

Article

Choreographing Social Memories: Healing and Collective Imagining in Eiko Otake and Wen Hui's Artistic Collaboration

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Abstract: This article explores the first-time choreographic collaboration between Eiko Otake, a renowned Japanese dance artist, and Wen Hui, a celebrated Chinese choreographer and filmmaker, which took place in mainland China in January of 2020. The outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan compelled Otake to return to the US prematurely, and the subsequent global pandemic led the two artists to continue working together through the computer screen. Constructed from daily footage of Wen and Otake moving together, conversing about their personal histories and choreographic works, and visiting the Nanjing Massacre Memorial, the resulting documentary film *No Rule Is Our Rule* (2023, 74 min) offers a poignant portrayal of their creative process, which places utmost importance on honesty and openness. Through an in-depth analysis of their artistic exploration presented through the film, the article examines how their collaborative endeavor which prioritizes corporeal interaction and unfiltered dialogues can be conceived as a form of mediated social choreography. I argue that their embodied methodology, grounded in the interweaving of personal and social memories, points to the potential for collective healing from the tension and trauma in Sino-Japanese history and promotes collective imagining through intercultural dialogues.

Keywords: social choreography; documentary; social memories; performance



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1. Introduction

On 3 January 2020, New York-based Japanese artist Eiko Otake arrived in Beijing for a month-long collaboration with independent Chinese choreographer and filmmaker Wen Hui.¹ This project, funded by the Asian Cultural Council and the Beijing Contemporary Art Foundation, aimed to provide a platform for these two highly accomplished female movement artists to engage in an intercultural creative dialogue and produce a new work. Originally, Eiko Otake was scheduled to spend one month in China, followed by Wen Hui's visit to the US for further collaboration. However, the unexpected outbreak of coronavirus in China forced Eiko to return to the US prematurely. It also precluded Wen's scheduled visit to the US. Despite these challenges, the two artists continued working together remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic; their collaboration resulted in the feature documentary *No Rule Is Our Rule* (2023, 73 min).

Edited by Eiko's former student and filmmaker Yiru Chen and the two artists themselves, the film primarily uses footage shot during their shortened, in-person collaboration in China in January 2020. Suturing together footage in a diary format and beginning each scene with a date and location, the film candidly documents Wen Hui and Eiko Otake's shared time during their residency. Presenting improvised duets between Wen and Eiko, the sharing of their personal histories and choreographic works, visits to the Nanjing Massacre Memorial, conversations with young Chinese students, and their negotiation of the imminent pandemic's new social circumstances around the Chinese New Year holiday, the documentary provides an intimate glimpse into the personal lives and joint choreographic process of these two artists.

Shot by the artists themselves, the diary format presented in *No Rule Is Our Rule* allows viewers to encounter Wen and Eiko through a wide range of experiences from

the artists' own points of view. These scenes vary in length, resembling fragmented, spontaneous, and at times more fully formed thoughts inscribed onto a digital space. One of the recurring themes in the film is one's relationship to history, in which the historical trauma between Japan and China was negotiated and articulated through the two artists' mutual engagement with bodily memories.

Despite the deep economic and political interdependence between China and Japan, the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) that resulted in the Japanese occupation of many Chinese cities and the loss of over 20 million lives continues to serve as a point of tension in China-Japan diplomatic relationships eight decades later. The extreme cruelty of the war, involving tactics such as the targeted bombing of civilians, murder, torture, human experiments, rape, and the use of chemical and bacteriological weapons, has been framed as a deep national and intergenerational trauma in Chinese national discourses. Stories and memories of this war have summoned cinematic renditioning and literary imagination both within China and in Chinese diaspora. The way these stories were disseminated and contested plays an important role in shaping public memories of this history. Despite deep economic ties and strong interdependence between China and Japan, the subject of the war remains highly sensitive, overshadowing the two countries' bilateral relationship and haunting the rest of East Asia. On one hand, the discourse of nationalism in China has continued to fuel anti-Japanese sentiment in response to a lack of repentance and apology from the Japanese government and its continued efforts to revise history books to downplay Japanese soldiers' actions (He 2013; Tian 2022). On the other hand, the Japanese government and its public have experienced contentious debates about how to reconcile with this part of its history. Some express deep repentance, some question this historical chapter, and others completely reject it (He 2013; Renouard 2017). Highlighting Wen and Eiko's bodily engagement with these social memories of intergenerational trauma, the film offers a salient case study to explore the notion and potentiality of social choreography.

While dance scholarship has long emphasized the politics of the body as a potent site for social engagement (e.g., Foster 1995; Gere 2004), the term *social choreography* was initially coined by literary scholar Andrew Hewitt (2005) to denote "a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its ideal from the aesthetic realm" (p. 3). In Hewitt's theorization, this aesthetic realm is rooted in bodily experiences. Hewitt's notion of social choreography highlights the fact that choreography can be an effective medium for imagining, rehearsing, and producing new political and social orders. Building upon this understanding, Cvejić and Vujanović (2015) expand the notion of social choreography outside the realm of dance to study patterns of movement, deeds, and gestures in the public sphere, investigating their capacities for responding to and formulating public political life. More recently, Imani Kai Johnson (2018) explores this concept in the context of hip hop street dance culture in the Bronx. Her analysis highlights the subversive potential of social choreography as a means of countering the dominant social order and carrying out "outlaw cultural values" (p. 66). More recently, while examining movement patterns and breath during the global pandemic through poetry, Johanna Pitetti-Heil (2022) suggests that social choreography occurs in settings "in which people (or things) move or [are] being moved by external forces" (p. 506), emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between the individual and the social.

Building upon existing understandings of the term, I conceive social choreography as a creative process of imagining new possibilities of social relations enacted through corporeal interaction between individuals and between individuals and the environments they inhabit. It is the act of actively embodying what is possible that is founded on a radical acknowledgement of and empathy for others' experiences. In this article, I approach social choreography as both an analytical concept for reading a performance work or a film and as a methodology of choreographic practice. In the case of this film, choreography undergirds the decision of what to film, the movement in front of the camera, and the logic of documentary editing.

My analysis of *No Rule Is Our Rule* is guided by the following questions: How does the concept of social choreography function in this documentary, both as a creative process and

an artistic product? How does this film invite new ways to understand what choreography is and where it takes place? What does a body-centered approach enable in the process of activating social memories, and what kind of social relations does it produce?

In the following sections, I first provide background context about the two artists. I then illustrate how Wen Hui and Eiko Otake's dialogic and movement duets emphasize that the personal, interpersonal, and social are intimately intertwined. I then present how the establishment of social contract plays a foundational role in their collaboration. Finally, I discuss how Wen and Eiko articulate an expanded notion of what choreography is and where it takes place. Overall, I argue that their embodied methodology—grounded in the interweaving of personal and social memories—models an intimate, honest, and reciprocal way of engaging with history. This prioritization of bodily knowing points to the potential of collective healing from the tension and trauma in Sino-Japanese history and promotes collective imagining through intercultural dialogues.

2. An Intercultural Duet

At first glance, Wen Hui and Eiko Otake, eight years apart in age, are ostensibly very different artists with seemingly disparate life trajectories. Wen is Chinese, and Eiko is Japanese. Wen works in China and Europe (particularly Germany), and Eiko lives in the US but does not consider herself American. Yet their breadth of work and life experiences have shared many resonances. Their coming together anticipates an intercultural duet that bridges cultural, historic, and artistic differences and presents a fertile ground of creative possibilities for choreographing how we collectively remember histories.

Eiko Otake was born in post-war Japan in 1952, the exact year when the US occupation of Japan ended. The reverberations of the painful memories of the war persist, impacting subsequent political, economic, and cultural aspects of people's lives. Growing up in a rapidly industrializing Japan, Eiko became a fervent political activist, joining the massive student protest movement in the late 1960s and rallying against a range of issues such as the US military bases in Okinawa, the Vietnam War, and the Japanese government's control of education (Candelario 2016, p. 176). In 1976, Eiko came to the US with her partner Takashi Koma Yamada (b. 1948) (ibid.). The duo Eiko & Koma quickly gained recognition and were widely celebrated by American audiences for their slow-moving dances grounded in "elemental themes such as birth, death, desire, struggle and the profound connection between the human and natural realms" (Viso 2011, p. 14). The duo was awarded the MacArthur "genius grant" fellowship in 1996 and the Doris Duke Performing Artist Award in 2012, which cemented their undeniable status in the American contemporary dance scene as groundbreaking Asian artists. In addition, Eiko & Koma's works are not limited to live performances. Since the early 1980s, the duo has created dance on film, participating in the filming and editing of their own works.

Wen Hui was born in 1960 in Kunming, a city in southwest China. She belongs to the generation whose family lives and personal histories were heavily entangled with a range of concurrent social and political upheavals carried out by the state, particularly the Cultural Revolution (1967–1976) (Zhuang 2014). In the 1980s, Wen Hui received her dance training at the most elite dance school in China, the Beijing Dance Academy. She went on to choreograph for the Oriental Song and Dance Troupe, a state-owned dance company whose primary mission was cultural diplomacy (Wen Hui, interview with the author, 24 August 2018). In 1992, Wen established the first independent dance company in China, the Living Dance Studio, along with her then-partner, documentarian Wu Wenguang. As a pioneer in independent dance theater incorporating multimedia and documentary, Wen has created a large body of work that explores the lived experiences of various subjects, such as migrant workers, who are often neglected by the rapid social transformation in post-socialist China. Her works evoke social histories that are often erased by the official narratives of the state through corporeal storytelling.

Despite their different upbringings and artistic trajectories Eiko Otake and Wen Hui's creative paths have increasingly converged in the past decade. One of their overlapping

interests lies in their new approach to duets. Since the early 2010s, both artists decided to work fully on their own terms, no longer collaborating with their previous male partners of many decades—Koma (in Eiko's case) and Wu Wenguang (in Wen's case). Since 2014, Eiko has worked with other artists to develop a series of duets under the umbrella of the "Duet Project." Eiko has intentionally chosen to work with artists across disciplines, nationalities, genders, races, cultures, religions, and times to explore what kind of conversation and creative potential these intercultural encounters offer. This collaboration with Wen is also framed within Eiko's conception of the "Duet Project." Similarly, Wen has also taken up duets in her work. Two of Wen's documentary films feature scenes of intimate duets between her and her father's aunt, whom she refers to as "third grandmother." These two films, *Listening to Third Grandmother's stories* (2012) and *Dance with Third Grandmother* (2015) recount lost memories of China's socialist past through oral history interviews, duet dance scenes, and montages of everyday movement. The artists' shared interest in exploring bodily relationships to history and memories through duet forms has long anticipated their creative collaboration.

3. The Individual Is Inherently Social

If we consider the documentary film to be a choreographic assembly of raw visual, graphic, and audio materials through a rigorous process of selection and omission, it becomes noticeable that what is included on screen about the two artists' personal journeys deliberately emphasizes that the individuals are always constructed in relation with others and to the socio-political and cultural environments they inhabit. The first part of *No Rule Is Our Rule*, consisting of footage from the first few days they spent together, documents Wen and Eiko sharing their personal histories, which are accompanied by old black and white photographs of themselves and their families, as well as video documentation of their choreographic works. Prompted by their genuine curiosity about each other, they recount their personal memories of their individual pasts, in intimate and sincere conversations. One of the early scenes of the film, shot at Wen's home soon after Eiko's arrival in Beijing, reveals that this is only the second time that Wen and Eiko have ever seen each other in person. Their first encounter occurred 25 years earlier in 1995, when Wen visited Pennsylvania to see Eiko & Koma's performance. Though they had been familiar with each other and their dance works, they did not know each other on a personal level until this collaboration. Their question-and-answer-style dialogues unfold organically as Wen and Eiko seek to get to know each other. This conversation also allows the audiences to take on the perspectives of the two artists to encounter them along with the artists themselves.

Wen Hui's memories of her upbringing highlight the role of the Chinese state in shaping the lives of Chinese citizens and her tactics of resistance against its dominant ideologies and social expectations. Illustrated through photos of Wen dancing and her family portraits, Wen reminisces about her time in kindergarten, her experience in the art school as a class leader creating dance work for propaganda, and her sense of pride during that time. Through political education of various forms in the years of the Cultural Revolution, Wen was initially inculcated to embody the Maoist vision of the collective body of Chinese socialism through her dance.

While countless life circumstances are pre-determined under state socialism, Wen also explains how she has exercised her individual agency. Wen shares with Eiko very private aspects of her life including undergoing illegal abortion four times, a topic rarely discussed in the public sphere in China. This conversation is accompanied by footage from her radical theatrical production *Living Together/Toilet* (1995) of Wen Hui and Wu Wenguang eating instant noodles out of an actual toilet. In this work, Wen and Wu recount their private lives from their gendered perspectives as a woman and man living together unmarried, which constituted a grave social taboo in the context of the dominant Chinese state ideology at the time. According to film scholar Kiki Tianqi Yu (2019), this production was intentionally omitted from contemporary Chinese art history due to its private nature. Even so, it undeniably marks the first time in contemporary Chinese art that a young

independent artist couple makes public their personal concerns and private lives through performance work.

Eiko's sharing of her early memories and family histories presents tension between national obligation and individual desire, rooted in her family's memories of World War II. Pointing at a photograph of Eiko's parents on their wedding day with their family members, Eiko reveals that her parents were married on 10 August 1945, five days before Japan's surrender during the war. In her own words, Eiko's family believed that the war was "bad" (*No Rule Is Our Rule*, 17:16–17:20). Yet her father had no choice but to take part in it because of the government's order. In a few sentences, Eiko sums up the tension between the nation and the individual by recounting her immediate family's experiences, implying that sometimes individuals' actions resist any facile judgment of being right or wrong. Though having not personally experienced the war, Eiko expresses that her memories of the stories recounted by her parents' generation have passed down to her and become part of her own memories of history.

Dialogues through spoken word are one way of engaging with each other's histories and experiences. The film also includes various scenes of their corporeal dialogues that highlight a different mode of knowing and sharing beyond verbal texts. For instance, in the opening scene against a large stone mountain with black and grey textures that resemble a water ink painting, Wen Hui and Eiko Otake sit next to each other on the ground. Wearing orange-red lipstick and a patterned silk jacket of the same color that resembles a kimono cardigan, Wen slowly shifts her forward-looking gaze to focus on Eiko's palm, which appears to be holding something. Eiko, wrapped in a long white coat with a scarf that matches the color of Wen's jacket, gently passes a tiny pebble from her palm to Wen's hand. Both artists appear fully present in the moment and attentively sense each other's motions without the need to maintain eye contact. The passing of the pebble between them becomes a metaphor for their sharing and exchange of experiences.

Duets like the above-mentioned scene, which recur several times in the film, are not merely a surface-level corporeal exchange but a dialogue of their individual histories and memories communicated through their bodily interaction. They sense and respond to each other, allowing each other's movement to shift their own. This choreographic exchange of memories transforms both Wen and Eiko, who encounter and engage with two sets of social and historical conditions that have shaped their individual lives. When discussing what working with other people means to her, Eiko states, "Working with others, pushing beyond our norms, is densely performative. I think better with effortful conversations. Two artists getting to know each other on a deeper level feels radical, but doable. Once that happens, we cannot go back to our prior selves" ([The Fabric Workshop and Museum 2023](#)). Eiko's words acknowledge that the individual is a fluid construct, influenced by and impacting those around her.

While the entire film presents a core message about how to encounter histories, these early scenes allow the audience to witness how Wen Hui and Eiko model their approach to accessing the memories of their creative partners. Their interaction establishes a living example of what Eiko reiterates in the film that no one comes from nowhere. The cinematic rendering of their dialogic and movement-based duet effectively shows that social relationships, identities, and memories are closely imbricated in intercultural encounters.

4. Social Contract as a Foundation for Social Choreography

The title of the documentary, *No Rule Is Our Rule*, plays with the paradoxical nature of rules. As much as both Wen Hui and Eiko Otake have embraced unruliness in their personal lives and artistic works as discussed above, the film's title also indicates that unruliness is itself a rule that the artists agree to obey in this collaborative process. In this film, the two artists stage their consensus and choreograph social agreement as a performative element. Insofar as social choreography is both a corporeal and dialogic practice of interaction between individuals, Wen and Eiko lay the ground rules for their interactions and the ways that their interactions will be presented to viewers.

On 4 January 2020, the first morning after Eiko's arrival in Beijing, the two artists are already eager to start working. Pointing the camera lens towards Eiko, who is warming up by swinging her arms around her torso, Wen asks, "What do you not want in this house if I am recording?" Eiko shakes her head and states softly, "No." She continues, "If it is not good, then we cut. . . We don't use. . ." (*No Rule Is Our Rule*, 04:50–05:08). Instead of censoring the filming process, Wen and Eiko agree to film each other as much as they see fit and make decisions on what to take out later during post-production. By carrying out a conversation like this at the very beginning of their filming process, Wen and Eiko obtain consent from each other, an important practice of documentary ethics. Through the on-screen verbal consent, Wen and Eiko also extend an invitation to the viewers, letting them experience their private lives and stories with ease rather than with a sense of voyeurism. This choreographed consensus underscores the two artists' ethical commitment to each other and their audience. It also reaffirms their corporeal and dialogic interactions as a foundational element in their social choreography throughout the film.

Beyond spoken words, their collaborative rule-setting also takes place through meaningful bodily gestures. In a subsequent scene, Wen and Eiko continue delving into their visions for working together. Wen speaks with Eiko in English, a language somewhat foreign to her, while largely relying on her expressive arm and hand gestures to articulate her thoughts. Wen conveys to Eiko, "We start (from) zero, and we meet. . . we talk (to) each other. . . we just film each other. Then, one month later. . . I am sure (in) this process, something comes up. . ." (*No Rule Is Our Rule*, 13:16–13:43). Looking at Eiko with excitement gleaming in her eyes, Wen bumps her fists together and then pulls them apart little by little, signifying the process of negotiation inherent in a collaborative process. This embodied expression underscores the significance of sensing each other and stepping back with grace when conflicts arise. Exploring intercultural dance collaboration in her book *Love Dances*, SanSan Kwan (2021) notes that language barriers between two dance artists with different mother tongues could lead to misunderstanding, while danced gestures, often serving as a shared language, become a form of mediation. In the context of this documentary, gestures not only bridge gaps in Wen and Eiko's verbal communication, but they also emerge as a site where the two artists enact honesty and openness. Gestures, in short, become another way that the corporeal—more specifically, the exchange of bodily movements—become part of the social choreographic practice of Wen and Eiko's duet.

How does Wen Hui and Eiko Otake's rule-setting at the inception of their collaboration relate to the concept of social choreography? Even as they agree on a practice of unruliness, Wen and Eiko are negotiating with each other and their viewers to create a social agreement that choreographs their collaborative process. While Andrew Hewitt's notion of social choreography lies in the theoretical realm, choreographer Michael Kliën's choreographic imagination presents a practice-based exploration. Originally from Austria, Kliën directs the Laboratory of Social Choreography at Duke University, through which he presented a trilogy of choreographic events—*Parliament* (premiered in 2014 in Greece), *Amendment* (2022), and *Constitution* (2023). In these immersive experiences, audiences take on the role of participants or what Kliën refers to as "citizen-performers," engaging in a collective negotiation of sociality (*The Kinan Institute for Ethics n.d.*) At the outset of the choreographic event, a set of rules or a score of "dos" and "do nots" is announced either by Kliën or another person (Tamler 2022, pp. 34–35). After this announcement, the speaker would exit the space, allowing the participants to embark on their experiential journey without the constant observation of the rule-maker. Kliën posits that social order consists of a set of rules constructed and collectively agreed upon by the masses, like laws, and individuals possess the agency to decide whether to adhere to or disobey these rules. By establishing a social contract or agreement and then seeing how it evolves throughout the experience, the citizen-performers model the functioning of society. Kliën's choreography of social order provides insight into Wen and Eiko's collaboration, in which the two artists embrace a parallel notion of rule establishment to lay the foundation for their social interaction.

In this documentary, the commitment to honesty and transparency in the two artists' creative process also becomes palpable through the role of the camera, which functions as a listening and observing "body" onscreen. The film does not shy away from revealing the presence of the camera or the methods of filming. Rather, it intentionally evokes its presence. It makes visible from the very beginning of the film that the documentation of their creative journey is carried out by both Wen and Eiko themselves using a DV camera and occasionally their phones. By engaging with the self-reflexivity of the cinema, exposing its presence and the production process, the film repetitively prompts the viewers to recognize that the unfolding narrative onscreen results from an intentional and dynamic process of construction.

The deliberate use of a handheld camera that produces shaky footage in some shots and imperfect composition in others renders a sense of spontaneity. This specific approach to documenting reality echoes the aesthetic features in what Kiki Tianqi Yu (2019) theorizes as first-person documentary practice. Yu (2019) observes a prevalent trend of turning the camera inward to film the self and its social milieu in the context of an individualizing China. In a post-screening talk about *No Rule Is Our Rule* at UCLA in November 2022, Eiko shared with the audience her concern that the film was too amateur. The audience disagreed, pointing out the intimate quality delivered through the camera work that appears spontaneous and the presentation of "ordinary" lives that are, in fact, "extraordinary." In Yu's theorization, the combination of a diverse range of aesthetic forms of inscription, such as the use of amateur home videos and corporeal performances, conveys a sense of intimacy, bringing the audience closer to the subjects on screen. These first-person films evoke a "subjective interpretation of a truth," making visible the filmmakers' "fragmented and multi-layered [selves]" (Yu 2019, p. 16). In other words, the cinematic devices deployed in this film are consistent with Wen and Eiko's established social contract of adhering to unfiltered honesty.

5. "Going to Places" as Social Choreography

In a public lecture given by Wen Hui and Eiko Otake to college students at the Nanjing University of Arts, the two artists shared a presentation slide that states, "Going to places is my choreography. There are things one only learns by being somewhere." This expanded understanding of choreography underscores the body's mobility through space and its encounters with specific places as generative of new knowledge. In Wen and Eiko's creative process, visiting different places constitutes both the choreographic process and the choreography itself. In this film, the places where the two artists interact play important roles. The locations where the footage of the day was shot are specifically marked onscreen, like a stamp on a postcard. Each site is not neutral but is already imbued with memories and social meanings. Out of all the sites where the two artists traveled together, Nanjing is portrayed as the most significant.

Eiko's decision to visit the Nanjing Massacre Memorial was spontaneous; the visit deviated from the original residency itinerary. She had felt a strong impulse to be at this historical site to directly encounter and process this historical trauma with her body. What does it mean for a Japanese woman to place her body within a Chinese city, especially Nanjing? What does it mean for a Chinese national and a Japanese national to visit, together, a monumental site that archives the most traumatic and painful intersection of Japanese and Chinese history? How does this site activate memories in their bodies, and in turn, what do their bodies produce by inhabiting this space?

Instead of focusing on specific narratives of the Sino-Japanese war, *No Rule Is Our Rule* presents how the two artists choreograph their bodily relationships with a place imbued with painful wartime memories. On 18 January, the two artists (along with a translator) arrived at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall. The scene intercuts between shots of Eiko attentively witnessing the museum exhibits and still close-up shots of the exhibition itself. We see Eiko gently touching the names of Chinese civilians carved on a smooth stone surface with her right hand, as if she is having a dialogue with them through a tactile

exchange. She speaks to her translator in Japanese, “It is so much work because each person’s life has weight. Each name was individually carved.” The camera zooms in slowly on her hand. This choreography of the camera movement directs the viewer’s attention to the haptic experience of her hand moving over the names carved into the stone. Her body and its movements in relation to the war memorial environment remind viewers of the breadth of interactions that constitute the social choreography in *No Rule Is Our Rule*.

Investigating how to activate bodily senses, particularly the sense of touch, as an approach to history writing, dance historian Ann Cooper Albright (2018) argues that engaging with her body to feel and encounter subjects of her historical research resembles “a contact duet.” Through this dance, she opens up her bodily senses to invite the traces of history to touch her as if it were “a somatic meeting” (p. 76). Albright contends that this kinesthetic approach to studying history grounded in somatic awareness offers different kinds of discoveries than other forms of historical documentation. In this scene, the tactile and sensual quality of Eiko’s hand delicately caressing the carved names is captured by Wen, who intuitively operates the camera and zooms in onto her hand. This act of touching establishes an interface that connects these invisible yet weighted figures of the past and Eiko’s corporeal presence. Such somatic exchange conveys her kinesthetic empathy towards these lost lives, blurring the boundaries of time, space, the lived, and the living.

If Eiko’s corporeal interaction with the site can be seen as a duet with a traumatic past, Wen Hui’s instinctual bodily impulse to document this encounter is prompted by her own desire to archive this duet, one that is charged with political implications. The next day, Eiko Otake and Wen Hui visited Nanjing Comfort Stations at Liji Lane Site Museum. The scene begins with Wen positioning a tripod with a DV camera mounted on top at the center of a plaza, reiterating her role as the primary cinematographer in this scene. In the succeeding shot, we see Eiko filming and taking pictures with her cellphone of a full wall of black and white close-up shots of 70 elderly women whose anguished facial expressions project pain, loss, and sorrow. We soon learn that these photos depict women who were forced into sex slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army. They were called “Comfort Women.” These survivors, appearing similar in age to Eiko, silently cry out and bear witness to the crimes imposed on their bodies during their youth.

Adjacent to this poignant photographic wall display stands a copper statue that depicts three grieving women clinging onto one another, one of whom appears to be pregnant. Wen and Eiko put down two bunches of white flowers at their feet and knelt in front of them. In the next shot, we see only Eiko Otake, still kneeling, alone and deep in her thoughts. The soundscape in this scene is the quietest in the entire film, empty of dialogue, with only traffic sounds that can be heard at a distance. This rather abrupt cut implies that Wen has left the scene to reposition the camera to get a closer shot of Eiko and to show her relationship with a site imbued with memories. In Wen’s composition, Eiko’s body implies with clarity and sincerity her empathy for those who suffered during the war and her apologetic position for the deeds of the Japanese government. Wen Hui’s impulse to document Eiko suggests her will to present an alternative and nuanced portrayal of a Japanese citizen’s reaction to this history that counters the dominant representations of Japan’s lack of repentance in official Chinese nationalist discourses.

“[T]he act of memory is bound up with the imagination”, says Toni Morrison (1995, p. 98) in her seminal essay “The Site of Memory.” Morrison articulates the role of imagination as necessary for uncovering various “truths,” especially the ones overlooked by mainstream historical accounts. The activation of bodily senses through the will to “touch” history not only evokes existing bodily memories; rather, this process of engaging with the corporeal as a source of knowledge production can open up avenues for imagination and cultivate new relationships with history. In Eiko and Wen’s film, a body-centric approach to history enables one to experience the past at a somatic level instead of relying solely on historical documentation. This approach offers opportunities for alternative modes of knowing and accessing historical “truths.” Observing each other through their own eyes and the camera’s lens, Wen and Eiko dance out a choreography of care and compas-

sion, transcending nationalist discourses and pointing to the potential for healing from historical trauma.

6. Conclusions

No Rule Is Our Rule witnesses Wen Hui and Eiko Otake's three-week, in-person artistic collaboration in China right before the outbreak of the global pandemic. During their time together, the artists' honest and unfiltered dialogues about their personal lived experiences allude to their individual relationships with nation-states and highlight the ways in which their bodies are marked with their memories. By establishing a mutual agreement and expectations for their collaborative process, their open discussion stages a performative process of setting a social contract that creates a foundation for their embodied exchange. Visiting different places in China, especially memorial sites of the Second Sino-Japanese War in Nanjing, becomes a form of choreography through the artists' intentional bodily engagement with the sites and with each other. This choreography provides new ways to access a traumatic history by highlighting the nuances of individual bodily experiences and memories that are often omitted in official discourses of history.

Social choreography as a frame of analysis allows us to focus on how various artistic elements, not just dance movement in a conventional sense, are constructed and assembled through a particular logic that allows for meaningful engagement with society. As a methodology, it provides a body-centered approach that is built upon an understanding of the body as an interface for social connection, participating in a reciprocal exchange with the social world. In other words, the body functions as both a site that stores and enacts social and cultural experiences and a site that can effect changes. My analysis of *No Rule Is Our Rule* also highlights that social choreography is ultimately an act of imagination that is made possible when the individuals taking part in its process are willing to engage with their own and others' memories and histories with radical openness and empathy. It is this reciprocity between the body and the social world that enables the creative process to become a form of theorizing itself and where new social possibilities can be imagined. Wen Hui and Eiko Otake's approach to encountering each other and the social environment presents an intimate, empathetic, and caring way of moving through the world that honors and engages with memories, gesturing toward a more just and compassionate society.

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Note

¹ In this document, I refer to Wen Hui using both her full name and her last name, Wen. However, since Eiko Otake has been known as Eiko from the artist duo Eiko & Koma, I decided to refer to her using her first name instead of her last name "Otake." This is an intentional choice with the goal of better reflecting their artistic identities.

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