

revised formations, post-disciplinary dance

MJ Thompson

“How will dance studies in Canada be prioritized?” A serious question, given increased budget cuts and the expanded roles and job descriptions facing most academics and administrators. The question resists the erasure of dance as a field, as individual programs collapse into creative arts tent programs, as retiring professors are not replaced, and as enrolments drop universally across postsecondary institutions. And some may see dance, with its emphasis on embodiment, always politicized, and the ephemeral, as particularly fragile. To fight for dance’s place in the academy is to fight for advanced discourse on bodies in motion with its attendant poetics and politics. Equally, it is to make use of, gain understanding of, and celebrate the specificity of the dancer as scholar and student, with a knowledge base committed to practice.

And yet.

From another perspective, the question could seem reactionary. What’s at stake in prioritizing “Canada,” and which Canada would be prioritized? Advocacy and legacy, toward what end and whose benefit? The history of prioritization on a collective scale within the national framework is hit-and-miss at best; to cite Edward Said, from the essay “States,” “continuity for *them*, the dominant population,” has often meant “discontinuity for *us*, the dispossessed and dispersed” (1999, 20). Institutionally, a model of decentred authority and a culture of shared or imaginatively used resources seem necessary given the present-day political and economic trajectory. Of course, dance—historically underfunded and adept at practices of ensemble performance and collective choreography—may serve up excellent models of such infrastructure, and this ideal—of creating shared, common space—seems to me to be the urgent need now.

At the same time, it is crucial to be focusing on and engaging with the histories, practices, and dances of marginalized or vulnerable peoples. Whereas no one would argue that any singular department could do this work—the legacy of colonialism too omnipresent, permeating the culture, art, language, and laws—the question remains: What sort of infrastructure can best support this ongoing project? Indigenous knowledge, for instance, has offered revised understandings of identity and space, inviting us to think trans- and extranationally, as well as locally, to propose alternative ways of voicing and structuring power. The scholar Mishuana Goeman, citing Faye Lone, writes:

It is important to look at our social, political, and certainly cultural relationships in a “framework that allows relatedness to a flexible spatial community, one that allows for strong, mobile, symbolic identity that underlies, and perhaps even belies, external influences.” These are recreated through symbolic relationships and obligations rather than inherent rights bounded through nation-state models of borders and citizenship. (Goeman 2009, 185)

While Goeman’s words are particular to indigenous experience, they are suggestive in the struggle to decolonize the university—inviting us to reimagine institutional and departmental identities more

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fluidly. The challenge is to represent, honour, and finance the largesse of the field *as* its histories, practices, peoples, while avoiding the politics of exclusion—the turf wars, gatekeeping, and empire building that have mired so much institutional labour.

Dance studies as a project may be far more expansive than present-day configurations of the university allow. It might mean resisting current funding models that position faculty as bureaucratic instruments: hiring students, managing budgets, producing outcomes and deliverables. Are there models that resist the conventions of the corporation and capitalism? What structures exist that will allow us to make work, support colleagues, honour the histories of those who came before, and foster student growth? Whatever that looks like, under considerable financial and performance pressure (“Double our research,” say the new strategic directions posters that paper the campus where I work), we need to think carefully about who we are as institutional leaders and imagine forms and styles of working that privilege day-to-day relationships and encourage collegial well-being.

Perhaps the most invigorating aspect of dance for me has been its ability to cross lines: disciplinary lines to be sure, but equally to transgress are the lines of body politics, to help us *see* bodies, *think* bodies, *do* bodies, *be* bodies in more nuanced, informed ways. This is no small task in a world that would rather ignore, encamp, incarcerate, or destroy bodies. More, dance transgresses the limits of language-based knowledge. Which is to say, dance holds power as an art form that may *do* differently. That is, it may not require centrality within the academic institution. Or else it may function in important ways to critique from off-centre. Foregrounding the tacit, dance may envision the learning project in rhizomatic or cloudlike ways that resist corporate, “performance”-driven models—all measurements and deliverables. Movement, stillness, presence, disappearance, simultaneity, singularity, solo work, ensemble work, choreography . . . ! These are just some aspects of dance know-how that can and have been taken up critically to restructure space as political project (Martin 1998; Lepecki 2007). These elements, taken as values, used as strategies, suggest possibilities for reconfiguring the assumptions, the categories, and the hierarchies of the university. In my own trajectory in the field, working between disciplines, and recently hired as a professor of interdisciplinary studies, the challenge has been to reach out to readers, editors, colleagues, and students in ways driven more by choice, relevance, responsibility, and need than by affiliation or location. It’s often very energizing. Nonetheless, a model of deterritorialized fields of study calls for a different kind of resource support: here, human networks, idea sharing, and slowness matter more.¹

To lament the loss of departmental stature in the academy today risks arguing that dance has become too pluralistic, too interdisciplinary, too relevant to an expanded field with too many stakeholders. Instead, how might dance’s performance, exemplary methodologies, and history of collaborations and movement/s model a better academy? One path may lie in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s suggestive idea of the undercommons, a shared space that eschews the logic of critique—always locked into the structure it seeks to dislodge—inspired by the radical black tradition of refusal. Responding to a cinematic image of a settler in a protective fort surrounded by “natives,” a backward image when it is the settlers who are in fact the aggressors, Moten and Harney argue that the image is not false: “Instead, the false image is what emerges when a critique of militarized life is predicated on the forgetting of the life that surrounds it.”

Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence

occasions this self-defense it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround. (Harney and Moten 2013, 17)

How might dance avoid the trap of self-possession and defend the surround? Paraphrasing Harney and Moten, the answer remains speculative until the fort is torn down. To make a leap, what if the new interdisciplinarity is not an attack on particular forms of knowledge-making, as it is sometimes perceived, but a way to bring back the commons? The likelihood of that largely depends on our actions, and activisms, as constituent members.

Note

1. Slowness as a strategy first came on my radar through Patrick Martins, founder of Slow Food USA and later Heritage Foods USA—whom I met in Performance Studies at New York University in 1998. At the same time, and most formatively for the field, André Lepecki's work on stillness has underscored, among other things, the political potential of not moving (Lepecki 2006). See also Berg and Seeber (2016).

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