DANCE, PRECARITY & COVID-19 IN TWO GLOBAL ART CITIES

by

Lauren Gerlowski

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Abstract

During time in isolation and quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic, professional dancers have had little interaction with their careers amidst the global health crisis. While technological innovations have been creatively utilized during this time by dance studios, dance as a profession (as an unique ephemeral art) has not had the same online transition that other arts have had, like theatre. This said, the conditions of enhanced precarity associated with dance industries has unfolded in cities around the world and is shaped by questions of political economic and urban geographic factors.

This thesis examines and reflects on a breadth of key forces surrounding precarity that dancers and the dance industry experience in Chicago and Toronto. Based upon interviews with 25 dancers in both cities, this research focuses upon the drastic differences of participation within the dance industry in each of these global cities. Each place plays a significant role of dance production and entertainment districts on local, national, and global levels. My findings showcase how different levels of local and federal support, labor representation, and access to affordable healthcare, affects the resiliency and subjective experiences of precarity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in each city.

Keywords
precarity, creative geography, arts, creative geographies, urban, urban geography, global cities, labor


Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

When the first two chords are played in the song *Seasons of Love*, an immediate nostalgia is felt within a certain community. The collective ‘aww’ moment happens when thinking about the Broadway show (and later, movie) that shed light on the harsh realities of those who pursued theatre-based careers. It made mainstream the truth, precarity, and agency that performers have while chasing *What (They) Did For Love*. The chase is fueled by a passionate vocation that pushes performers to continue working for *five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes* a year. Through character development and plot the award-winning show *RENT* details difficulties and passions that performers face – these difficulties are grounded in political economic and urban geographical phenomena which have become more compounded through the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

As the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic spread in March 2020, so did feelings of uncertainty within a wide swath of performing arts spaces. Professional and recreational dance studios shut down, studio rentals were postponed, K-12 recitals were canceled, classes were held virtually, rehearsals were paused and almost all theatres in North America were closed. Many within and outside of the performing arts sector experienced economic instabilities, obstructions to the creative and work processes, and an impending fear of the unknown. "It's just been like a roller coaster of emotions of being hopeful of theatre coming back and also being like, why? Every day I battle with going after my passion even though it's an unstable industry… At the end of the day I just end up following my heart, which is theatre, and I'm just hoping that I'm making the right choice." Here, Ayana Strutz, a freelance dancer in Chicago, shares her anxieties with Melissa Perry of the *Chicago Reader* (2021). Strutz is explaining her concern about following
her heart and believing in a career within a volatile industry and can produce unhealthy standards of precariousness in employment. Many participants in this study relayed that they considered leaving or are leaving the industry because of the same questions. Covid-19 presented a unique opportunity for dancers to reflect on their experiences with the industry and recognize different moments of precariousness.

The conditions of precarity associated with the performing arts sector are evolving unevenly in various places, spaces, and cities around the world. The Covid-19 health crisis has enhanced and worsened these conditions. In the US and Canada, two countries of focus in this research, some performing artists have the benefit of accessible federal and local-level assistance, others do not; some have universal health insurance, others do not; some are supported by unions, others are not; some are receiving large gifts from philanthropists, others are not. There are huge variations in different sectors of the economy and dancers are amongst the most precarious of the performing arts sector at-large. Chicago and Toronto are two cities with similar area size, population, and timelines. Yet these places have different political socio-economic spatialities with regards to federal and local financial support for the performing arts broadly and dancers specifically.

My research demonstrates the ways that Covid-19 re-configured dancers’ relations of precarity within Chicago and Toronto. This expands the literatures of precarity to encompass professional concert dancers as always reckoning with precariousness in employment based on their job conditions. This research additionally expands on the literature by showing the uneven ways that dancers remained in a precarious state amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, and how that differed based on state/national support. Additionally, I discuss how digital engagement in the dance sector was emotionally distressing. Conditions of precarity varied based on the dancers’
position within the hierarchical dance political economic infrastructures. I close this research by presenting questions for the future – interrogating what it means for a city to not have places of dance actively working through the Covid-19 context.

1.2 Research questions

With long lines, smooth transitions, endless pirouettes, and high leaps, dancers are thought of as some of the most elegant and graceful artists. It is lesser known of how difficult it is to be graceful and successful in this career: specifically, how the dance sector perpetuates insecure and risky work environments, even outside of a pandemic. The uneven effects of Covid-19 revealed longstanding precarities within the dance industry.

The questions for my research project are as follows:

1) What are the relations of precarity in the dance industry in Chicago and Toronto? Where and when does a dancer have greater agency? Where and when can a dancer be economically self-sufficient?

2) How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect dancers in Chicago and Toronto?
   a) What types of support did dancers receive? Specifically, in what ways did dancers receive financial support?
   b) How does the pandemic affect dancers’ resiliency for their career during the pandemic?

   In what places are dancers more resilient and why?

3) Given the co-constitutive relationship between cities and their spaces of dance (theatres, studios), how are Chicago and Toronto affected as global art cities due to the impacts of COVID-19?
1.3 Methodology

My research utilizes methods of virtual interviews, discourse analysis and elements of autoethnography. These methods led to my approach of analysis which utilized tools of phenomenological inquiry (focus on a phenomenon that all participants experience) and an international urban comparative case study (exploring issues relevant through cases) (Cresswell, 2007). The impetus for this project spawns from my background in dance. I have a BFA in dance and was professionally active in the dance field for six years in Pittsburgh and New York City. This project was imagined in the Fall of 2019, before the pandemic, and has since undergone major shifts. For instance, I have not been able to visit my research sites in-person. Specifically, access to Toronto from the United States for US citizens has been completely shut down. It has been interesting, to say the least, to interview, research, and write about two cities I have not been to.

Interviews were the primary method of data collection for this project. The original intention was to conduct in-person interviews but due to Covid-19 safety precautions and UW-Madison’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) rules, interviews were conducted virtually. Many scholars (Lo Iacona et al, 2016; Janghorban et al, 2014; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) agree that, although not the same experience as face-to-face interviews, virtual video interviews can serve as effective alternatives. However, some scholars (Lo Iacono et al, 2016) have expressed concerns regarding virtual interviews, citing the difficulties of establishing rapport and understanding participants’ off-screen body language when only the interviewer can only see their ‘headshot’ as well as establishing rapport. This highlights two distinguishable challenges presented by virtual ethnography: (1) establishing rapport, credibility, and trust with the
participant, and (2) noting how a participant feels in the interview. Luckily, as dancers, my interlocutors displayed clear body language and comfortability seeing themselves on camera. Moreover, my own dance training allowed for easier interpretation of interviewees' body language.

I drew on practices of ‘grounded interviewing’ (Fraser & Weninger, 2008) to structure my interviews. Grounded interviewing is the practice of mobilizing discourses and themes which appear in early stages of research throughout interviews. Early in my interview process, the theme of “death” of the dance industry emerged. I returned to this often in my interviews and it became integral to my discussions with all participants in understanding how the precarious dance career is affected by the pandemic in each city. As my interviews were semi-structured, I was able to seam together this, and other concepts, through the data collection period.

In July and August of 2020, I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews. I identified 22 total participants, 14 from Chicago and 8 from Toronto. The interview conversations were semi-structured and followed Hay’s (2016) format and Lupton’s (2020) virtual qualitative amendments (see Annex A for the full interview tool)

The participants were dancers, choreographers, and dance administrators whom I accessed through snowball recruitment and social networking sites. I have a considerable background in dance that has produced many connections in both Chicago and Toronto. Considering concerns of privacy and anonymity (Sin, 2015), I only used social media as a form of recruitment of participants rather than as a research tool. Dancers must project a certain level of professionalism online, and their accounts (primarily Instagram) are used as a stand-in resumé. Because of this, it is unhelpful to use these highly edited and polished accounts to understand the socio-spatial processes happening on macro and micro levels of the field.
Discourse analysis was highly relevant when understanding quantitative analysis of performers in cities and changes in upper echelon (what I call Tier 1) companies. Drawing on a variety of reports from organizations, including the MacArthur Foundation and Hill Strategies, I analyzed narratives to help me understand the different socio-spatial processes at work in different segments of the dance industry.

My dance background was particularly relevant when thinking theoretically about the structure of the political economy of dance, making connections with my participants and establishing the credibility necessary to solicit deep engagement during interview conversations. In this, I utilized elements of auto-ethnography. Ellis et al (2011, para. 1) describe this as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.” Looking at my experience as a dancer analytically has allowed me to think through what a political economy of dance may look like.

1.4 Feminist Concerns & Limitations

Here, I’ll pause to recognize my inability to remain “objective” within the scope of this project, despite Western scientific expectations of impartiality. In this, I am critical of my methods and how my positionality affects my research results (following Lees, 2003). I have been a coworker, peer, and friend to a handful of my participants and care deeply about dancers’ subjective experiences. However, objectivity is not my goal here (following Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000 p. 674) – instead, the goal is to uncover a glimpse of the changing dance sector in Chicago and Toronto. From my experience, as a former professional dancer and current geography student, I have a unique position to relate to, synthesize and analyze the data presented.
My intersectional identities and social positions have created visible and invisible tools (Reyes, 2018) that allowed for quick rapport and a particular insight and analysis. In the invisible tools, I was able to use my rapport and professional experience to quickly establish comradery. My participants and I bonded over our shared passion for dance. I call upon Sara Smith’s (2016) reflexive piece that describes how she theorizes intimacy and angst in ‘the field’ as a feminist geographer while in conversation with her participants about love, heartbreak, loss, and other private matters. This highlights how having an ‘intimate’ and ‘insider’ view of the field can produce its own anxieties which affect research (specifically, writing) production.

Other scholars, such as Sharp & Dowler (2011), highlight how a move away from the (objective) field can redirect the interview to a co-constitutive performance. In this, the ambiguous insider/outsider status – or which ‘hat’ I was wearing as the interviewer – does not matter. Rather, embracing both academic and dance statuses allowed for unique discussion. In my interviews, participants held a high amount of trust that I understood the vernacular and spatial politics of dance. By acknowledging this together, we were able to deeply unfold their experiences amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, I acknowledge that as a white-cis-heterosexual woman that is able-bodied, my experience as a researcher (and former dancer) has come with many privileges as well as limitations (the visible tools, referred to earlier). Starting with the latter, I find it important to acknowledge the many times within the academy that (white and male) peers and faculty have dismissed my research as unimportant. I have not worked closely with these scholars, but in passing they have not viewed dance or dancers – or let’s face it, art in urban spaces in general - as being a relevant research topic with importance. This has produced much anxiety and moments of reflection, especially in the writing process. It has left more space for me to bring in
political economy perspectives (e.g., Harvey, 1989). I also recognize that my race and class background has granted me access to levels of academia (and dance) that I otherwise would not have known. My gender and able-bodied ability have allowed for me to access specific sites of dance that granted me many research participants for this study. Additionally relevant is that there is a response bias in my sample of participants of who is even able to make it this far, based on their intersectional identities.

This momentary reflection is mostly indicative of the positives and negatives that are produced in this work. In being so close to my work, it has been difficult to step away and see broader pictures and narratives. Relating these intimate stories to theory in the academy has been a consistent struggle as I have navigated writing and research in the field.

1.5 Comparative Urban Analysis as a Framework

Finally, I approach the data analysis and written report of my research following work conducted by urban geographers who focus on comparative urban analysis (Robinson, 2016; Van Heur, 2020; Jacobs, 2012; Smith, 2009; Nijman, 2007). This field has roots in political science and sociology and has gone through waves of popularity. The 1950s-90s was a major time for comparative urbanism. This was especially true when urban geographers connected their work with economic geographers and Marxists. Comparative urbanism significantly changed in the twenty-first century with foundations to build on, new ways of theorizing (topographic or topologic), and understanding relational place-based geographies of cities (Ward, 2008).

Germinally, this approach has been defined as:

“a field of inquiry [which] aims at developing knowledge, understanding and generalization at a level between what is true of all cities and what is true of one city at a given point in time… Comparative urbanism, then, is the systematic study of similarity
and difference among cities or urban processes. It addresses descriptive and explanatory questions about the extent and manner of similarity and difference.” (Jan Nijman, 2007, p. 1)

Jane M. Jacobs (2012) highlights how similar a city is does not matter – rather scholars should invoke Deleuzian theory as method. She calls for horizontal relations that invoke a “third part of comparison” (2012, p. 905). In this, the scholar understands a singular characteristic or happening that exists in multiple urbanities or under multiple urban processes. The tertium idea focuses on ‘in’ the city and how it constitutes (“of”) the city. Jacobs closes by recommending comparative urbanists should utilize the tertium idea to theoretically understand phenomena.

Here, following Nijman (2007), Robinson (2016) and Jacobs (2012), in the case of my research, I am trying to understand Chicago and Toronto through the framework of dancers in the context of Covid-19. In this, I add to comparative urbanist research by focusing on the same singular aspect (dance amidst covid-19) in two differing cities. My work expands this literature by incorporating comparative political economic discussions to understand how different places value performing arts, and what that means for the dancers’ experiences within those cities. To do this, I investigate urban governance, urban processes, and transitive geographic processes affect individual participants, the dance sector, companies, and the urban form itself.

1.6 Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 consists of my literature review. My research utilizes and adds to three subfields of scholarship: creative economy debates within urban geography and planning, geographies of creativity, and labor geography’s understanding of precarity and agency. These subfields are presented together to focus on creative spaces and environments and the labor of creation. This includes physical, mental, and social labor but also is related to creative labor
markets and precarity. I close this chapter by presenting a framework toward a political economy of dance.

Chapter 3 presents a broad overview of Chicago and Toronto as global art cities. I provide a definition of global art cities as scholarship has discussed it to date. I then present overviews of Chicago and Toronto and highlight key information about Covid-19 in each city. I end this chapter by discussing the tiered framework which emerged with data analysis that shows the hierarchical nature of the dance sector. It is utilized to understand the political economy of dance in Chicago and Toronto as well as the variance of precarity experienced by dancers in each place.

Chapters 4 and 5 are my empirical chapters which demonstrate the dance sector in Chicago and Toronto before the Covid-19 pandemic and during the Covid-19 pandemic, respectively. In these chapters I discuss agency and bodies in dance, the exploitative nature of the dance industry, and how individuals and companies were supported financially amidst Covid-19. These discussions unveil that dancers always are experiencing precariousness in employment but only certain dancers are experiencing the full life condition of precarity. Additionally, it shows that, as Toronto citizens received significant economic support from their government, they proved to be in a more resilient position than others. My thesis closes in chapter 6 where I present final conclusions and questions for further research.
**Chapter 2 Literature Review**

I situate my research within three sub-fields of literature: creative economy debates within urban geography and planning, geographies of creativity, and labor geography’s understanding of precarity and agency. I present research from each of these fields with a focus on post-industrial cities. Each of these subfields provides a unique avenue of which to understand the urban experience of dancers amidst Covid-19.

The creative economy debates infamously have highlighted the unique position that creatives have within urbanities. This highlights the major role that arts play in a city’s economy to attract investment. Jamie Peck (2020) follows Gibson and Kong (2005)’s note that creatives bring more than just economic success to a community, in fact it is not always a direct economic benefit. It is the work that artists do, “in the sense that they serve a purpose, especially in the humdrum world of local economic development, where the cupboard is also pretty bare when it comes to needle-moving, genuinely effective, yet fiscally affordable and organizationally feasible interventions” (Peck, 2020, p. 49).

The latter two subfields I engage with focus on body and material experience of creativity. Literatures of geographies of creativity focus on how researchers understand creativity and the experience of creating’s effect on place making. Labor geographies’ focus on precarity and agency are relevant to understand the labor happening within the creative industries. The artist within a city often participates in labor structures of insecurity and risk. The work on precarity is particularly integral to my research as I build upon multi-dimensional understandings of precarity in my empirical chapters.

Each of these subfields complement one another as the artistic labor of dance is relevant in economic and urban contexts. Cities have been branded for creatives, and for circulation of
capital, and the experiences that urban dwellers have (and choose to have) within these structures is important for understanding the ways cities can work for artists.

2.1 Creative Economy

The ‘creative economy’ has been a buzz word amongst economic geographers in the last two decades. It has been realized as critical to the formation of the urban Gibson and Kong (2005) developed a compelling review of the literature and explained the multiple definitions, looking at the sectoral-based explanations, labor-market organizations, the creative index approach, and the convergences thereof. Loyd (2010) and Markusen and Johnson (2006) show how arts contribute to broader economic sectors specifically in post-industrial cities, such as Chicago and Toronto. Specifically, they link it to the post-industrial workplaces which require artistic services (i.e., graphic designers, advertisers, marketers, etc.). Others have looked at the spatialization of creative economies within various places (Power and Hallencreutz, 2002; Power and Scott, 2004; Grodach, 2013; Waellisch, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, I follow Kong’s (2020) lead and utilize the term ‘cultural industries’ to acknowledge the creative work that artists do as well as empower strong economic and urban potential for political change.

Other scholars have linked artists relationships to the city. According to Peter Hall (2000), the artist is linked to the urban for a variety of reasons: one of which is the temporal history of the city. Older and more mature cities have wealth already accumulated and have the wealth to create links of spatial, economic, and cultural happenings. In this, artists are attracted to older and established cities where capital is circulating. Both Chicago and Toronto, only over a century old, are two global cities with capital constantly circulating in many circuits and sectors.

Artists have been geographically clustering within certain cities. Peter Hall (2000) writes that the specialized skill of cultural production (e.g., work to put together a dance performance,
including rehearsals, classes, auditions, staging, and performing) needs to cluster geographically. Cultural agglomeration districts have been localized within post-industrial city centers because of “the instability of casualized employment relations and the critical need to remain in contact networks,” (Gibson and Kong, 2005, p. 544). This is a large reason as to why artists, especially those whose labor requires them to perform in-person, locate within major city centers, such as Chicago: there are multiple opportunities for job-based flexibility and project-based engagement (Ley, 2003; Lloyd, 2010; Borén & Young, 2013).

Florida (2006) boldly asserts that the creative class is the most important creating class of a city. In The Rise of the Creative Class, Florida (2006), posed that a city’s economic success is correlated with levels of artists, creatives, and technological innovators. He correlated a rise of a ‘Bohemian Index’ with a rise of economic activity. In other words, an urbanity’s cultural life would attract mobile business leaders (and their capital) and to these places. Sharon Zukin (1998) earlier (similarly) posed that artists are first wave gentrifiers, in this same regard.

Carl Grodach (2013) compares Austin and Toronto’s creative economy city plans and his research shows that Florida’s “creative city model dominates contemporary economic development and invariably facilitates neoliberal development schemes. Both cities do employ the creative city discourse to promote the city image, and to justify the pursuit of redevelopment projects in which cultural activity serves as a branding device and amenity,” (p. 1762). Here we see how in Toronto’s cultural economic plans the Floridean Creative City model dominates the language. Notably, it is used to justify upscaling central-city property in this post-industrial economy.

Michael McKinnie (20007), a theatre professor at Queen Mary University of London, writes a compelling argument about the place of theatres in cities and political economies at
large. This text has become an integral part of my research. In many ways, theatres are more than cultural institutions but are necessary for the development of the post-industrial society. To put it in the language of classic economic geographers (e.g., Harvey, 1978), it falls into the secondary and tertiary circuits of capital where capital is reinvested in and out of the built environment. In *City Stages*, McKinnie specifically examines the relationship of the urban development and theatre in Toronto over about 50 years beginning in the 1960s. Toronto, McKinnie (2007, p. 134) writes, “is a city stage not only because of the physical contours of its theatre buildings and the neighborhoods in which they reside, but also by the ways in which a city stage depends on valuing certain places in certain ways, privileging some places over others and working to create, sustain and defend places.” In other words, he is identifying the civic self-fashioning and neoliberal fast policy (which Peck, 2020 and others write about) that Toronto utilized in some specific neighborhoods to re-develop them according to the Floridean creative city formula.

David Wilson (2018) is among the few geographers who have begun to link artists and arts economies to broader political economy and economic geography conversations. From an urbanist’s perspective, Wilson conducted creative geographic scholarship on the relationship between the political economy, gentrification and blues clubs in the Southside of Chicago. In this work, he details how the “current neoliberal racial machine” advances impacts of the redevelopment and commodification of blues clubs and their users by the elite (Wilson, 2018, 75). Through his ethnographic account he demonstrates how the art created within the Southside spaces has been transformed into an urban entrepreneurial tool (Harvey, 1989).

The creative city narrative that Richard Florida has sold to cities has become a dominate narrative within urban planning. This has had major and drastic effects on cities and their relationship to the creative class. As the literature has shown, the creative economy has largely
been used to advance capital into a city’s network. As Wilson (2018) and McKinnine (2007) discuss, the art (and places of art) are used as places for commodification for this schema. However, I find it important (through my work) to highlight the perspective of the artists and how they are appreciated, or not appreciated, by the city.

2.2 Geographies of Creativity & Dance Studies Scholarship

Geography has been attuned to changes and notions of creativity both in terms of research subject matter and methodology. As De Leeuw & Hawkins (2017) articulate, we can know that critical geographers have utilized artistic and creative studies to understand “the ways in which these creative works both make and remake space, places and human relationships” (p. 307). In the most recent re/turn to creative geographies (Hawkins, 2015), geographers have engaged multi-directionally with poets, visual artists, musicians, dancers, and circus artists to create new works, understand the spaces which these artists inhibit, and use these different art forms as methodologies (respectively: Cresswell, 2014; De Leeuw, 2014; Shabazz, 2014; Pine & Kuhlke, 2014; De Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017).

Within the re/turn to creative geographies, Hawkins (2014) created an analytic framework of three research questions which scholars studying art and space’s interaction have followed. Firstly: (1) what ‘work’ does art do in the world? (2) what are the geographies of the art’s production and consumption? And (3) how is it that we encounter art works? This call has sparked interest in a type of feminist praxis via creative mechanisms to understand geographic concepts (Kinkaid, 2019). In other words, Hawkins’ approach has evolved to become a tool for ‘doing geographies’ (Madge, 2014). Dancers are consistently aware of their spatialities and are morphing the negative space around them in their work. Their proprioception gives them a unique insight for relating dance with space.
Dance and geography’s academic disciplines have had few intersections. One way that it has appeared is when social scientists examined when, where and how place fits into the meanings with moving bodies (Potuogul-Cook, 2008; Cresswell, 2006; Meyer, 2014; McSharry McGrath, 2014; Johnson, 2014). Derek McComack (2008, 2014) introduced dance studies to human geography when he investigated negotiations between the moving body and affective senses. Adam Pine and Olaf Kuhlke published two edited volumes (2013, 2014) on the Geographies of Dance. These volumes expand the literature on corporeality and the importance of bodies in placemaking. Specifically, they examine the utility of dance in understanding different scale of socio-spatial phenomena. Similarly, Anjeline de Dios and Lily Kong (2020) published a handbook on the geographies of creativity investigating how, largely, creativity and creatives intersect with current geographic scholarship, emphasizing the importance of art to placemaking.

The first volume on the geographies of dance from Pine and Kuhlke (2014) focuses on the importance of dance and landscape, as dance can “create a meaningful form of representation that interprets space” (p. ix). This shows that as dance happens in different places at disparate stages of the creative process, it has various audiences that it will affect, at multiple scales. These edited chapters focus cultural or traditional dances performed (such as belly dancing in Israel and Bharatanatyam choreographers in Toronto) and other forms of social dance. This volume, like 1990s dance studies scholarship, focuses on choreography as a method to understand socio-spatial phenomena. The second volume (Pine and Kuhlke, 2015) demonstrates that the dancer’s body is negotiating being a corporeal place, that is acted upon by the choreographer, and a place that holds expression and emotion, for the dancer to show artistry. Much of this work specifically focuses on the dance performance instead of the dancer. My work adds to this literature and
includes professional concert dancers in Chicago and Toronto but focuses on the political, economic, and social factors at play in shaping dancers’ experiences with their careers, while navigating the Covid-19 pandemic.

Much of dance studies scholarship has focused on the intersection of the material and symbolic in choreography (Desmond, 1991; Njardi, 2014). However, there has been a recent turn to include more understanding of the precarious nature of dancers’ laboring practices (see special issue 1, volume 51 of Dance Research Journal, 2019 and TDR Vol. 56, No. 4, Precarity and Performance: Special Consortium Issue). This has happened outside of geographic discourse, where dance studies scholars are engaging with sociology and anthropology. In 1998, Randy Martin started a turn to intersect Marxist political economy with dance studies. Scholars have looked at dance labor under neoliberal geopolitical conditions (Reynoso, 2019; Quinlan, 2019; Desmond, 2019; Van Assche, 2020; Kedhar, 2020) and how the project-oriented nature of the ephemeral art makes it hard to define the boundaries of professional and private life increasing the precarity experienced (Pewney et al., 2019). This difficult to define boundary increases difficult and insecure work conditions for dancers that can affect their dance styles, where they dance, and how often they are able to engage with the career. From this, we can see that dance studies are recognizing and advancing our understanding of the precarious nature of dancers’ laboring practices.

My work helps expand, integrate, and proposes new connections for geography and dance studies scholarship with a focus on political economy, socio-spatial discourses of urban geography, and the material body. What is missing from the re/turn to creative scholarship in geography is an examination of the artist: the subjective individual experience; the identity(ies) of the artists; their positions within the capitalist world system. I add that many have also
overlooked the multiple economies dancers interact with outside the studios. Multiple part-time jobs, flexible work hours, insecure work conditions create situations of economic vulnerability for those participating in places of dance. My work expands on how state and national support amidst the COVID-19 health pandemic.

2.3 Precarity and agency within labor geographies

The field of geography has engaged with precarity both theoretically and as a life condition starting after the turn of the 21st century (see review: Coe, 2012). The term was first used by the French researcher Pierre Bourdieu (1963) while discussing his research in Algeria. Kendra Strauss has most recently advanced geography’s relationship with precarity in key three articles where she discusses entry points for geographers to analyze precarity (2018), the spatial fix of agency and labor (2019), and racial capitalism’s particular relationship to precarity (2020).

Precarity, as defined by Mahone et al. (2018, p. 237) is the “applied experience of uncertainty and insecurity that comes with flexible labour practices and arrangements that include temporary and seasonal work, subcontracting, freelancing, piece-work, project-based work, home-work and informal work.” From this definition, that my research will follow, we see that precarity is a life condition which can be experienced unevenly by individuals in similar and different sectors of work and life.

Strauss writes (2018, p. 625) that precarity “encompasses both ‘labour’ and ‘life’: life is inherently precarious, but human societies and economies are organized in ways that render some lives more precarious than others, often but not exclusively through the capitalist wage relation and the division of paid and unpaid labor.” Here she is recognizing that while precarity is a life condition, it can be exacerbated by structures that affect both places of work and the home.
Campbell and Price (2016) delineate five levels of precarity including: precariousness in employment, precarious work, precarious workers, the precariat, and precarity. I created the table below to clearly demonstrate the different definitions of these terms: this explains specificities of how, when, and where an individual is experiencing precarity which, as Strauss shows (above), is an inherent life condition. In Campbell and Price (2016)’s work, they use this to understand their case study of secondary students working part time retail jobs in Australia. These workers are doing precarious work but not experiencing precarity because of their kinship support and standards and labor protections in Australia.

| **Table 1: Definitions of Levels of Precarity, based on Campbell and Price (2016)** |
| Source: Campbell and Price (2016) |

| **Precariousness in employment** | A multi-dimensional concept referring to objective job characteristics that involve insecurity, such as a low level of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions (p. 315) |
| **Precarious work** | Waged work exhibiting several dimensions of precariousness (p. 315) |
| **Precarious workers** | Persons not just engaged in precarious work but also enduring the necessary consequences of precariousness (p. 315) |
| **The precariat** | Analogous to the 19th-century notion of the proletariat – [the precariat] is identified as a class-in-the-making that is emerging from the ranks of precarious workers (p. 315) |
| **Precarity** | Generalised set of social conditions and an associated sense of insecurity, experienced by precarious workers but extending to other domains of social life such as housing, welfare provision and personal relationships. (p. 315-16) |
As is seen earlier, it is important to identify and understand what type(s) of precarity an individual is experiencing. Campbell and Price (2016) follow a modified schema from Vosko (2010) which highlights four important (somewhat measurable) elements that are essential to precarity: (1) a lack of labor protection, (2) low wages, (3) insecurity for employment, (4) little to no control over wages, hours, and conditions. In this, we can especially see overlap with Mahone et al (2018)’s definition of precarity which includes dimensions of flexible and unreliable practices of work.

Waite (2009) argues that precarity is unique from terms such as vulnerability and risk. Gilson (2014) states how vulnerability is a fundamental condition to life, vulnerability calls for a human reaction for protection or change, and vulnerability is a first step to danger. Risk is focused on quantitatively and qualitatively by human geographers. When used for qualitative research, risk is related to uncontrol and danger of a situation (Gregory et al, 2009). For Waite (2009), when talking about labor as precarity “encapsulates political potential” (p. 413). For Waite, the term encompasses the agency for actors to rally collectively for social and political activism. Specifically, he is stating that when one is precarious, one is experiencing the conditions of risk and vulnerability but also can mobilize “in response to that condition, whereas risk and vulnerability generally refer to just conditions.” (Waite 2009, p. 421). The agentive aspect that Waite highlights here is what is relevant within my work. Agency is a theoretical term that is embedded amidst structuralist and post structuralist debates. In the dictionary of human geography, Gregory et al., (2009) define human agency as “The ability of people to act, usually regarded as emerging from consciously held intentions, and as resulting in observable effects in the human world,” (p. 347). As my research shows, agency and precarity are inherently linked when trying to understand dancers’ economic conditions.
Paret and Gleeson (2016) discuss precarity and agency while looking at migrant lives. They understand precarity to be the condition that is experienced by structures created by neoliberalism, states, and borders. Whereas agency is lived through how the actors navigate the structures.

Strauss (2019) discusses agency and precarity in similar ways. She theorizes following Herod’s (2001) work where he re-theorizes the spatial fix to include the workers and how they shape landscapes as part of their social self-reproduction. This is important because it moves away from the Marxian and structuralist understanding that capital (or capitalists) is the sole shaper of landscapes for various sectors. It follows Paret and Gleeson’s (2016) contribution that the actors, the workers, have the capacity to act to navigate and shape the places they inhabit.

2.4 Towards a Political Economy of Dance

Researchers predominantly outside of geography have begun to understand the highly precarious spaces that performing artists, specifically dancers, exist in. My research will follow similar lines of work to Annelise Van Assche (2016; 2017). Van Assche has conducted extensive research on contemporary dance and dancers in Brussels. She analyzes the artistic labor within the city and shows how contemporary dance is “especially precarious owing to the difficult to define nature of the profession, the demand for transnational mobility, the predominance of project-based work and network-oriented activities and the dependence on bodily health and public funding,” (2017, p. 238). I call on Hetty Blades’ (2019) research on the ontology of dance in the US and the UK and claim that dancers from all genres experience a similar level of precarity to contemporary dancers because of the immaterial nature of dance labor, the blurring of professional and private life, and the scarcity of resources.
Questions around agency of the artists in precarious economic conditions are prevalent in these discussions. As many have shown, artists exist not only in labor systems in the art world. Rather the short-term projects and insufficient funding (Blades, 2019) have forced artists into multiple labor markets: both in art spaces and outside of them (Mahone et al., 2018; Menger, 1999). Ursell (2000) and Mahone et al. (2018) posed that artists have voluntarily positioned themselves in spaces of extreme exploitation and self-commodification. They state that “the creative worker [can get] by on the strength of job satisfaction,” (Mahone et al., 2018, p. 273). Their understanding articulates academically the ‘love’ that the show RENT was attempting to portray. In other words, it shows how much people have given up (seemingly voluntarily) to pursue artistic careers. However, these approaches neglect to acknowledge the complexity of the interweaving demands that racial neoliberal ideologies and policies place on artists.

Srinivasan (2011) and Kedhar (2020) attend to dance studies beyond theoretical and (politically) symbolic perspectives of choreographies. Their contributions add to the articulation of the hegemonic political-economic structures which shape dancers’ daily lives. Both scholars highlight the geopolitical aspects of their subjects, understanding how citizenship and immigration complicates the labor and the art. Srinivasan (2011) investigates the labor in the embodied experience of Indian dance in the United States. Kedhar (2020) discusses British South Asian dancers’ dynamic existence with regards to policy and funding. She uses the metaphor of a flexible body to discuss the exploitative nature inside the studio and within the larger precarious career. I build on similar experiences of vulnerabilities created by the geopolitical and urban formations that are faced by dancers with different identities and techniques.

Black et al (2019) discuss the precarity of the domestic arts and crafts industry in Canada and the US, particularly looking at how the industry has moved online and the subsequent
increase of economic precarity for the artists. This conversation is salient to my discussion as we see the dance field shifting online due to COVID-19. Many of my participants endured similar measures of precarity to those in this study; some of which include uncertainty around online earnings, as revenue is made through advertisements, burnout, dance no longer being a ‘legitimate pursuit’, and the notion that the internet is often premised off free labor (Black et al, 2019, p. 281).

There is room to continue expanding the literature on the connection between the political-economic and urban structures which create precarious relations to dance and shape dancers’ subjective experiences. These discussions are mainly happening in fields outside of geography. Geographers have extensively looked at precarity and labor geographies relations (as mentioned above) and begun to look at dance as a place-making act and a corporeal negotiation, but there is still room to extensively apply how dancers are affected by racial capitalism’s neoliberal policies in various cities and countries.
Chapter 3 Making Sense of the Dance Sector in Chicago and Toronto

People in the United States and Canada had different experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Federal, state/provincial, and urban governments handled regulations of individuals’ movements differently. Numbers of confirmed cases within each place were starkly different. From OurWorldInData\textsuperscript{1}, in July 2020, the highest number of the 7-day average of confirmed cases in the United States is 67,086.29 and in Canada is 517.14. Figure 1 below shows the number of cumulative cases in the United States and in Canada from June 30 – August 1, 2020, which is the period of interview data collection. This information helps contextualize the quantitative experience of Covid-19 in these two places. The United States’ line has a strong positive trend while the line for Canada is steadier. The cumulative confirmed cases on August 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2020, in the U.S. and Canada was 4.63 million cases and 118,523 respectively. More specifically, In Chicago as of July 29,2020 there were 59,994 (Chicago Department of Health) cases of Covid-19 and 14,100 as of July 29, 2020 in Toronto (Public Health Ontario).

\textsuperscript{1} Dates looked at: July 1-31, 2020
Figure 1: Cumulative confirmed Covid-19 Cases: Canada vs the United States

Source: OurWorld in Data

Accessed: 10-24-2021

Regulations that governments in Chicago and Toronto enacted were different. Illinois had a statewide mask mandate for indoor spaces and other places where social distancing was hard to accomplish that began on May 1, 2020 (Wood, 2020). This mandate was still being enacted in July of 2020 when the bulk of this research was completed. Additionally, Chicago had restrictions on youth sports and at the end of July 2020 had a list of 22 states where Chicago residents had to quarantine after visiting because those states had high numbers of Covid-19
infection (Chicago Tribune, 2020). Chicago has a 5 stage ‘reopening plan’ where stage 1 is the strictest order and stage 5 is the return to ‘normal’ with minor restrictions.

The Ontario Government enacted emergency orders on March 17, 2020, to begin to curtail the health pandemic. Toronto’s stay at home orders were very strict. Citizens were encouraged to stay out of all public spaces outdoors and indoors and to not interact with families outside of their households. Unlike Chicago, Toronto’s re-opening plan was not based on mainly confirmed case numbers but based on citizens being vaccinated. Like Chicago, step one has the most restrictions, encouraging outdoor gatherings mainly and step three has a return to ‘normal’ with minor restrictions (Toronto.ca, 2020).

This data presentation focuses on July 2020 when participant interviews were largely conducted. This is because, at the point of writing (Fall 2020), both Chicago and Toronto are continuing to deal with the global health pandemic and the multiple variants thereof. The Delta variant has become a major stressor that health experts have discussed in each city. Chicago and Toronto went through multiple waves of high case counts at different periods. The figures below show different waves of cases and deaths of Covid-19 in each city’s respective state and province. As seen in Figure 2, Illinois’ largest peak is in November of 2020 when there were over 8,000 new cases (Allen, 2021). Figure 3 demonstrates that Toronto’s highest peak was about three months later, in March of 2021 (Public Health Ontario, 2021). Participants would have had no idea that they were about to ride multiple more waves of a pandemic before vaccines were introduced and stay at home orders are lifted.
Figure 2: New Cases and Deaths in Illinois (March 2020-October 2021)

Source: The New York Times

Accessed: 10-24-2021
The structural context that was enacted from the government and numbers of confirmed cases helps understand the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for dance and the dance sector. In Chicago and Toronto, in July of 2020, the month when interviews were conducted, dancers could not meet indoors in either place. Dance companies were only working virtually as they were not essential workers and did not need to meet in person for the society to effectively move past the pandemic. In Toronto, at this time, dancers were not able to meet outdoors either. This did not allow for any site-specific work in public parks and in other spaces.
3.1 Chicago and Toronto as Key Cities

Chicago and Toronto are two global art cities (Can-Seng Ooi, 2017), each with dynamic international economic transactions and have agglomerations of artists for artistic projects and gig economy work. However, not all artists have international status or are funded by cities to expand their networks, instead some key institutions\(^2\) are chosen for this. Can-Seng Ooi (2017) first used the term *global art cities* when discussing Paris, London, Berlin, and New York with regards to their transnational economic activity with art. Christian Morgner (2019) expanded the discussion of global art cities in Asia. Specifically, he discusses how the size and architecture of the city allows and doesn’t allow for creativity to emerge. I add Chicago and Toronto to this conversation as they are both key places where art sellers, artists, and companies gravitate. As we can see in Chicago and Toronto, the city is shaped physically by the Great Lakes and the post-Fordist deindustrial turn in the mid-twentieth century. The mobilization of manufacturing districts away from the city center created space, time and interest in investment into the cultural aspects of cities (McKinnie, 2007). It was a moment when these places within the city starkly changed from sites of production to sites of artistic consumption (Waellisch, 2019; Zukin, 1998).

3.1.1 Chicago

Chicago’s visual arts, music and theatre are internationally recognized and renowned. Chicago’s topography from the Great Lakes (as mentioned above) shapes the city and serves as a noted place for inspiration of art. The Art Institute, one of the most visited museums in the

\(^2\) My work later addresses how the dance organizations that are funded by cities, and used in urban entrepreneurial tactics, are primarily white institutions that practice a particular kind of dance that has been historically whitewashed. The key dance organizations that are bolstered and not ignored are supporting white art in Chicago and Toronto.
United States, Art Society, Renaissance Chicago and more all call Chicago home (Madigan, 2004).

Perhaps more famous than Chicago’s internationally renowned visual arts is the ‘Chicago Style’ found in theatre and music. According to broadwayinchicago.com, a site for buying theatre tickets, Chicago has more than 200 theatre companies that perform a variety of works which attract a wide audience for shows ranging from the classics and experimental contemporary works. Madigan (2004) describes how actors have been attracted to Chicago’s art scene, creating a distinct group of talented actors. The Chicago Sound, a distinctive Blues and jazz style of music, was created following the great migration as the city became an ethnic and cultural hub. Although the sound isn’t as common now, it can still be found in blues clubs around this city – and on the Southside – (see Wilson, 2018) as well as the Chicago Orchestra and the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

However, dance companies in Chicago tend to come and go more quickly than the aforementioned institutions of music and art (Madigan, 2004). A couple notable exceptions are (Tier 1 companies) Giordano Dance and Hubbard Street Dance who are international leaders of jazz dance. The Joffrey Ballet is another staple dance institution that moved to Chicago from New York in the mid 1990s. All these companies, and others, will be expanded on in later chapters.

3.1.2 Toronto

Toronto has had a vastly different history with regards to its cultural life. While it has been presented as a creative city, it ironically has not kept up with other cities from a cultural perspective. Per capita, the city of Toronto gives $14.61 to artistic life, while comparable cities of Chicago and Montreal are at $21.95 and $26.62 respectively (City of Toronto, 2019).
However, it is known that investing in the arts will generate revenue other places (Peck, 2020). For every dollar invested in the arts, the city of Toronto generates $3.20 in economic activity (City of Toronto, 2019).

There are a few key institutions within three main fields that dominate the cultural sector of Toronto. The city has a big investment into classical music, namely the Toronto Symphony Orchestra which was founded in 1922. In 2006, the Canadian Opera Company opened the Opera House downtown which led to a renaissance shift for the city towards more music and ballet performances (City of Toronto, 2019). However, in 1967, Michael McKinnie’s (2007) research shows that this was the year the city of Toronto both physically and administratively stopped investing in theatre’s built environment. It was the 1990s that was a pivotal period in Toronto’s theatre history when some drastic re-zoning happened politically, and former industrial capitalists started to own theatres and theatre companies including the Mirvish and LivEntertainment Coorporation (Mckinnie, 2007). Since the late 1970s no not-for-profit theatre company in Toronto had purchased their own space. This sheds light on quantitatively why there are only a few theatre companies and even less dance companies currently in Toronto.

Theatre and dance are not bragged about on the cultural aspect of Toronto’s website. The city focuses on galleries and history museums and their large television/film industry, which generates over $2.5 billion in economic activity annually (McGillivray &. Howarth, 2021). Toronto has become a hotspot as a film location and is part of the ‘Hollywood North’, with little attention given to the performing arts.

3.1.3 Comparing Chicago and Toronto

Chicago and Toronto fall into each other’s 6th and 7th most similar cities when comparing size and population. While very similar populations, Chicago’s Performing Arts related sector
has about 10,000 more employees – as is seen below, with information from Metroverse, a Product of Harvard Growth Lab (Neffke et al, 2020). This series of data provides insight into how small the labor force of the Performing Arts, Spectator Sports and Related Industries are within each city. Unfortunately, this data is aggregated and cannot be separated from how it stands presently. Future research would be useful in unpacking this sector of society quantitively.

Table 2: Population and Labor Force of Performing Artists in Chicago and Toronto

Source: Metroverse (Neffke et al, 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Labor force</th>
<th>Number in Performing Arts, Spectator Sports and Related Industries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>6.8 million</td>
<td>4.4 million</td>
<td>21,100 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto</td>
<td>6 million</td>
<td>3 million</td>
<td>12,400 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Comparing Chicago & Toronto’s Performing Arts Industries

Source: Metroverse (Neffke et al, 2020) [https://metroverse.cid.harvard.edu](https://metroverse.cid.harvard.edu)

Accessed: 08-03-2021
Figure 5: Chicago’s Economic Composition with Performing Arts Sect Highlighted
Source: Metroverse (Neffke et al, 2020) https://metroverse.cid.harvard.edu
Accessed: 08-03-2021

Figure 6: Toronto’s Economic Composition with Performing Arts Sect Highlighted
Source: Metroverse (Neffke et al, 2020) https://metroverse.cid.harvard.edu
Accessed: 08-03-2021
Both cities’ economic compositions (above) show less than half of a percent of workers participating in the performing arts sector, and dance companies are less than one hundredth of a percent of that. This small figure is fascinating as Floridean urban creative class theory (2003) dictates that the creative class is the most significant class to the city. But this subgroup of creative workers is quantitively low. Figures 5 and 6 show that Chicago is dominated by Education and Technical Services fields while Toronto is also focused on Technical Services and Food services (Neffke et al, 2020).

There have been many challenges and opportunities of acquiring and analyzing quantitative data about dance in each respective city. It is an interesting thing to try to quantify a field that doesn’t want to be quantified; to look at multiple sources that have vastly different numbers, sometimes to the scale of 100 times different, demonstrates that this field does not want to be quantified. The precarious aspects of the dance sector, including the insecure work conditions and engagement with multiple sectors causes confusion in quantitative datasets. In other words, the qualitative aspects of the dance field drastically impact the quantitative data that appears on national datasets such as census information. In fact, it may (and most likely does) skew it significantly. Dancers, as mostly independent contractors, may be in-between engagements at the time of the census and would not be included in the count. The census in both the U.S. and Canada assumes that the data collection happens in a given city at a time when most contract periods are active. However, contracts range anywhere from 2-50 weeks, pending on dance industry tier, with most landing between 26-50 weeks (Brooner & Worthen-Chaudhari, 1999). If one is to naively assume the dataset produced in census data is correct, then the analyst must assume that the dancer has only one contract within a given year, not multiple contracts, at
the time. My data shows that most dancers in both Chicago and Toronto engage with multiple
dance entities, if dance is, or if it is not, their main form of income.

Most of quantifications from census data have been used in various reports explaining the
cultural economy of a given city (see literature review, Chapter 2). Applying this to urban
geographic theory: I argue that if the creative class, as urban geographer Richard Florida asserts,
is the most important class of a city, then quantitative data about dancers needs to be normalized
as well as the definitions for it to be applicable across research sites. While defining who is in the
creative class is out of the scope of this paper, it is accepted in all studies that the creative
economy that dancers are part of the creative class – however small their percentage in the
cultural industry.

Quantitative datasets in this regard do not recognize or value the actual impact that dance
and dancers make in a given city. What do I mean by this? For example – two landmark reports
have been created throughout the 2010s about the cultural economy of Chicago. Jennifer Novak-
Leonard (2014) of the University of Chicago has the most limited version of defining the
occupations within a creative economy, following the National Endowment of the Arts Standard
Occupation Codes, which dance is included in. Within this, she uses US census data and finds
that there is 21% of the civilian labor force is a creative worker (an estimated 31,000 people), of
which .7% are dancers and choreographers (approximately 9,300 people).

Contrastingly, World Business Chicago (2019) produced a report which had a much
broader definition of occupations in the Creative Economy. This report utilized data from the
Otis Report which estimated that 253,511 people work in the creative economy, within this about
8,400 people work in the fine and performing arts occupation. Unfortunately, these reports did
not get more numerically specific regarding occupations.
Both numbers – from different base datasets – present very different pictures in a short time span (published less than five years apart). This shows that they cannot work with one another. They do not show the same trends, in fact, they show very different creative economies within the same city. This enhances the unique and precarious position for these dancers, where dance as labor is not consistently recognized in quantitative research.

3.2 Tiered Framework

Following research and amidst data analysis, I recognized and created a tiered and hierarchical structure of dance companies in both cities. This structure is useful in telling which people can make sustainable livelihoods in the dance sector. Later in my thesis, I return to this to understand what kinds of support (economically and domestically) participants experienced and how those forms dramatically varied across the tiers in each place. This is critical for understanding the political economy of dance in each city. It demonstrates how the city allocates funding (from public entities, grants, and private philanthropic endowments) in the dance sector and how dancers experience this distribution unevenly. It shows that not all companies, of all dance genres, get funding, affecting dancers’ levels of precarity.

Chicago has very distinct tiers of dance companies within the tiered structure. As Table 3 demonstrates, Tier 1 companies have the largest budgets with long contract periods. These are the most competitive companies to get into and many were devastated and drastically changed by Covid-19. As an example, we can look at the 2021 virtual auditions for Hubbard Street Dance where there were over 900 dancers attending (Conversations on Dance Podcast, 2021). As is shown in Chapter 4, the tiered landscape drastically impacts a dancers’ ability to economically survive. Tier 1 companies in Chicago are prized by the city. When you land at O’Hare
International Airport, you see posters for the Joffrey Ballet and Hubbard Street Dance. The city does not invest evenly in its dancers in Tier 2 & 3 companies.

When directly asking a participant in Tier 2 if the reason she has not been able to have dance as the main form of income is because she is not in a top company, her response was “100%, I feel like those companies are so competitive.” All in all, over two-thirds of my Chicago-based participants were not economically self-sufficient through their dance careers because they were not working in Tier 1 companies.

Table 3: Tiered Companies in Chicago

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier  Level</th>
<th>Company Examples</th>
<th>Length of Contract (Estimate)</th>
<th># Of Participants (n=13)</th>
<th>Participants with Dance as Main Form of Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>Joffrey Ballet, Hubbard Street, Giordano</td>
<td>Full time 50-week contracts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>DanceWorks, Crash, Cerqua Rivera</td>
<td>Part time 6–20-week contracts</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 3</td>
<td>Independent Festivals</td>
<td>Gig based</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Toronto’s dance landscape differs from Chicago’s insofar as the tiers are also separated by genres of dance. The musical theatre dance genre dominates Toronto’s dance scene. Meaning for dancers to be able to make their livelihoods within the industry they need to be a “Jack of All Trades” instead of a “master of one”, as one participant stated. Specific companies that specialize in one style of dance such as contemporary, modern, and tap do not receive the same government and philanthropic funding as companies that work within more than one. This is in line with how some dance genres (primarily and historically white) and companies receive more attention than
others. This shapes how non-dancers experience dance and performing arts in Toronto, when exposure is particularly limited to handpicked genres.

Notably, participants in Tier 1 in Toronto have contracts for about five months spread throughout the year of full-time professional work. In other months, which my participants note primarily fall in the summer, they may teach independently. However, many noted that the pay for the work they did within those five contracted months was large enough to sustain themselves to a point where they weren’t worried but also weren’t 100% comfortable.

Table 4: Tiered Companies in Toronto

Source: Author

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier Level</th>
<th>Company Examples</th>
<th>Length of Contract (Estimate)</th>
<th># Of Participants (n=8)</th>
<th>Participants with Dance as Main Form of Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>Mirvish Productions, National Ballet of Canada</td>
<td>Full-time; 5 months (spread throughout the year – summers off)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>Dance Theatre of Canada, Canadian Contemporary Dance Company</td>
<td>Part-time; 1–8-week contracts, mostly gig based</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This tiered structure is utilized in this research as an analytical tool. The hierarchy presented here is only put into practice to understand which dancers are economically self-sufficient within the field and how they can be resilient amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. It shows the structures of the political economy of dance that shape precarity in each city. Most importantly it gives a language to how dancers experience the city based on what company they are in (or not in). Dancers’ livelihoods, agency, and experiences are shaped through this tiered and hierarchical infrastructure.
Chapter 4 - The Dance Sector & Dancer Livelihoods

4.1 Introduction

Despite a massive disruption, the Covid-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity for many people to pause and look at whether they were enjoying their lives. It provided a unique moment when dance work was not available in normal circumstances, and dancers reflected on their time in the industry. This chapter, my first empirical chapter, goes into detail at how these reflections help understand how dancers interact with the dance sector in each place before the pandemic. Political decisions of arts funding schemas are responsible for programs and histories that have formed how dancers interact with their profession. In turn, the creative profession has created opportunities of investment for cities raise capital via Entertainment Districts and tourism.

In the next subsection, section 4.2, I present an overview of the dance career and the various elements that make it precarious for the dancer. Precarity and agency are inherently linked experiences. Waite (2009), Paret and Gleeson (2016) and Strauss (2019) highlight how there are moments of agency for workers when they are responding to conditions of precarity created through structures which create similar experiences of risk and vulnerability. The various actors in the creative process of dance have different amounts of precarity and agency at particular stages. It is essential to understand how a dance is created, and under what conditions, to decipher what conditions precarity materialize for dancers in general, and during the Covid-19 pandemic context.

In section 4.3, I present information from participant interviews that relates to conditions in the workplace. This section demonstrates how dancers have had abusive, unhealthy,
dangerous, and risky work conditions while in the creative process. This information is indicative of what type(s) of precarity that participants experienced in the field.

In the final subsection (4.4), I focus on (economically) who can make a living in the dance sector. This information builds largely upon precarity literature and is presented from information collected in participant interviews about whether they were able to economically be self-sufficient based off a career in the dance sector. This research shows that only dancers in Tier 1, regardless of Chicago or Toronto, are the dancers who can do so.

4.2 The Dance Career – Exploitative Labor, Precariousness in Employment and Dancers’ Agency

In its most general sense, the general flow of the creative process for (Western: ballet, modern, tap, jazz, contemporary) dance styles is below. It is worth noting that this is not always a linear process, the steps (are often) muddled and can vary depending on the tier the creative process is happening in. This table is largely auto ethnographic and is based on my experience within the dance field. This is applicable as the methods of creation are (generally) the same in Chicago and Toronto as in Pittsburgh and New York where I performed.
### Table 5: Structure of a Dance

**Source:** Author

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>What Happens</th>
<th>Who is (typically and broadly) involved</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Choreographers present or start with an idea</td>
<td>Choreographers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Auditions for cast</td>
<td>Dancers, choreographers, directors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Dancers are cast</td>
<td>Dancers, choreographers, directors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rehearsals</td>
<td>Dancers, choreographers</td>
<td>4a) the dancers are spatially staged 4b) the dance is edited 4c) the dress rehearsal on stage happens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Dancers, audience, director, theatre staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along this (seemingly perfect and theoretical) timeline of how a dance is produced, the choreographer holds majority of the agency and power. The choreographer thinks through the idea (Step 1); allows the idea to change throughout the process (Steps 1-4b); picks particular dancers (Step 2-3); writes the script for the performance and changes it as they see fit (Step 4); picks who does what and where at particular times (Step 4); asks for them to perform at varying speeds, directions, with seemingly endless costuming and lighting design changes (Step 4); and then has to relinquish the agency to the dancers to see what happens for the final performances. At each step, the choreographer has the final say in choosing where, what, and how the bodies will move in space.

The choreographer is a position of holding majority of the agency and power in the room. While it may be the case that dancers nominally dominate the landscape of the dance studio, the
choreographer holds onto this power by utilizing the competitive aspects of the dance industry to verbally and physically threaten or abuse dancers into submission to his/her prescribed choreography. While this may sound dramatic there are many instances where a dancer is quickly dismissed for incorrect placement. The infamous jazz choreographer, Bob Fosse was known for his intense demands. If a single part of one’s body, including a finger, was out of line, you were dismissed. Not only that, you also may have had a chair thrown at you. While this is considered the ‘Old Style’ of choreographing, in many companies, especially in Tier 1 these practices persist, as was expressed by multiple participants from Hubbard Street Dance, Giordano Dance and others who were previously with RiverNorth Chicago before the company folded.

The dancers have little economic or artistic agency in this process. Dancers can decide whether to audition and if they are cast, to accept the role or not (Steps 2-3), true amidst all tiers to varying degrees. Often roles come few and far between in this highly competitive environment, and dancers will do whatever work they can get. Next, the dancer has some creative license with how they choose to use their body to perform the movement. However, there are limitations put on the body by directives made by the choreographer that include where, how, and when movements are done (Step 4). The dancer will take their mastery over the technique and choose to combine it with other ways of moving the body which matches their style. The agency over how the dancer’s body is moving is re-appropriated by the choreographer who specifies how the movement should be exactly executed (Step 4b). If dancers do not follow the choreographer’s desires here, they can quickly be replaced. And finally, in the performance (Step 5) the dancers share the agency with the audience – the choreographer is no longer in the
same place as the dancers and the dancers ultimately decide what form the bodies and dance will be perceived by the audience.

The audience has agency in two major ways in Step 5. In one regard, the audience has agency in how long the run of the performance will be. If the show is a success, with multiple nights of sold-out tickets, the run of the show may be extended. However, the inverse is also true, where if the theatre is empty on the first night, it may be canceled for the remainder of the run. Building off of Martin (1998), who explains that there is work that goes into how a person chooses to understand and reconcile with what the movement is trying to portray, the audience exists in an agentive fashion where they choose who to watch on the stage, where to watch, or even to not watch (as in fall asleep, as is the story of so many who attend the Nutcracker at a young age).

In Tier 1, this is generally how the flow would be as there are clear roles that each actor holds. In Tier 2, this is also generally how the flow happens however some smaller companies may give more agency to their dancers. In Tier 3, the roles are the most blurred as the choreographer is also often a dancer. But, in this instance, the general flow temporally will still happen.

Within this brief and abstract overview, we can see the moments of agency for dancers to choose how their body moves within the creative process are few and far between given the competitive aspects within the dance industry. Meaning inside the studio, the dancer has little control on shaping their body motions. The dancer does not pick, or have the capacity to act upon, who is in the process with them nor the movements her body creates (their intensity, style, speed, direction, tempo, rhythm, etc.), but they do pick the career. However, the city is the
playing field where these processes are constituted and reshaped. It’s policies, programs, and political figures hold great influence over who may or may not be successful within the tiered infrastructure of each global art city. My participants’ experience in the studio is shaped also by what happens outside the studio. My participants especially felt that they lacked agency when the choreographer/director took up the Old Style of dance: participants Rae and Shawna, Tier 1 and 2 dancers respectively, expand upon this more next.

4.3 Participant Experiences

My participants expressed multiple levels of concern over their encounters in creative processes. The experiences of the dancers in the dance profession in each city demonstrates the precariousness in employment (Campbell and Price, 2016) experienced. In this, the dancers are experiencing the multilayered symptoms of precarity outlined in the literature review: insecurity and little to no control over working conditions, wages, or hours. This section focuses on the dancers’ circumstances within the creative process which was generally outlined in the previous section. I am focusing on this to understand the elements of precarity that dancers do and do not experience within the studio.

Section 4.2 discussed how the power held by a choreographer who uses the Old Style of teaching is often utilized in threatening ways. Participants discussed how the Old Style is frequently used to get dancers to present certain movements with certain levels of dynamics, passion, excitement, and other emotions.

“One adopted this [the Old Style] because they felt like it got the energy from a performer that they wanted, um, by throwing a chair, which… what does that mean to
you to invoke fear in someone? And fear causes you to do several things.” (Rae, Tier 1, Chicago)

This participant is stating that, by having a chair thrown at them to execute the movement in a desired manner, fear was utilized by the choreographer over the dancers. Being afraid of injury caused by violence from a person in a position of power was normalized in dancers. It is questionable of how many choreographers still use this tactic (and to what degree) which, unfortunately, this data does not answer. Regardless, it is notable that this strategy is used enough for a handful of participants to have brought it up. It is also of importance to note that the Old Style seems most prevalent in dancers in Tiers 1 and 2 however it is also instilled in dancers in training as another participant discusses about her experience at a top-tier university:

“Our dance professors would throw shit at us. Or yell verbal abuse. Because we didn’t dance in the way that they wanted us to.” (Shawna, Tier 2, Chicago)

The fear invoked from the different levels of abuse that Rae and Shawna referred to was part of the dance culture. Competition in the dance sector adds fuel to the fire of fear. Many dancers are scared into anything but submission for fear of dismissal. As a dancer, you are repeatedly told that there are people constantly ready to step in and replace you. Dancers are told this from many levels of people above them (directors, choreographers, etc.). This threat competition is used as another tactic of fear to extract certain movements and demands from bodies. During the audition, rehearsals, and performances (Steps 2-5) choreographers hold the majority of agency. If they do not like how you look, how your emotions are physicalizing, or how you’re executing the movements, threats and fear are used to receive what choreographers want.
“There is a thrown to the wolves feeling. Your body, the way you look, your emotions. Big things that encompass your humanity.” (Kai, Tier 1, Chicago)

What the participant (Kai) is describing here is that when you enter a place of dance, you must utilize your body’s physicality, appearance, and your emotions - your entire human being - to execute the movements. Kai, a tier one dancer in Chicago, explains how this can lead to moments in that dance at a tier one level is not accessible for everyone:

“There is a very specific way that you have to look; there is a very specific way that you have to act; there is very specific, hard to obtain, regimes that you must be able to encompass. I think those things are not accessible to everyone. For example, your body – yes, your body is your instrument and should be healthy - but your body should be colorful, your body should be dynamic and different, it shouldn’t look one certain way. What really is a healthy body? And what is a body that is visually appealing to certain people?” (Kai, Tier 1, Chicago)

Dance relies not only on the appearance of shapes the body creates but the physical appearance of the body. This is relative based off which genre of dance one is performing and is strongest within Western concert dance. Ballet is a prime example as it focuses on technique and aesthetics, with very rigid physical expectations of performers bodies. Dancers in other genres also experience this. To be a Radio City Rockette, a New York City based company that focuses on ballet, tap and jazz movements, you must be between 5’6” and 5’10.5” tall (Rockettes, 2021). The company measures you when you enter the audition space in Step 2. The company holds the power to quickly dismiss if you’re out of those proportions. A participant who performed with two, Tier-1, jazz-based Chicago companies, discussed his experience of altering his body’s physical appearance for the company, even though it did not alter any movements:
“You will not have tattoos or piercings. If you are black, you will have a shaved head. That was something that was said to me in 2013…. So, I did shave my head. Did I dance better? No.” (Rae, Tier 1, Chicago)

This same dancer moved to Tier 2 work, following his experience in a Tier 1 company – hoping for a less *Old Style* experience. He found similar patterns again with the Tier 2 company. He reflected on working with one choreographer of the Ter 2 company, in particular:

“We had a choreographer come in and she’s very Old [Style]. And she told me, ‘cause I had just dyed my hair again, she was like, Hey, um, I’m not sure why your hair is this color because this isn’t going to work for my dance. And I was like, well that’s odd, ‘cause my headshot has the same hair color [purple]. And she was like, ah, that’s funny you say that because when I saw that I wasn’t goin to put you in the dance, but you showed up to the first rehearsal with brown hair and I realized you could be in the dance.” (Rae, Tier 1, Chicago)

Editing the body’s physicality is common, as is demonstrated above. But there is an additional racialized component to this interaction. Rae, a black dancer in Chicago, experienced racial biases in his workplace. Western concert dance has a long history of racism along Steps 1-5 of the performance. But there is space for more research into this aspect, specifically the geography of race and dance in Chicago. Rae highlighted the sub-community of black Chicago dancers who have leaned into working together and helping each other out. He shares this experience with a different affect, more positive, than discussing other aspects of his dance career. But importantly, he discusses how he has had to navigate the career noticeably different than his white counterparts.
A question can be raised as to why dancers have stayed in the career this long when it is treating them in unhealthy ways? There are racialized experiences, fear, verbal, and physical abuse, and more. It’s normalized that dancers must have a tough skin or they should quit. This is extremely problematic, and one may ask why there are no labor protections? Why have dancers not engaged in collective action for the spatial fix of labor (Strauss, 2019)? How is the passion for the career keeping one interested when people in positions of power throw chairs at dancers if movement is done wrong?

“If the dance community was something that was more empowering and diverse and inclusive and fighting and doing good, then I would be more willing to put up with stuff in the short term for the long term. But this is a community that doesn’t necessarily care about its members and in a lot of ways, it doesn’t fight for its dancers. We’ll fight on our own because we love dance… but when the feeling of unity and collaboration is not present anymore, why, why do I want to fight to be in a community that doesn’t care about its dancers?” (Robert, Tier 2, Chicago)

This participant is discussing a narrative that many of my participants shared. He is showing that, because of how selfish the career was – a quality that is reinforced out of fear and competition – where the dancer needs to focus on themselves only to be successful, there is no desire for dancers to work together to protect their labor. There is a surplus of dancers waiting to perform. People can be quickly laid off and replaced. Labor issues are at the forefront of dancers’ experiences, but they are not working for collective action or union representation as other sectors have. No participants in Chicago in this study are a part of a dance union or in a dance union. Three participants from Toronto are part of an entertainment union that is not dance-only focused but focused for performing arts.
Section 4.3 has highlighted the abusive and insecure work environments that dancers work in. These work environments have had little to no labor protections. In this way, we can understand that dancers are experiencing extreme precarity in their work environment. Following Campbell and Price (2016), they are precariousness within employment in each of the steps within a creative process.

4.4 Who Can Make a Living with Dance?

The tiered discussion of dance companies referred to in Chapter 3 is relevant in understanding which dancers make a living solely within the performing arts industry. Based on my research with participants in each place, only dancers in Tier 1 in both Chicago and Toronto are solely economically sufficient from their performing arts career. A lot of this relates to the funding schemas of the city, as talked about in Chapter 3. Tier 1 companies have the highest funding, but very little turnover of dancers. The following two tables represent each participant in this research and what their main form of income is, if not dance.
Table 6: Participants in Chicago’s Main Form of Income

Source: Author Derived from Interview Information

**Participants in Chicago (n=13)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dancer (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Is dance their main form of income?</th>
<th>If no, what is?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaylee</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Internship/Gym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Physical Therapy Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lane</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Gym/Catering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maia</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Remote Assistant Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Catering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Computer Science related job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rae</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Teaching dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Admin work at a different company's office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawna</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Teaching Pilates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4 yes</strong></td>
<td><strong>69.2% of participants did not have dance as a main form of income</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Participants in Toronto’s Main Form of Income

Source: Author Derived from Interview Information

Participants in Toronto (n=8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dancer</th>
<th>Is dance your main form of income?</th>
<th>If no, what is?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>50% dance &amp; 50% yoga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mira</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Photography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6 yes</td>
<td>25% of participants did not have dance as their main form of income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over two-thirds of participants in Chicago are not economically self-sufficient in the dance field. Instead, dancers are working in related and distant fields to meet economic demands to keep working within the dance sector. This contrasts directly to my findings in Toronto, where six of my eight participants were able to have dance as their main form of income, as majority of these creative workers were mainly working in the musical theatre industry. It is important to note that my participant sample from Chicago is much more representative in terms of company tiers than my sample from Toronto.

These conditions are created via the city’s political economy and the tiered infrastructure for dance which means that in certain companies with certain performances funding is available. There are relevant projects and programs that cities and other philanthropic funders have
implemented which shapes the dance sector at particular moments\(^3\). This creates segmented
dance careers. Instead of even funding for performance arts groups of all dance styles, funding
goes to companies that are historically white either in company make up and/or specific
discipline of dance (e.g., ballet). This is seen through programs like PPP going to only Tier 1
companies. Hubbard Street Dance and Giordano Dance Company are not ballet companies, but
both companies have racialized issues where participants of color expressed that they
experienced discrimination. Both companies are primarily jazz dance companies\(^4\). I describe the
racialized aspects of this more in subsection 4.3.

Select companies were prided by cities for their urban entrepreneurial pursuits (Harvey,
1989) for continual economic growth (Molotoch, 1976). Section 3.1 documents how creative
economy reports in cities can quantitatively misconstrue the true nature of the dance sector. This
section shows dancers are listed as part of the creative economy for cities but the extent that
dancers are fiscally making is misunderstood. Research is still needed on the creative economy
since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic\(^5\).

Participants in Tier 1 hold year-long contracts in which they are employed full time with
one dance company. Some participants discussed how they took on a couple side projects with
friends or projects they are passionate about. But all participants in Tier 1 were quick, and proud,
to state dance has been their main form of income.

\(^3\) I do not dwell on these projects or key political figures here, to focus on qualitative aspects of how participants
have experienced the dance career, but there is space for further research to fully understand relevant policy
development and de-funding through history in each city

\(^4\) Jazz dance has roots that originate in African American slavery (Straus, 2008). Through its evolution it has become
whitewashed (Desmond, 1997). This racialized history is acknowledged to understand how cities’ investments in
companies is mainly for white companies & whitewashed forms of dance.

\(^5\) This research focuses on the realities of the dance career and how that impacts how dancers experience the Covid-
19 pandemic. I choose to not go into depth with specific documents about local development of economic policy on
culture and instead focus on how the dancer experiences the career and city that it is housed in
However, as the above tables show, this is not the reality for all dancers, especially in cities with large numbers of dancers in Tiers 2 and 3. Instead, there are dancers who are not just experiencing precariousness in employment, but they are experiencing the full life condition of precarity, following the definition by Mahone et al. (2018), especially amidst the Covid-19 pandemic (as is expanded upon in the next chapter). Because of the number of participants in Chicago who were able to participate in this study, and additional confirmation from a key informant in the field, I argue that this data is representative of how the field in Chicago is experienced. Over two-thirds of participants in Chicago are not economically self-sufficient on dance careers because they are not in Tier 1 status. Instead, dancers are engaging across multiple sectors for subcontracted work.

Dancers in Tiers 2 and 3 engage in jobs outside of their performing career which brings them into the larger workforce. I find it important to note that while dancers work outside of the performing arts sector, my participants did not engage in the ‘gig economy’, as defined by Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham (2019). They define the gig economy as the combination of factors related to technology, society, political economy “in which firms have an on-demand workforce that differs from previous types of precarious jobs… workers have the freedom to choose where they would like to work, but the other side of that bargain means that precarity exists at a much finer scale,” (Woodcock & Graham, 2019, p. 38). My participants are not working in ‘on-demand work’ where they would only schedule their work throughout the day. Regardless, I argue that the work being done is by the individual is still precarious. Precarious work, as I discuss here and in the literature review, is when an individual experiences uncertainty of employment type, length, relationships, protections, and benefits.
Although not in the ‘gig economy’ many people still engage across multiple sectors for subcontracted and piece-based work. My research directly adds to labor geography’s discussions on precarity as it shows that dancers are not only experiencing precariousness in their employment (dance), but they are also experiencing a full life condition of precarity where the conditions experienced in employment affects aspects of social life including relationships, domestic reproduction, and welfare (Campbell and Price, 2016). These multi-layered conditions of precarity that dancers experience shapes how they largely interact with their urbanities. It shows how the product of the dance is affected in choreography and audience attendance, how dancers’ engagement in various sectors is always in a precarious state, and how the creative economy at large is dominated by precarious workers. This shapes the urban geographic experience of the dance sector in Chicago and Toronto.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an opportunity to understand how precarity emerges in the workplace to shape the dance sector in a city. From this, I utilize labor geography’s theoretical understanding of precarity to argue that dancers in all tiers, and regardless of pay, are experiencing precariousness in employment. This reflects the little room for dancers’ agency within the steps of the creative process. The power is held by other actors in the creative process who (in Steps 2-4) have used problematic tactics of fear in search of a particular look, shape, and movements of a body. Dancers have not worked together in organized labor practices but experienced insecurity, risk, and danger in their labor.

In section 4.4, I presented detailed information from my participants which demonstrates that only dancers in Tier 1 are economically self-sufficient in the dance career. This has been an interesting finding of this study as it is true of both dancers in Chicago and Toronto. Dancers in
Tiers 2 and 3 are experiencing full life conditions of precarity. Dancers are experiencing risk and vulnerability of workplace practices with lack of protections within the studio. They additionally must engage with multiple sectors promoting more insecurity with wages as times for auditions, rehearsals, and performances are constantly in flux.

In the next chapter, I expand upon this to discuss how dancers found agency in the pause of the Covid-19 pandemic to make distinct career choices that, without the pause of the industry, they would not have been able to make. My research in the next chapter discusses how the place of their career, whether in Chicago or Toronto, shaped these choices because of forms of support provided.
Chapter 5 – Impacts of Covid-19 on Dancers in Chicago and Toronto

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on participants’ experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the previous chapter, my work explored the structure of the creative process of the dance industry and how dancers are in a situation of precariousness in employment where they have limited control over wages and working conditions are insecure and risky. This section expands on that and shows that many dancers cannot make a living off dance alone and many (specifically those in Tiers 2 and 3) are in a precarious life condition in which they engage with multiple sectors of work and their home lives are affected. This also majorly shapes which dancers’ engagements with an urbanity on various scales.

This chapter grapples with what happened while theatres were ‘dark’, performances were postponed, layoffs happened within companies and studios shut down amidst Covid-19 stay-at-home orders. Some dancers also engaged in virtual spaces by taking classes on Zoom and Instagram Live. This chapter explores, elaborates, and compares how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted dance sector’s elements of precarity and resiliency in Chicago and Toronto.

This chapter is structured by first presenting data of how participants in both Chicago and Toronto experienced dance in the pandemic, then examining how individuals and companies were supported economically by their respective governments. It investigates how the new, at home, places of dance affected the dancer in various regards. I present information from Chicago that shows the uneven experience dancers and companies have with receiving government financial support. Then I contrast this with the ease that individuals experienced financial support from the Toronto government. I conclude by arguing that dancers in Toronto can be more
resilient and see the hope of the industry as they were not in as precarious of an economic situation in the Summer of 2020.

5.2 Dance in Isolation in Toronto and Chicago

Dancers brought dance to new and different places. They took Zoom classes in their apartments, met in public parks for socially distant movement classes, but they would not be in the dance studio. A dance studio is typically structured with (at least) one wall of mirrors, marley and sprung floors, ballet barres, and a large open space. The emptiness of the room allows the dancer to have control over shaping the negative spaces. With dance taking a new place, the dance and dancer’s body were both affected. Dance spaces are immediately affected, but at a broader level - as this thesis is showing, the relationship of dance and cities was also affected.

Four themes emerged in how people described these dance practices amidst isolation. These themes emerged from dancers in both Chicago and Toronto. They were not individualized to a city but universal to participants in this study. Succinctly, these themes are effectivity (positive and negative), nostalgia, place, and affordability. Participants shared that some thrived, some found Zoom and Instagram Live classes ineffective and the feeling of dancing with multiple bodies in a room was what was missed, the new places for dance physically affected the dancer’s body and some enjoyed the new access to classes and different genres of dance at a low cost.

One participant felt like she prospered in the period of isolation. This Toronto-based dancer moved from New York to Florida during the pandemic. She moved out of a small apartment in New York City to a large house in Florida. She was able to afford an extra bedroom
and turn it into a dance studio. It allowed her to focus on parts of her technique that, without the
lock down, she would not have been able to:

“I know that I, when things come back up, which they will at some point in some way,
shape or form, I will be working again as a dancer…. So, I am currently preparing for a
theatre role that I, that I haven’t booked and that doesn’t exist in my life. I chose
Adelaide from guys and dolls. So, I’m preparing myself for that role and I’m doing the
work as an actor that I would do if I had the part, but I’m doing it now because I have so
much time…. I’m dancing now more than ever and have so much time to focus on my
craft” (Jane, Tier 1, Toronto)

Here, the participant is describing how she would learn parts and choreography for ‘dream roles’
while at home. These are roles that she has not yet performed but aspires to play. For her, it was
no question of ‘if’ the theatres were going to reopen, but when. Not all participants felt certain
that dance was going to return. This participant had been in the dance industry for about ten
years and her main form of income is dance. As she is preparing for these dream roles during the
lock down, she is ready to take on these roles when theatres re-open.

Another participant states how he felt like he was able to thrive as he could understand a
different facet of his dance technique. He was able to stop moving with 150% of effort and find
joy in smaller movements of the body. The space of dancing in his living room physically
constrained him from moving how he used to. Therefore, he had to do something different when
taking technique classes virtually. While able to see some positive aspects of this, he did not
enjoy the experience of Zoom classes:
“my tiny living room, which is very small, I’ve found a different quality of movement… I learned how to dance full out and not put all my energy into it. So just finding different ways to work…. however, dancing on Zoom doesn’t work for me. I know that.” (Kai, Tier 1, Chicago)

Dancers had to adjust to the digital engagement of taking classes from home and in a different space than the dance studio (as described above). Kai, among others, described physically changing the shapes his body would create. At home, there is no ballet barre, instead people would use backs of chairs and countertops. Scrolling through social media, specifically Instagram, you would see teachers in their kitchens teaching dance. You could take these classes for free on Instagram Live and this option proved very accessible for many people. New options of class styles and classes from world-renowned performers and teachers were offered:

“At the beginning of the pandemic, lots of companies were hosting classes on Instagram and zoom for free. Which was really interesting because if you previously went to the Hubbard Street studio to take class, it would be 20 bucks or tuition for a summer intensive.” (Mandy, Tier 3, Chicago)

As my participant describes above, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, dancers would have to pay about $20 for a (approximately) 1-hour technique class at a prestigious professional studio such as the formal Lou Conte Dance Studio run by Hubbard Street Dance. To move through to the top hierarchy of the tiers, it is expected that you take at least one class a day. This expense pays for the dance studio costs and the payment of the dance teacher. Dancers in Tier 1 have company class daily which is part of their job requirements. Dancers in Tiers 2 and 3 are
the ones taking classes the most (to work up through the tiers) who must pay for it. This increases the precarious life condition that dancers are experiencing.

During the first months of the pandemic, as Mandy discusses above, dancers saw a wave of community coming together virtually. Dance teachers and studios offered classes virtually for free or at a discounted price. This accessibility was an exciting moment for a lot of dancers for it seemed like the dance career was changing. As the pandemic prolonged teachers began charging back to normal prices again.

This digital engagement didn’t work for some individuals for a variety of reasons, even in instances when classes were more accessible. Some individuals felt that taking classes or attending rehearsals virtually did not fulfill them in the same ways that the in-person elements of the career did:

“I don’t personally feel that the magic and the multilayered experience of being in a space with bodies is replicated in any way, virtually. [There are] pros and cons, of course, but there is a disconnect a bit.” (Ava, Tier 2, Toronto)

“It’s an interesting thing because, for me, I’m in the dance studio and I enjoy the comradery with the other dancers, the work we’re doing and the message we’re dancing about; I am enjoying the way I feel when I’m moving through the space, its sometimes like a runners high, like a euphoria of sort, if you’re lucky you get to experience that in rehearsals and/or when you’re performing. But most of the time you don’t.” (Shawna, Tier 2, Chicago)
The passion for dance for these individuals stemmed from being in a singular place with multiple people where they were using their bodies to create energy and shape art. When they were no longer able to be in a place doing this, the dance was no longer meaningful to them. Dance as an ephemeral art was not transitioning online (to work from home) in successful ways that other sectors had.

One element that made the dance career particularly different to work from home with was how hard it was on the body. As described in Chapter 4, the entire body’s emotions, physicality, and mentality is at work while dancing. Dancers emotionally process information through their movement. In the two quotes above, from Ava and Shawna, the dancers are discussing how important the way they feel about the experience is to the dance. Another participant speaks about how emotionally necessary it is for him to dance.

“We’re used to dancing six to eight hours a day, every day, which is a huge outlet for us… but then we’re also used to working through so many different emotions in different pieces and telling different stories. I didn’t realize how much of a part of me that is until I wasn’t doing it at all.” (Francis, Tier 1, Chicago)

The physical dance studio is useful for dancers’ bodies and their safety. Two immediate examples are having full length mirrors to examine body placement as well as sprung floors to prevent shin splints. In the stay-at-home orders, dancers are working in their living rooms and these places constrain their bodies to only move in some ways. Kai explained how it affected his movement earlier. Tap dancers were not able to practice their craft unless they lived on the bottom floor of a building. In addition to changing the shapes created, it also can be harmful physically:
“I think it’s 50 50 who likes dancing at home and who doesn’t. I haven’t been dancing too much at home, not to mention it’s hard on your body. My floors are crooked…. Either people are like yea let’s take a bunch of zoom classes, I love it, it keeps me involved! But over Instagram live, I personally just find it so depressing.” (Kara, Tier 1, Chicago)

“I’m just doing more for myself and less for any sort of staying in shape because there’s not, it sort of doesn’t feel like there’s too much of a point. I don’t really have space in where I’m living to take Zoom class and I’m really tall, five foot nine, and I live in a small apartment, so I just hit the ceiling, kind of.” (Molly, Tier 1, Toronto)

The digital shift presents a moment when the dancers cannot be present with other bodies to create their art. It was a moment where it immobilized people from taking class as it didn’t work for them for a variety of reasons. While some stopped dancing and reflected on what they loved about dance they realized what were the most important aspects to them. They were fulfilled by the camaraderie of the studio and how dance was an outlet for them. Others continued to take class and found it difficult to sustain moving the same way as they did in studios in places that were not conducive to the moving body.

Dancers experience with how their bodies moved through space, and in which places, impacted how they thought about dance and the dance sector. Beyond the immediate place of dance, other forces also shaped how they interacted with the dance sector. These aspects included people around them, their companies, support from cities financially and politically, and even how their nation state responded. The next two sections detail the relationships between
these local and global forces and how they affected my participants’ subjective experiences of the pandemic and their futures with the career.

5.3 Dance in Chicago amidst Covid-19

In all 14 of my interviews with Chicago participants, interviewees focused on the feeling that the dance industry was (and I quote) “dead”. Despite the high levels of precarity they were facing, they thought that this was no longer the industry they loved and if they had to stay virtual that they no longer got the same elements of joy that they once had. Instead, this (in combination with the height of the Black Lives Matter movement) led to much reflection on the intensity of the industry. Much of this is documented in Chapter 4.

The idea that the dance industry was ‘dead’ was only felt amongst Chicago interviewees. Many felt like the long pause was indefinite. If dance was going to return, it was not going to be in the format that it was in before. A large part of this is because all Tier 1 dance companies completely halted work in person. These companies followed Broadway’s lead and did not have in-person work and shows. Only one Tier 1 company, Hubbard Street Dance, in Chicago continued with some virtual ‘performances. Most Tier 1 companies, including Joffrey Ballet and Giordano Dance were hosting virtual classes but nothing else. The virtual audience engagement for Hubbard Street’s performances were high as they made an entire online season free. This was highlighted as over 900 dancers attended their 2021 virtual auditions held over three days in the month of April.

The pandemic was a tumultuous time for dancers in companies. Many dancers were told that they were expected to be consistently ready to return in person though. However, communication was slim and emotional support was little to none as companies stumbled
through navigating funding, board members support and thinking about an audience. Tier 1 companies were laying off many administrative workers and dancers.

Dancers in Tiers 2 and 3 who were experiencing precariousness in employment, and the life condition of precarity, were re-evaluating their position as they navigated the global health crisis. Many had to dedicate lots of time to navigating Chicago’s complicated unemployment program. Others felt that the loss of in-person experiences combined with reflections on the exploitative nature of the industry leading them to precariousness led them to no longer being interested in remaining in the dance sector. This is clearly demonstrated in one Chicago participant’s words below. After two performances with her Tier 2 company were canceled, she reflected on the industry and her life, she stated that she realized the sustainability of the 9-5 job was better for her then the intense dance career:

“For me, as far as, since there's no date on when that could even get back for now, I'm kind of assuming in my mind, like dance, isn't going to be a thing for me. At least there's not something I'm going to actively pursue unless there's like a position readily available. And even then, I might kind of realize, well, the sort of nine to five job I'm doing for now is more sustainable in the long term.” (Melissa, Tier 2 Dancer, Chicago)

In conversation with Chicago participants, they showed they loved dance but not the profession and all that came with it. They weren’t sure what to expect if dance returned. All participants were able to describe was that the landscape would be entirely different. And in many ways, it is.

In Chicago, dancers’ experience of government financial support was very uneven. Some participants were lucky and were able to reasonably deal with unemployment through the city of Chicago. These participants were able to make more off unemployment than off their normal paychecks. This highlights the economic insecurity and precarity they were experiencing prior to
the outbreak of the Covid-19 health crisis. This was evident for many Tiers 2-3 participants. One participant discussed how she made twice as much on unemployment than working three jobs in addition to her performing arts career:

“I did unemployment because once the gym closed, our studios canceled classes, and we didn’t do zoom classes until probably May. So, I had a month or so off from teaching and I was temporarily furloughed from Athleta. So, I filed for unemployment, and it’s actually kind of sad, I made more being on unemployment than I did from working my job… Like twice as much.” (Lane, Tier 2, Chicago)

However, there were other participants who struggled through the City’s confusing unemployment. Many dancers are sub-contracted and because of their precariousness, the multiple sectors they engage with complicates their tax filing status. This made it more difficult for them to prove their income and unemployment status. These participants spent hours on the phone with the city’s unemployment office. As one participant states:

“There's a lot of people that also were hit hard because they don't get any money for unemployment. Like a lot of my friends are independent contractors, so the ones that are doing dance or teaching and no taxes are getting taken out, they don't get any money. Like, luckily, I've worked for a few places where they've been taking out taxes so I can get on unemployment, um, and survive”. (Rae, Tier 2, Chicago)

Most relayed that they were grateful supported by a member of the household throughout the pandemic, and I had no participants in this study who applied to grants (e.g., X) outside of unemployment.

In Chicago there was support from the city to dance companies via the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL). The PPP is a loan under
$10 million for small businesses, independent contractors, and nonprofits with under 500 employees. The EIDL provides multiple options, in smaller amounts (from $10,000 - $2 million) to the same entities due to difficulties from Covid-19. These are federal loans under the CARES Act (Illinois Department of Human Services, 2021).

In Chicago, only two dance companies applied for PPP loans – Hubbard Street Dance Company and the Joffrey Ballet – both are Tier 1 dance companies. The question stands as to why did Tier 2 and 3 companies and projects not receive PPP loans?

More research is needed to fill this gap, but analyzing the case of Hubbard Street Dance presents an interesting opportunity begin to understand the geography of what is happening. A major physical change to the built environment of dance in Chicago was the closure of Lou Conte Dance Studio, ran by Hubbard Street Dance Company. After 46 years of operation Hubbard Street Dance published, “With a heavy heart and with gratitude ... we announce that the Lou Conte Dance Studio will be closed indefinitely. The closure is a direct result of the COVID-19 public health crisis,” (Chicago Sun Times, 2020). This was significant for the dance community in the city as it was a staple studio that aspiring professionals could train at, companies could rent studio space from, and was a home base for a Tier 1 company. With this Covid-19 business casualty, the landscape of Chicago’s dance scene was drastically changed.

Hubbard Street Dance typically has an annual budget between $5-8 million dollars (Hubbard Street 2020, 990 tax filing form, accessed from: Propublica). They applied in April of 2020 and March of 2021 for the PPP and received a little over $500,000 both times. They reported that all but $1 of this went to payroll 47 people (federalpay.org). Meanwhile, as the dancers told me, Hubbard Street had to cut many promised contracts. They promoted four dancers in April of 2020 and ultimately were not able to provide them with contracts, leaving the
dancers stunned and without a job in June of 2020. The dramatic changes to this company have
greatly lessened the physical spaces and opportunities of dance in Chicago.

As a Tier 1 dance company who received PPP, Hubbard Street was able to continue
without a physical space and only in the virtual space. Because of the historically large funding
and large audiences, they were able to maintain their viewership levels, if not, increase
engagement digitally. Meanwhile in Chicago, large theatres were left empty, only illuminated by
the ghost light. And Tier 2 and 3 dance companies who did not have the same devoted large
audiences to be successful only online, met spatially distant in parks. Dance, an art that isn’t
always readily accessible, took up a new place: it took place in the public sphere in a place
without ballet barres or mirrors.

5.4 Dance in Toronto amidst Covid-19

Meanwhile in Toronto, in summer 2020 at the point of interviews, everyone still had
hope. When asked about the “death” of the industry, Toronto dancers were shocked. They
believed that the dance would return, that too many people loved theatre for it not to. As one
Toronto based dancer and choreographer passionately told me:

“I just feel like we’re in this weird momentary lapse. And I think when it comes back,
creative people are going to blow people’s minds away… I’m faithful that creative
people are going to make stuff happen. I just feel like – I think about all the performers I
know, specifically dancers… how many times have I been asked to be in a situation
where I’ve had to do something that I have no skillset to do, but I figure it out. Dancers
are just in the space to figure it out because we’re so intense and focused. So, I believe
dancers are going to be what comes back the hardest. I’ve been creating stuff all the
time” (Mira, Tier 1, Toronto)
This feeling of ‘pause’ or ‘momentary lapse’ was prevalent in all 8 interviews with Toronto participants. These conversations were very positive and optimistic. Another participant repeats the same feeling. This re-emphasizes the hopefulness for the dance and entertainment industry to return, even if it is different. The dedication to the dance sector is still prevalent:

“I feel like we just got the longest summer break ever. And we just weather it until we figure out what the new normal is.” (Kayla, Tier 2, Toronto)

One Toronto participant was particularly surprised by the question of whether things are ‘dead’ or on ‘pause’? She was taken back by the fact that there was a possibility of other dancers imagining the dance industry being over.

“I would say the dance industry is on pause, I attribute it to the degree of resilience. I just see it as like, of course it’s on pause. Like what would I do without it, like, and I’m speaking on behalf of myself and also all of my colleagues and peers and all of these dancers I’ve been having conversations with, but it’s like, of course it’s on pause. Like it can’t die. I’m not doing anything else.” (Ava, Tier 1, Toronto)

The themes that are coming out of this portion of the interviews are surprise, resiliency, and patience. These participants were surprised by this question, and I was equally surprised with their answers – as they were so opposite of how participants responded in Chicago. Mira discussed how she saw dancers as some of the most creative people who, like how Ava put it, needed to dance and would figure out how to do it. As is shown in section 5.2, not all of the dancers enjoyed Zoom and dance in a work from home setting. But they were still confident that they would return to the career they loved. They were resilient in their dedication to dance.

In Toronto, every participant said that without the Canada Emergency Response Benefits (CERB) they would be in an unfortunate state of not being able to afford their bills. This
financial support was provided from the Canadian government. It was $2,000 per month for up to 50 weeks (Canada.ca, 2021). Importantly, participants said their experience with this was very easy and their status had to be updated weekly. One participant explains its significance and how she doesn’t take it for granted based off what she sees on media and through friends in America:

“It has been a true blessing and a savior because I know my fellow American friends have such problems with finances from the government…. I was shocked with how easy it was to get CERB. It takes like two minutes. You go to the CRA website, you log in and you click agree, agree, agree, agree. And then there’s a direct deposit into your account within three days.” (Kay, Tier 1, Toronto)

Directly relating this to the theme of resiliency that dancers in Toronto highlighted, one participant stated:

“There’s a financial cushion, which I’m sure you’ve heard of CERB that we get in Canada, [which] I’m receiving income to pay my rent to keep me afloat. So, it’s created this framing of pause, because I’m living, I’m still able to pay off my essentials and still kind of survive without an actual income. So, it feels like, when… things go back to normal, in big quotations, we can proceed. I think that’s contributed to the feeling that I’m being supported, so everything is on pause.” (Ava, Tier 1, Toronto)

While Canada’s support for individuals was well explained and easy to maneuver my participants did not mention anything about their dance companies that they worked with and their financial support. Many received consistent notes and updates about Ontario’s re-opening plan. Canada’s financial relief website due to Covid-19 has many options for businesses.

Important themes that have blossomed out of this research with Toronto participants experience are (1) the dance industry on pause, (2) economic assistance was very easy to access
for Canadians, and (3) resiliency was high. Participants felt like they were supported by their government and could continue to do what they desired to do. They were not in a situation of precarity where they would have engaged with multiple work sectors, amidst the global health pandemic, with no government support, and reflected on the dance industry. Many felt resilient because, as they pointed out, the uncomplicated financial assistance provided security and they knew dance would return in a similar form.

Participants used this time to reflect on the dance industry and raised questions to better it, instead of walking away like some Chicago participants. This was partially inspired by the Black Lives Movement, but was a different socio-political movement called ‘Not in Our Space’ which focused on ending sexual harassment in the dance studio. Toronto participants told me how they met in Zoom groups to see what they would like to see in the form of workplace protections around this. While expanding on this movement, in addition to the Black Lives Matter Movement, is out of the scope of this thesis, I find it important to relate to the resiliency of the career. Not only did the dancers recognize the industry only being paused – they were looking to re-shape what they would see in the industry. Dancers, as creatives who are key place makers as Florida (2006) asserts, are rethinking the political economy of dance: who is in power, and what happens within places. As performing arts (Wilson 2018; McKinnie, 2013) are used as urban entrepreneurial tools will this change the commodification of the theatre? Will dance be more included in policy in the creative economies?

5.5 Conclusion

Dancers were mobilized and immobilized in various ways. The mobilization has shaped dancers’ experience with their cities in the pandemic. This chapter has presented how some dancers are mobilized and have thrived in their work from home environment. In this, they were
able to discover new movements and focus on different roles they dream of playing. In summer of 2020, dancers met socially distant in public parks. One Chicago based participant discussed how this was exciting because it brought dance to the public realm and out of the private dance studio. It didn’t aid in making it physically easier on the body, but it aided in giving a sense of comradery and returning the magic of dance. In some ways this gives dancers agency to interact with their audience more, as dance happened in places where it was not as expected.

Dancers in Toronto felt particularly mobilized to think critically about how they wanted the dance industry to return. While the question of what will ‘normal’ look like was left unanswered, people (as quoted in section 5.4) were thinking creatively at how to re-shape the spaces.

However, dancers were also extremely immobilized. Not everyone had access to the networks where people were practicing in parks or felt comfortable to do so. Dancers were physically constrained at movements they were able to perform in their apartments. Others talked about that when studios closed, rent increased, and little support from the U.S. government, left them feeling defeated and like the industry was not going to return.

This may be expected, but overall, dancers in Chicago had a more difficult and uneven experience with financial assistance amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. While stay at home orders and dancers were immobilized, Chicago participants had frustrating and uneven experiences with financial support from the government. Chicago, the state of Illinois and the U.S. government’s economic assistance plans for individuals was not as accessible and simple as it was for dancers in Toronto.

Dancers in Chicago also repeated the theme of death of the industry. Within these participants, it was highly uneven of who felt avidly like dance would return, most feeling
negatively. This directly contrasts to Toronto-based participants who adamantly dismissed the idea of the ‘death’ of the industry and opted for ‘pause’. I argue that dancers based in Toronto were able to see the hope of the art they are passionate about as they weren’t in as precarious of an economic situation.

This data presentation shows that people are creative within their homes and wait patiently for the ‘new normal’ in Toronto. And in Chicago there are many people who are leaving but simultaneously a new crop of dancers who are graduating universities and excited to be in the studio.

The next chapter investigates how these cases and participants’ stories relate to the creative placemaking of the city. What has it meant to the people in the industry and to the city for dance to have been gone for so long? Following Michael McKinnie’s (2013) work on how cities and theatres are co-constitutive – what has it meant for the city for the theatre to not have happened for the last year?
Chapter 6 Conclusion, Forward Looking & Closing Thoughts

I find it important to pause that now, over a year after data collection, dance is starting to return. The pandemic has not tapered out, with two new variants of the Covid-19 infection, but dance in each place has started to try to return to the studios and stages. Vaccines have been distributed and cities started to move forward with their reopening plans, even as at times they were paused. Vaccination cards and masks are required in some places for dance. Bodies are no longer moving individually within their cramped living rooms, but again as a unit. The CEO of Joffrey Ballet, Greg Cameron, eloquently relayed his relief when vaccinations were released in an interview with Melissa Perry for the Chicago Reader. This showed an immediate turning point for how the dance companies were emotionally dealing with the pandemic:

"The morning that the vaccine approval was released, I took a deep breath, and I was like, 'Oh my God.' It's like if you're going on a hike into a mountain and the mountain has been under fog for ten months but you're not exactly sure where the peak is. That morning, I was like, 'Oh, my God.' We're still at the base of a mountain and we have a long way to go but we can see at the top." (Perry, 2021).

Even with the rise of vaccinations (and multiple boosters) Covid-19 has not left cities in North America. This means that theatres, entertainment districts, dance studios, dance companies, and other places of art have not had linear openings, as was anticipated. Uncertainties and Covid-related shutdowns (even thirty minutes before a show) are still occurring.

Interviews conducted in 2020 shed light on what was happening at the height of a global health pandemic. This research compares how two global art cities experienced that time. Further research is useful in understanding the turnover of the industry, to see quantitatively how the
The dance sector in each place is shaped differently from people who may or may not have left the sector, during their period of reflection from March of 2020-present day (December 2021).

This research has shown that Covid-19 has reshaped, and continues to reshape, relations of precarity within Chicago and Toronto’s dance industries. In both places the pause in performing arts has produced a period of reflection for dancers: they have been reckoning with and understanding the different aspects of the field that shape their lives to be precarious in employment. This research showed that regardless of place, dancers experience precariousness in employment, and dancers in Tiers 2 and 3 experience precarity as a full life condition. Chicago and Toronto’s dance landscape has drastically changed amidst the pandemic. Tier 1 companies were on pause but had heightened numbers of audience engagement. Solely digital engagement proved unsustainable for dancers as taking zoom classes from home was emotionally and physically distressing. Dancers within Toronto have proved to be more resilient within the Covid-19 pandemic as they have had ample and regular financial support from their city and national government.

To adequately explain the cases and studies happening in the places of dance in each city, I have focused on the materiality of the dance sector and subjective experiences of the dancers amidst Covid-19. However, I have yet to speculate theoretically. Part of me has done this to remain away from my research standing too much in academia’s headspace and not enough in more grounded areas of application. Regardless of my hesitations, asking what it means for a city when a co-constitutive aspect of it is ‘dark’, for about a year, is an interesting question that is important to expand on to understand the effects of Covid-19.

Michael McKinnie’s (2007) seminal work showcasing how cities and theatres are co-constitutive, discussed at length in Chapter 2 presents a unique methodological unit for analysis
which he calls city stage. City stage highlights how the urban and the theatre (physical theatre spaces and their relationships to theatre companies) have been shaped together through historical and planned events, regulations, and measures. Assuming his position of post-industrial global art cities as city stages, I ask what dance theatre has meant to the people in the industry and what it has meant to the city. What has it meant to the city for the theatre to not have happened for the duration of the pandemic? Specifically, as I argued in Chapter 3 that Chicago and Toronto are global art cities, what has it meant for global art cities?

Not all places within cities are evenly developed, and theatre has procured an investment of consumption into places in the post-industrial turn. McKinnie (2007) writes that “theatre may have helped secure the creation of the Entertainment District, and the district has been successful in offering a vision of civic harmony gained through an urban leisure consumption” (p. 70). This structuralist understanding of the city highlights the use by cities of Entertainment districts for urban entrepreneurial effects. People and capital will be attracted to investment in multiple sectors because they are attracted to the Entertainment Districts. McKinnie is criticized for not recognizing the agents as agentive within the process and only yielding to capital circulation within the political economy (McEvoy, 2008).

Entire Entertainment Districts within cities are ‘dark’, where the physical theatres remain empty, but the virtual space became bustling as there were virtual events going on. Some museums held virtual exhibits where you could pay to virtually attend a gallery online. Dance appeared on tik tok and those crazes went viral but, again, that experience happens on screen and not in person. But dance is heavily ephemeral. It is not something that you can experience virtually in the same way as you can in-person. Dancers physically shape the negative space
around them to create beautiful movements, lines, and stories with their bodies. It is not just something you see, but something you feel about the space when you’re in person.

As Toronto and Chicago are reopened, and theatres are navigating when is and is not safe to reopen again, it is important to ask if digital engagement modes of performance will wane? Can performance solely happen in theatres again? According to Gordon Cox (2020) on variety.com, there is a notable shift in how artistic directors are thinking about ensuring digital access options in future productions as that was successful in 2020. An example of this is when Disney Plus uploaded Hamilton to watch from their streaming service and in the first month it aired (July 2020), it had the most viewers of any Streaming program option (Durkee, 2020). Cities will have to reckon with the virtual options and how that could limit some people from returning to the Entertainment Districts in the cities.

The COVID-19 health pandemic re-shaped the physical infrastructure of these global art cities’ Entertainment districts. Chicago and Toronto, two global art cities, have large spaces for artistic endeavors in their theatre and Entertainment Districts. Theatres and dance studios shape of these districts that allow for agglomeration of performing artists. In Chicago the closure of the Lou Conte Dance studio is a major change in the shape of the urban environment. A place where aspiring Tier 1 dancers would normally fill the studio for class no longer exists. Hubbard Street Dance Company, a staple of the Tier 1 dance structure, also does not have a place of its own. This is one example of how the places for art in global art cities physically changed during the pandemic as online practices increased.

Inside the theatres, some physical changes have also taken place. A theatre in Berlin wanted to ensure the safety of their patrons and spatially changed the layout of the theatre to have people sit (mostly) 6 feet apart. The image below shows what it looked like, as reported by Nora
McGreevy (2020) in the Smithsonian Magazine. At the time of writing this thesis, Broadway theatre in New York City has reopened without making drastic changes to the seating of their theatres. The image of the Berlin theatre feels empty and desolate. If this was how theatre was able to return – how successful would this return be? How would this change interactions with larger Entertainment Districts that cities rely on for tourism?

Further quantitative and qualitative research is needed to understand how the theatre is returning and how citizens are engaging with the public arts. The Motion Picture Association released a report in 2020 that shows the global trends of people attending movie theatres is down with an 18% decline in revenue (Adgate, 2020). A report in the similar vein would be useful in understanding global trends of places of performing arts.
This research focuses on expanding the multi-dimensional understanding of precarity by investigating the material experiences of dancers during July of 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a critical turning point for many dancers and a lens to understand the relations of precarity that dancers endure. Regardless of place, dancers are experiencing precariousness in employment. Adding dancers to the precarity literature, we see that dancers are a prime example of this theory because of their interactions outside their immediate sector and the little room for dancers’ agency within the steps of the creative process. Dancers do not have power in the room, and they consistently experience risky work conditions in the studio and in their forms of payment. The pandemic has been a difficult time where dancers were unable to physically engage in the same constrained places. This research showed that solely digital engagement of the dance field is unsustainable for dancers as taking zoom classes is physically and emotionally distressing. Dancers’ experience of the pandemic within these two different global art cities was uneven. Some Chicago dancers were able to make more off unemployment than working in Tier 2 companies and outside of the dance sector and some had difficulties receiving unemployment due to tax filing status. In Toronto financial support amidst Covid-19 was frequent and easily accessible. From this, Toronto participants proved to be more resilient within the Covid-19 pandemic, as they have had ample and regular financial support from their city states. The passion that performers have for their career, as is documented in *RENT*, is not unwavering and is grounded in difficulties that are political economic and geographical. The dance sector and dancers in each place were strongly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.
Annex A: Interview Tool

Interview Questions for Dancers:

Background Questions:

1. How long have you been professionally dancing?
   a. What style of dance have you done professionally, with whom and where?
   b. Did you go to college for dance? If so, where? What was this program like (both in terms of how it was built and the culture)?
   c. Is dance your main form of income? Do you work any job outside of dance to supplement your income?
2. Before the pandemic, approximately how many hours each week did you spend working out, in class, and rehearsing? Which would you focus on the most?
3. Do you teach dance? What styles and ages?
4. Before the pandemic, approximately how many hours each week did you spend working jobs outside of the dance industry?
5. Are you a part of a union?
   a. Briefly describe your position in the union (e.g., do you have an agent within it, how involved are they) (if applicable)

Pandemic-focused Questions

6. How has your dance career been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
   a. In particular, how have you adjusted your dance practices (workouts, rehearsals, technique classes)? Are there new or different types of opportunities arising?
   b. How have your career development practices (e.g., marketing or otherwise) changed since the COVID-19 pandemic started?
   c. Did the number of hours you work in and outside the dance sector change when the pandemic started? If so, what are the new numbers?
   d. How have your forms of income changed since the pandemic started?
   e. Did you have to relocate because of the pandemic?
      i. Is/was your decision to relocate temporary or longer?
      ii. Was it driven mainly by financial need or something else?
   f. How has the pandemic altered how you feel about yourself as a dancer now, and future aspirations as a dancer?
7. How have dance studio spaces you’re associated with been affected (e.g., have they shifted to online, what are their plans for the summer/fall, etc.)? With respect to both places you teach and places you take class. (If applicable)
   a. How has this fiscally affected you (if at all)?
8. Could you describe how are the dance collectives you are associated with responding to the pandemic?
9. How are key dance collectives that you are not associated with, within Chicago and/or Toronto, responding to the pandemic?
   a. Are there ones that are responding particularly well? Poorly? Why do you think they are responding in this way?
10. Do you think the audience for dance is going to change at all based on the pandemic? Both in terms of people who attend, and the built spaces audiences exist in?
11. What has the union done for you, if anything, since the pandemic started? (If applicable)
12. Have you utilized or know of government programs that have provided (or provided opportunities for) economic assistance to you and other dancers in your city?
   a. What has your experience been?
   b. Is this a generic program or a dance sector specific program?
   c. Is this a local program? State/provincial? National?
   d. Do you know of any other ways that the government has supported dance & dancers (e.g., providing new spaces; rent relief; etc.)?
13. How do you see the broader dance world in Chicago and/or Toronto changing in the coming years?
14. Do you know of others I could contact who would be interested in participating in this study? Where could I contact them? Would you like to see the final product of this research?

**Interview Questions for Dance Administrators:**

1. How long have you been working in dance administration?
   a. Have you danced professionally?
   b. How many dancers are you currently the administrator for?
   c. Have you worked with other companies?
2. Quantitatively and qualitatively, how did the pandemic affect how the collective works?
   a. Specifically, how did it affect the number of hours the collective works, including administration, rehearsals, classes, and teaching?
   b. And what do these changes look like (e.g., online classes, virtual rehearsals, performances in public, no guest artists)?
3. Can you describe the funding for the company and how it has changed since the pandemic began?
   a. Does the collective receive federal assistance, private funders and/or philanthropic donations? Has this changed since the pandemic began?
   b. What is the pay structure of the collective? What are the different tiers of funding (for example, do directors and dancers make the same amount)? Do you pay all your dancers? Has any of these levels changed since the pandemic began?
   c. Are there any new funding sources that have emerged since the pandemic began?
4. Has the collective provided its dancers with any extra forms of support since the pandemic began (e.g., mental health, mutual aid, food, etc.)? How was this decision made?
5. Does the company work with any unions?
   a. Could you describe how that relationship works? (If applicable)
   b. Do you know how they responded to the pandemic? (If applicable)
6. How do you see the broader dance world in Chicago and/or Toronto changing in the coming years?
7. Do you know of others I could contact who would be interested in participating in this study? Where could I contact them?
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