

Backspace: A Special Issue on Dance Studies

Alana Gerecke and Mary Fogarty Woehrel

What is behind the object for me is not only its missing side, but also its historicity,
the conditions of its arrival.
~ Sara Ahmed, “Orientations”

I start with my back to the audience because there is this myth I believe in that when you have your back turned.... [This] allows for people to see through you and see who you are. And it also allows them to judge who you are. And I present my back because it gives you a perspective of me from behind, and I offer you, as an audience, the opportunity to really gaze into me from behind.
~ Alessandra Seutin in *This Is Not Black*

In this special issue, we explore the productive possibilities of the back in its multiple senses: spatial, temporal, aesthetic, and kinaesthetic. Although it is often hidden from view, the back is dense with cultural and political information. Back-story, background, back-work: our interest in the back is both an invitation to come at things the other way around and an act of critical-kinetic practice. Even the most apparently frontal movement is supported, if invisibly and unconsciously, by the musculoskeletal infrastructure of the back.¹ The back creates the conditions for the front. And, as choreographer Alessandra Seutin identifies in our second epigraph, the back is symbolic on stage in limitless ways. Perhaps most strikingly, the back offers an unadorned vulnerability that brings with it an invitation to gaze and an attendant quality of transparency—a way for “people to see through you” (Seutin 2013).

We engage with questions of history, privilege, and kinaesthetics “through the back” (Peeters 2014). The kinaesthetic concept of backspace opens toward an investigation of that which is not, perhaps, immediately evident—gaps in our performance and dance histories. With our emphasis on the back, we seek to enact the potential of dance studies to speak beyond itself, carving out back-routes into discussions about belonging, exclusion, and social values. Indeed, the politics of the back speak to ongoing and emergent concerns about historical and contemporary relationships of bodies, gestures, and pathways to raced, classed, and gendered vectors of privilege. Consider Rosemarie Roberts’ observations about the racial inequities embedded in back entrances as “designated space[s] through which Black and Brown ‘help’ could walk” (2013, 4), and the contemporary affect of this shared history for black dance companies who are led through back spaces (like kitchens or back entrances) by white facilitators on route to a studio or performance space. Consider also Laura Levin’s contention that “traditionally, women and other historically marginalized persons (non-white, lower class, queer, etc.) have been relegated to the background” (2014, 17), a provocation that underpins her exploration of the generative politics of background.

Alana Gerecke is a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Theatre at York University and a settler dance artist. **Mary Fogarty Woehrel** is the Graduate Program Director in Dance Studies and an associate professor of Dance at York University, Toronto, Canada.

Following these scholars, we use a framework of backspace to attend to communities of practice that have often been backgrounded by institutional investments in the Western theatrical tradition, systems shaped to overlook the various and vital movement practices of, for example, people of colour (Boye 2018). Here, we track a recent shift in the discourse, an insistence to think critically about our past, our own backstories, and what has been left behind in the construction and expression of those stories. As Henry Daniel suggests, the “re-cognizing” capacity of dance epistemologies can be “a means to generate new experiences that ‘challenge’ or ‘take issue’ with that which is already embedded in us” (2016, 124). In this sense, we hope that this special edition’s focus on the “back” as a way to “see through” (to return to Seutin)—to get beyond a frontal, outward-facing presentation—is an invitation to “take issue” with what is already embedded in us as a community of dance scholars.

The authors in this issue experiment with efforts to foreground the background: the backstage work, the backspaces, and the backstories that move dancing bodies—an impulse resonating through current dance studies conversations in the land commonly referred to as Canada. A reluctance to acknowledge the specificity of background has long played out across the histories of modern and contemporary dance, which have been cultivated in this country as “universal.” Of course, this universalizing relies on a highly racialized set of exclusions that privilege white European aesthetics, exclusions that may well be invisible to facilitators but are deeply felt by those who are left underwhelmed and uninvited. Following the work of numerous artists, dance educators, and scholars—some of whom have been engaged in versions of this project for decades (see Flynn and Doolittle 2000)—we understand movement as radically contextualized by its particular social, spatial, historical, and political backspaces and backstories. Our move toward backspace, then, is less defined by a dichotomous turn one hundred and eighty degrees from front to back: instead, we propose a set of pivots, partial turns that understand the ways in which the front carries the back, and vice-versa.

This refiguring of front/back as a continuum of sidedness is fundamentally kinetic, a matter of orientation. As Ahmed reminds us, our positionality and (subsequently) our understandings of the environments that surround us are contingent on our orientation, which in turn is contingent on our backstories and the “conditions of [our] arrival” (2006, 549). For Ahmed, “If we face this way or that, then other things, and indeed spaces, are relegated to the background” (547). And this backgrounding is not benign. Ahmed again: “Some things are relegated to the background to sustain a certain direction, in other words, to keep attention on the what that is faced. Perception involves such acts of relegation that are forgotten in the very preoccupation with what it is that we face” (2006, 547). Following Ahmed, how can the concept of backspace help us remember moves that we, as a field, have forgotten? Drawing from kinaesthetic knowledge, we propose the back as, itself, one of many possible sides—defined in relation by the positionality of perspective. A turn, a spin, a reorientation can realign positionality anew. Consider how this is physicalized by shifts in dance genre: the entire premise of what it is to know the body is context-specific and can be undone with a reorientation of movement principles and priorities. It becomes crucial, then, that we reorient our facings regularly, and also that we work to develop an understanding of that which is “relegated to the background” in the act of sustaining a given direction.

But, moving more slowly, subtly, and away from a restlessly pivoting re-orientation, we are also interested in considering what dancing bodies know about backspace even within a supposedly frontal presentation. That is, we wonder what a somatic understanding of three-dimensionality can do to augment a framework of orientation. Must we turn our facing to turn our attention? What

ways of knowing can we engage if we abandon the notion that we must face something in order to orient toward it? Grounding these questions, the contributions in this issue are characterized by their investigations of the background conditions that support dance practice. Authors featured here come at dance scholarship with an interest in programming choices, festival curation, amateur practice, landscape, movement tools, and archival practice. These considerations follow the tradition of interdisciplinarity in Canadian dance scholarship that spurred an extended conversation on the topic in the predecessor to this issue, the dance studies Forum in *Performance Matters* 2.2 (2016). Here, Allana Lindgren observes: “Dance in Canadian universities has always been interdisciplinary in nature, though the experiences and engagement with interdisciplinarity are individual to each institution” (2016, 85–86). Of course, interdisciplinarity hardly sets Canadian dance scholarship apart; rather, this trait characterizes dance studies in the United States and globally (Manning 2016; Clayton et al. 2013). And yet, in a country with only one dedicated dance studies doctoral program (at York University), an investment in dance studies as a disciplinary home-space is not a legitimate option for most Canadian dance scholars. Notwithstanding the valid impulse to generate and preserve the dance-based knowledges that inhabit Canadian dance histories (Lindgren 2016, 88), we draw from Laura Levin and Marlis Schweitzer’s recent scholarship on the multiple genealogies of performance studies in Canada in our recognition of “disciplinarity itself as a contextually dependent and unstable performance—by turns aspiration and appropriative, forward-thinking and forgetful” (2016, 17).

The explicit dance studies focus of this issue—to our knowledge, the first dedicated dance studies issue of a peer-reviewed journal in the country—is a continuation of a project initiated by Seika Boye, Nikki Cesare Schotzko, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, and Evadne Kelly. In 2016, this group coalesced and networked dance studies conversations with their symposium “The Other ‘D’” at the University of Toronto’s Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. From this symposium and a subsequent roundtable at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research (2016), the collaborators developed a relationship with *Performance Matters* and its founder and general editor, Peter Dickinson. The group co-curated an extended Forum conversation in a 2016 issue and secured a dedicated dance studies special issue of *Performance Matters* to be published every second year. This crucial effort to hold up, foster connections, and carve out a peer-reviewed space for dance studies in Canada promises to offer a home for the field—if an intermittent one—in an unprecedented way.

In the spirit of reversal, let us describe the first of these dedicated dance studies issues starting at the back. To close this issue, we offer a Forum conversation between nine dance studies specialists about the ways in which their backgrounds (variously understood) constitute them. We have asked Karyn Recollet, Seika Boye, VK Preston, Angélique Willkie, Freya Björg Olafson, Lindsay Eales, Patrick Alcedo, MJ Thompson, and Michèle Moss to give an account of the critical voices and artists, background activities and moves that inform their work. Invested in speeding the rate of circulation and curbing a feeling of isolation across this vast geography—and attendant to the politics of citation—we hope that this contribution will prompt consideration of how we are introduced to new work in Canada: which sites, performers, scholars, and venues shape the conversations we animate.

Our Materials section features a range of backwork: rehearsal notes, footage, and photographs; inter-artist correspondences; and reflections on the relationship between text and movement. Carolina Bergonzoni and Naomi Brand offer reflections on their work with All Bodies Dance Project, a mixed-ability dance company, and VocalEye, a live description arts service. In their effort to co-create a dance experience loosened from an ocular fixation, they offer tactile, auditory, and text-

based translations of physical experiences and a video link to the creative process. Daisy Thompson works between mediums in a different way, bringing together images, behind-the-scenes correspondences and conversations, rehearsal notes, and creative responses to offer a back-way into her experience as a dance interpreter in Lee Su-Feh's *Dance Machine* (2009–18). Sebastian Oreamuno re-imagines his own backstory to weave a fairy tale that models one possibility for reorienting within our epistemic landscapes and learning to remember that which we have forgotten. Victoria Mohr-Blakeney investigates the impulse to remember in her reflections on *No Context* (2015), a performance and catalogue co-curated by the Nomadic Curatorial Collective featuring the work of dance artist Amelia Ehrhardt; here, Mohr-Blakeney considers the relationship between dance performance and the supporting infrastructures of curation and catalogue. Joshua Swamy and Mary Fogarty Woehrel outline the personal notation systems of b-boys from hand-written illustrations to phone emojis to address the creative process of breaking practice.

Our Articles section features seven different versions of back-oriented dance scholarship. An emphasis on the racialized relegation of specific bodies to the background characterizes many of these contributions. Melissa Templeton examines the complex racial exclusions structured into Canadian contemporary dance by probing the Eurocentric forces at play in the 1999 iteration of the *Festival International de Nouvelle Danse* (FIND); Templeton underscores the distinction between holding up difference in order to punctuate sameness, versus genuinely turning—reorienting—toward practices outside of the Western theatrical canon. Erin Silver situates her examination of the politics of the dancing body in gallery spaces. She interrogates the presumed neutrality of the dancing body and critiques the racism that upholds this logic, one that is attended by varying degrees of spatial, aesthetic, economic, and cultural access.

A call to attend to backgrounded areas of popular dance practice also characterizes several articles. Mary Fogarty Woehrel builds on her research into “how dance is shaped by background sounds and music” (Evans and Fogarty 2016) by reversing the direction of analysis: in this contribution, she looks at backup dancers and their relationship to entertainment industries and dance communities. Following the recent movement in popular dance studies to consider dance competitions (Dodds 2018), Nicole Marrello examines competitive dance as an amateur practice that centres on children and families. Here, Marrello offers a multi-faceted exploration of the background labour and economic mechanisms that drive competition events, sustain studio loyalty, and support the development of the form.

Renewed attention to the felt, physical qualities of the back body moves through many articles in this issue. These themes are central to Matthew Tomkinson's reflections on choreographies of the back across a range of contemporary works. By reversing our editorial call to “approach the back,” Tomkinson theorizes the back as an active agent and a productive aesthetic positionality, examining “the many senses in which backs and buttocks do the approaching.” Coralee McLaren and Patricia McKeever also push for an expanded understanding of mobility by drawing out the movement affordances generated by specific physical environments. With attention to the classroom spaces and mobility devices that support children with movement impairments, McLaren resituates and reorients understandings of place-based mobility. Alana Gerecke takes another route into considerations of land-body reciprocity: within a framing consideration of the possibilities and limitations of decolonizing contemporary dance practice, Gerecke traces a four-day long choreographic migration along a buried creek in Vancouver (1998) to examine the ways in which topography directs movement and asserts agency.

While this dance studies special issue is not intended to offer a comprehensive representation of practices in the country, it strives to include a range of voices, bodies, and practices often absented, elided, and backgrounded. However, we are aware that there are many significant gaps in representation.² In part, the contributions and absences here reflect the Call for Papers structure we employed, with its limited reach and resonance. In keeping with our dedication to backspace, we ask readers to hold the following questions: who is left out of this conversation? What does this issue take as its own backspace? Which practices are unrepresented, unaddressed, and unmoved here? What might another set of pivots orient us toward?

Notes

1. An earlier, practice-based version of this exploration of backspace found expression in a movement workshop co-facilitated by Alana Gerecke and Justine A. Chambers at Arts Assembly in 2016, and a subsequent workshop hosted by Dance Troupe Practice (2017).
2. One particularly notable absence from this issue is Indigenous-led dance studies, which is moving in exciting ways across these lands (see, for example, Dangeli 2015 and Recollet 2015).

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