn’s Dance Archive* (Seo et al. 2019) examines Ahn’s oeuvre in great detail, and *Dancing Rugby Ball, Eun-me Ahn: Dancer Eun-me Ahn’s Dance Stations* (Jeon 2020) gives an overview of Ahn’s life and work, interpreting her style, mission, and philosophy.

It is worth noting that *Dancing Grandmothers* is the only piece that receives intense enthusiasm and ovation, as opposed to similar works featuring middle-aged men or teenagers.<sup>3</sup> Some of her subsequent works in collaboration with amateurs suffered from the criticism that not consulting a professional therapist when tackling sensitive and traumatic topics rendered the performances uncomfortable and, at times, irresponsible.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the Body Anthropology series does not have the impressive spectacle or wild creativity that usually characterizes the Eun-me Ahn Dance Company, as it is a collaborative work positioning amateur performers at the centre. Ahn’s typical “kitsch” aesthetic, which critics have identified with reference to her employment of “cheap” materials such as neon colours and popular music in creating the stage design, is apparent in some, but not all, parts of staging, costuming, and lighting in these collaborative pieces (Jeon 2020, 197–

98). *Dancing Grandmothers* displays a certain roughness in its quality and content as well, with its loosely woven scenes and untrained movements taking up a majority of the performance time.

I trace *Dancing Grandmothers*' popularity to the antiquity of the grannies' bodies, which corresponds strongly to the aims of a Body Anthropology that frames the body as a container for its own experience and inherited DNA. If the body is an "automated encyclopedia," and dance is "the history of recording," as Ahn suggests, then the grannies' bodies carry by far the oldest and most deeply fermented memories (Ahn 2019). Moreover, the performance provides an important site for restoring the transgenerational connection severed by the social exclusion of elders. To understand how the grannies' bodies are historicized and liberated at the same time, I focus on studying the dramaturgy of the "rough" elements of the performance. While the show's cognitive decoloniality has received critical attention, its significance as a radical form of practice-based research has not been investigated in depth, leaving major parts of the performance inaccessible. Using technique as a starting point, I explore the epistemology of movement embedded in the dramaturgy of *Dancing Grandmothers*.

As the name PAR already postulates, the disparities between thinking and doing, or mind and body, are deeply entrenched in human history, making them challenging to bridge. Although there are varying approaches to and interpretations of PAR, as reflected in subtle differences between the names of the various lines of inquiry involving practice and research, I am less interested in distinguishing between them than in adopting the generative concepts these inquiries provide.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I attend to how PAR recognizes particular art-making modes that bring with them decolonial possibilities. To this end, I ground my analysis in Ben Spatz's (2015) employment of "technique" as a methodology for pursuing physical knowledge.

Spatz's scholarship is largely a response to the preceding PAR discourses that centre on creating room for experiments. For instance, Robin Nelson's definition of the relationship between practice and research is neat in the sense that it provides a clear identity for a group of disparate interrogations; but this definition is also inevitably left general and vague in terms of the specific academic insight such interrogations yield. Nelson (2013) writes, "[PAR] involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry" (8–9). While this definition emphasizes the blending of practice and research, Nelson also identifies challenges to compromising the disparate languages employed by the two modes of inquiry. He writes, "Artworks, and other material practices, are often very complex, resonant and multi-layered, while the articulation of a research inquiry needs to be as clear as possible" (10). Indeed, the "complex, resonant and multi-layered" aspect of doing evades linguistic elaboration, rendering an edited volume surveying various experiments with arts the ideal model of exploring the relationship between practice and research. In the introduction to *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*, Estelle Barrett (2019) follows a similar trajectory, leaving practice as is, unassimilable within the linguistic realm. Barrett interprets artistic practice as "philosophy in action," implying that artistic knowledge lies in the senses prompted by doing (1). Although they mention that tacit knowledge could also be explicit, their compilation of various practice-research methods offers a survey of different attempts without suggesting an epistemology of doing.

Pointing out the limitations of prioritizing infinite interdisciplinarity and the dissolution of surface-depth divisions, Spatz (2015) calls for the need to acknowledge the depth of knowledge within the

practice (230–31). Spatz’s focus on technique is an attempt to complement the scarcity of particular methodologies bridging the distance between academic inquiry and embodied practice. When technique “functions . . . as the structure of embodied repetition,” it helps address the concrete formation and constitution of embodiment (8). Spatz is concerned with elaborating the connection between “specialized and everyday practices” (10). Thus, for him, technique is instrumental in analyzing everyday action’s transition into staged performance. At the same time, my study connects with the decolonial impulse reflected in the abstracted approaches of Nelson and Barrett, which grapple with the complex issues of working through the colonial inclinations embedded in producing knowledge through clear linguistic articulations. The resistance to continuing research-based academic inquiry in its customary form underlies the essential inquiry of performance studies, which surfaces in PAR when it examines the fundamental assumptions about performance scholarship. Spatz’s theorization of technique as its own kind of academic language attempts to reformulate ideas of research without avoiding research as a whole.

When habits become sites of knowledge, the distinction between specialized and everyday movements dissolves. Spatz (2015) writes, “Technique, once discovered, becomes available for dissemination. As knowledge, it has the potential to travel beyond its community of origin and to effect widespread transformations far beyond the imagination of its original discoverers” (177). Practice, as episteme, creates new languages, enabling people to see things in ways that escape notice. In *Dancing Grandmothers*, research and practice are one and the same in that knowledge is found in the movement of everyday bodies.

### Locating the Technique in the Unconscious

*Dancing Grandmothers* explores the embodied aspect of “the hunch” or “intuition” through *makchum*. The striking similarity in the grannies’ spontaneous movements demonstrates that the “primal” or intuitive muscle language manifests the cultural and historical unconscious of the community. My employment of the term *primal* corresponds to contemporary dance scholars Shirley McKechnie and Catherine Stevens’s (2009) distinction of dance vocabularies from linguistic modes of perception. I follow their observation that physical imitation can be much more instantaneous than that of the linguistic (85–86). The process of making *Dancing Grandmothers* affirms this view, as the research of working “with” the grannies is made possible through dancing. Ahn recounts how the grannies would be reluctant to engage in interviews and recordings at first, but when her crew started dancing, their eyes would shine with pleasure and a desire to join in (Lee 2011). Soon grannies would begin dancing, and from then on, would bring food to share and tell their life stories (Gladstone 2020). This anecdote illustrates dance’s impact, as a practice, in building immediate connections that facilitate active relationship-making and bonding, allowing collaborative research (Lee 2011). Wooyoung Chun, a hospital historian, also comments on the primacy of the body as the container of history in his introduction to the performance: “History is first expressed by our bodies before it is recorded in writing. The life of history expressed by our bodies is short, compared to that of history written in a book, but the contents of the history expressed by our bodies can be much more condensed and extensive” (Chun 2011, 20).

To bring out this primal texture of *makchum* in the performance, Ahn minimizes the effects of repetition by not holding any rehearsal for the grannies. Spatz (2015) writes, “Training—the passage of technique from one person or community to another—is a crucial part of how technique functions” (60). In other words, training leads to the development of technique, or physical fluency,



through the series of imitations and repetitions in the process, which is not the effect Ahn was seeking. The desire for mastery, implicit in training, is founded on an eschewal of failure and interferes with the spirit of carelessness and recklessness in *mak* (random). *Makchum* is uninterested in the particulars or how-to of movement as intuition takes over. *Makchum* derives partly from the Korean shaman's dance, which is thought to be led by the unconscious and consists of simple hops that gain traction as their contact with the spiritual intensifies (Noh 2016). If the technique is rooted in training, it contrasts with the unconscious movement of *makchum*, as the dancer pays great attention to the dexterity of movement. However, the conscious and unconscious are not divided concepts in *Dancing Grandmothers*. Ahn's removal of rehearsal for the grannies evinces that spontaneous dance may bear the most recent muscle memory, picking up the repeated gestures instantly. If repetition creates movement protocols in the body, then technique forms part of the unconscious when repeated enough to the point that it is inscribed into the body. In the case of the untrained grannies' dance, centuries of imitation and repetition accumulated in the somatic and cognitive genes emerge as a technique from the unconscious, through instinctive response to music. When knowledge lies in repetition, doing serves as a research methodology to identify and interpret this embodied knowledge. Ahn observes: "[Audience members] see that the grandmothers . . . bring an authentic energy, that dance is not just about physical power and technique. The grandmothers dance straightforward, from their heart, but they can convey anything with their body: happiness, joy, but also sorrow and suffering" (quoted in Van Leeuwen 2018). This remark conveys an awareness that minimal artistry may draw out the performer's unconscious more effectively than advanced technique.

While exploring *makchum*'s language in itself, Ahn also paints a bigger map of dance on which *makchum* can claim its place. Ahn plays with the relationship between the technique and the primal, or, choreographed and untrained dance. She employs a horizontal or lateral repetition to exhibit the technique of non-training in *Dancing Grandmothers*. The performance is structured to walk the audience members through recognizing the artistry in *makchum*. It begins with demonstrating the technique of the grannies' dance by the highly trained dancers' bodies. The dancers perform creative movements inspired by the grannies, eliciting new aesthetics from rough amateur gestures. Exploding energy and strength conveyed in high jumps and somersaults introduce fresh perspectives to the uneventful elderly dance. The following video sequence eases the audience members into accepting the artistry of *makchum* by highlighting its archival value as a folk dance repertoire. In the recording, each random dance presented carries a sense of disorganization, but when collected and presented together, consistency and collectivity emerge, affirming the existence of cultural inheritance. The absence of music helps viewers to focus on the movement patterns that may have escaped eyes accustomed to looking for technique. When the grannies take the stage in the next segment, the audience members should be ready to perceive the familiar movements from a different perspective. At the same time, the order of presentation reverses the traditional idea of progression from raw into polished material. The masterful dance progresses into the secondary and then the primary source material: the recordings and the grannies' live dance. It even goes into suggesting further developments, making transgenerational transmission by inviting the audience to join the dance. The form of the work demonstrates research and practice in synergetic collaboration, where the boundary between them becomes indistinct as each sequence serves both as research and practice.

## Meeting of Live Bodies

In the part of the performance where the grannies appear onstage, their “technique” is not the only centre of attention. The performance distinguishes between actual bodies and archived bodies by requiring different modes of engagement from audience members. The grannies derive courage from the emotional support in the auditorium that immediately expresses respect for their bodies through erupting applause at their appearance (Gladstone 2020; Kim 2011, 222). The Korean title, *Dance Dedicated to the Ancestors*, implies there is more to this dance than seeing the grannies on the stage (Lee 2011).

The grannies on the stage are definitely not “killing it,” as their shyness and awkwardness are conspicuous. However, the aged bodies of the grannies conjure the memory of modern historical traumas, evoking the sorrowful aesthetics of Korea, with maternal suffering at its core, represented by the word *han* (accumulated sorrow in the body). The idea of maternity carries a particular affective dimension, exemplified in the common use of the sacrificial mother trope in Korean cinema, which draws tears from audience members, giving them immediate cathartic satisfaction. Also, *han* is most often associated with women’s and mothers’ hardships. The grandmothers’ generation has lived through World War II, Japanese colonialism, the Korean War, and compressed modernity. Although the show never delivers interviews or explains the grannies’ living conditions or their stories, their collective hardships are conveyed by the young dancers crawling on the floor in the first part of the performance. As a result, audience members are led to associate the grannies’ bodies with loaded memories and experiences with little room for release (Chun 2011, 22). Ahn comments on how the grannies’ joyful dance would elicit tears from her, as she could see falling bombs and flying bullets (Hyeon 2019, 370–73).

The popularity of *Dancing Grandmothers* evinces the effectiveness and particular strength of meeting the “ancestors” body-to-body.<sup>6</sup> The decision to present the grannies in their home place first, via the recorded video footage, before letting the audience meet them “live,” avoids appropriation or assimilation of the grannies’ *makchum* to the semantics of the stage. Practice-based ethnographic research takes precedence in the video sequences as the various backgrounds against which the grannies dance are carefully curated to depict the texture of the Korean countryside. This allows the audience to contextualize the dance and understand the fleeting quality of the live bodies in the performance. The work’s ephemerality emerges not from the sense that every moment is new but from the presentness of the intergenerational meeting. The archival impulse and the “ancestors” in the title underscore that these bodies will pass away and take with them the arm-waving movements lying inactivated in the younger generations. The communal dancing in the show’s last part is crucial in this sense; it is a scene of transmission, an opportunity for the younger generations to find the technique buried in their genes. It prompts the audience members to awaken the physical language embedded in their bodies.

Ahn’s nickname, “techno-shaman,” and the shamanic emphasis embedded in the word “ancestor,” render this communal dance a form of ritual, helping the audience connect with the body’s unconscious (Jeon 2020, 319). The significance of dancing together in this piece corresponds to how anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) discusses the terms “liminality” and “communitas” together to delineate ritual powers of performance. He observes that a sense of horizontal community and camaraderie emerges from entering a liminal state of stripped-down, naked humbleness (95–96). When audience members are invited to the stage in *Dancing Grandmothers*,

communality activates liminality and facilitates the challenging process of tapping into one's unconscious. To join the dance in the conventional indoor proscenium theatre space, audience members would have to unlearn the social prompts of moving, overcoming the shame associated with the clumsiness implied in *makechum*. In essence, this final dance solicits corresponding effort from audience members to return the research and practice in their own forms.

The epistemological model of practice grounded in somatic exchange can be found in Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, which extracts academic value from the multidirectional meeting of different entities. The rhizome uses the image of extended roots and calls for an epistemological shift in Western thought from a hierarchical mapping to a lateral one. It centres the cognitive practice on multiplicity and heterogeneity, deviating from its previous structure based on coherency and linearity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 6). Writing that "a rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles," Deleuze and Guattari suggest six principles that this new concept embeds: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography, and decalomania. These principles underscore the rhizome's engagement with the present, constantly changing as each entity interacts and forms new relationships with other entities. Similarly, heterogeneous and multiple bodies meet and greet in *Dancing Grandmothers*, following each other's motions in the form of decalomania, and plug in and out of their connection with others as they see fit, creating asignifying ruptures.

The rhizome is an oft-summoned philosophical framework in PAR. Scholars have repeatedly expanded upon it to discern the nonlinear model of cognitive and embodied knowledge in (re-)configuring the relationship between research and practice (Smith and Dean 2009, 21). Spatz opens his book with a quote, "what can a body do?" which is a question Deleuze borrowed from Baruch Spinoza (Spatz 2015, 1). Kim Vincs, a creative arts researcher, employs the concept of the rhizome to analyze the research aspect of her studio-based dance projects. For Vincs, the rhizome's focus on fluidity and change helps break down the split between process and product, establishing doing as a proper site of inquiry. In this vein, Ahn's research process is also an end product in itself since it aims not only to collect data but also to serve the community by performing active listening to life stories. Although the profound depth and extent of the harrowing war memories that the grannies shared appear in Ahn's interviews now and then, their exact words are not part of the production (Hyeon 2019, 371–72).

Instead, the collaborative structure of *Dancing Grandmothers* presents onstage subjectivity as fluid. The participants of *Dancing Grandmothers* share the authority, as the choreographer, dancer, and audience members are all pushed out of their comfort zones and encouraged to make contributions. For instance, the show compels honesty from the grannies, to drop the desire to pretend that dancing without an agenda in front of silent gazes is unusual. Moreover, while Ahn gives amateur dancers centre stage, the professional dancers of Ahn's company participate in the creation and engage actively in relationship-making with the grannies. Ahn is also present as the weaver of the piece, appearing onstage for short periods. Vincs (2007) demonstrates how rhizomatic mapping works well with dance, as dance involves meeting individual bodies that carry respective subjectivities (109–10). She finds subjectivity in dance "a process of individuation and assemblage that challenges the sale of capitalized 'ready-to-wear' identities by producing an individual, physically unique and material set of meanings" (111). The individual subjectivities born out of the process-based quality of dance evince that the grannies' authority is not entirely dependent on audience support.

Simultaneously, the absence of choreography itself stops audience members from the analytical process of deciphering the artist's intentions. Dance philosopher Anna Pakes (2004) affirms the significance of PAR in its acknowledgement of how "the performing arts necessarily involve collective production and collective action, a number of agents working together to produce performance events" (4). The greater number of people involved in the creation, the more equivocal the piece becomes, particularly in the absence of detailed action prompts. Pakes contends that such proneness to intersubjectivity in performing arts, or noticing the multiplicity of agents in the art-making process, animates "a different, more flexible kind of rationality, sensitive to contingencies" as "decisions are not generally made in accordance with a technically rational view of how to achieve a preconceived effect" (4). When the grannies take the stage in *Dancing Grandmothers*, they come with equal artistic authority as the director and the dancers. The scarcity of set choreography in their random dance aids the audience members to focus on the grannies' presence and the intersubjectivity at play rather than probe for the meaning beyond. *Makechum* ceases being a failure in *Dancing Grandmothers* because it affirms the creative sensitivity of each body.

As utopic as it sounds, the rhizome's envisioning of infinite meetings leads to corresponding glitches, reluctance, and rejections in practice. During the third part of the dance, when the grannies and dancers perform short skits, a dancer comes onstage with a microphone and tries to register the sound of laughter by various people on the stage. At this point, a group of grannies and dancers are filling the stage, exploring the group *makechum* dynamic. The dancer endeavours to circulate the microphone among onstage individuals, asking them to input their voices. This attempt is unsuccessful as the grannies' uneasiness at creating artificial laughter is conspicuous. They avoid getting into the situation by not approaching the dancer with the microphone. It is obvious that the grannies are not following the prompt, but this slippage from set expectations adds to the performance's rawness. The grannies are not pushed to make unwilling contributions as other dancers eventually step up to take on this job. This scene expresses a relaxed anticipation for the contingencies of the present—there should be no disappointment or stress to fulfill the prompt if the unconscious is "not feeling it" at the moment. The same scene will unfold in vastly different ways at each performance. A sense of discomfort may arise from awkwardness or failure for the grannies, dancers, or audience members alike, but the show compels that they practise accepting imperfections.

## The Joy of Moving

Joy is the driving force that fuels a reconsideration of *makechum* in *Dancing Grandmothers*. Ahn's characteristic playfulness and inviting air gives the performance a strong sense of unity and inspires participation. Pleasure is put forth in spurring audience members to join the dance, indicating that collective motion in decoloniality can evolve in jubilation. On Ahn's stage, decoloniality materializes in the form of exultation based on human connection and a sense of release. It contends that effective praxis lies in the spirit of sharing and that it should not be conceived as the researcher's sole responsibility. Instead, including community reaction is vital, such as responding in doing/embodied listening.

*Dancing Grandmothers* is a form of decolonizing from within, where knowledge shifts mainly through remapping the perceptual rhetoric. It attempts to let the bodies speak for themselves, with minimal imperatives modifying the content to fit the existing knowledge structures. Ahn chooses to invite the grannies onto a proscenium stage, a conventional platform preserved for hyper-able bodies, and

changes its meaning by rendering it a space for celebrating the knowledge in imperfection. At the same time, the authority and respect that the stage possesses are kept alive, from which Ahn extracts a significant part of the joy powering the performance.

On top of contributing to a cognitive turn, the practice serves as a reminder that animation, vitality, and revival are essential parts of knowledge, generating new energies by stimulating the senses. *Dancing Grandmothers* seeks a balanced approach of mental and physical provocations, creating a stable triangle of rigorous research, proficient bodily practice, and a readiness to enjoy failure or discomfort, which come together in each performance to awaken the somatic unconscious.

## Notes

1. All English translations are the author's. However, due to the heavily Korean-resource-based nature of this project, I do not announce my translation each time.
2. In this second set of collaborations, Ahn works with blind people, people with dwarfism, mothers who have lost children in the military, and differently abled people through the performances *Abnsim Dance* (2016), *Daeshim Dance* (2017), *Sri Srirang* (2017), and *Good Morning Everybody* (2018).
3. Jeon (2020) identifies apparent shortcomings in the range and variety of researched and archived bodies and too much directorial intervention as factors in their underwhelming reception. While he offers some valid criticisms, I am interested in how the grannies' distinctive qualities allow Ahn to sidestep pitfalls associated with archiving the historical body through dance.
4. Ahn has collaborated with civilians who volunteered, continuing her work of Body Anthropology that archives movements inherent in the body in *Spectacular 88 Dance* (2014), *A Minute and Fifty-Nine Seconds* (2014), *OK! Let's Talk About SEX* (2014).
5. The list of different names includes *practice as research*, *research as practice*, *practice-led research*, *research-led practice*, *practice-based research*, and *research-based practice*. See Smith and Dean (2009, 5).
6. To be clear, Ahn is not intent on valorizing the live body; in *Dragons*, Ahn's successful 2021 piece, she promotes meetings of bodies across the Asian continent by employing hologram and digital technology. Ahn includes a collective dance scene with audience members at the end yet again, letting the hologram of Southeast-based dancers enact simple taps on their bodies, encouraging audience members to follow those movements. Overall, *Dragons* conveys the message that limited availability of live bodies can bring further creativity to dance.

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