

### Get Thee Behind Me: The Back-Body as a Supporting Figure in Contemporary Performance

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#### Orientations: When People Face the Wrong Way

“I turn my back because I play better,” said Miles Davis about his habitual position on stage, responding to critics who felt he had given them the cold shoulder (Franckling 1986, 23).<sup>1</sup> Haters of jazz may see in this gesture a combination of the genre’s perceived worst tendencies: self-absorption, indecipherability, and highbrow hermeticism. Jazz aficionados, by comparison, may tolerate or even enjoy a degree of alienation and rejection—may see in a turned back an opportunity to focus more on the act of listening. Indeed, when people and things turn away from us, they sometimes have a funny way of making us all the more desperate to engage. Nonetheless, does a person not reserve the right to withdraw, to establish personal space, and to refuse visibility—in short, to point his trumpet wherever the notes resound the sweetest and clearest?

The French playwright Georges Banu (2014) suggests that frontality is “the first rule of decorum” on stage and that to refuse it “acquires the meaning of a revolt” (61). Looking back on the history of reception, Banu notes that Denis Diderot was one of the first theatre practitioners to “encourage a deliverance from the frontal relationship with the auditorium” (62). Diderot’s theory of acting is reminiscent of the observer effect in quantum mechanics, which says that particles will change their behaviour when measured. He believed that actors might perform more truthfully and naturalistically if they were freed from the spectator’s scrutiny and allowed to shut out the audience with their backs.

In discussing the front-body and back-body, we confront all kinds of entrenched values of this sort, including those associated with spinal anatomy and posture in dance history, which is beyond the scope of this essay. Generally speaking, though, the front-body tends to connote positive traits such as vulnerability, honesty, clarity, and empathy—but also confrontation and defiance—whereas many associate the back-body with negative traits such as defensiveness, disengagement, and deception. The front also tends to be synonymous with an approach, whereas the back symbolizes retreat: a silhouette on horseback dissolving into an orange haze.

When I read the call for papers for this special issue of *Performance Matters*, I was struck by the phrase “We approach the back in multiple senses.” Why, I wondered, is the back here construed as a passive surface, a sleeping creature on which we researchers do the sneaking up? By enacting what I call a “cheeky reversal,” this essay aims not to “approach the back in multiple senses” so much as to investigate the many senses in which backs and buttocks do the approaching.

Beyond the front/back binary, I can think of no satisfactory term to describe the appearance of both surfaces at once—the kind of multi-angle perspective that a tri-fold mirror provides, for example. The word that comes closest, to my mind, is “uncanny.” In his 2014 book, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, Slavoj Žižek recalls a short story by Guy

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de Maupassant (1886) called “Le Horla,” in which a man gains the ability to see his own back in the mirror.<sup>2</sup> The man’s back appears strange to him, “not because of its immanent uncanniness, but because it implies the point of view of an impossible gaze” (Žižek 2014, 519). Crucially, it is the gaze that takes on an uncanny quality in this scenario, and not the back itself. As the playwright Bert O. States (2010) puts it, to hold such an impossible gaze is to occupy a “divine standpoint.” To take in every material dimension of an object—to see the fronts and backs of things at the same time—would require, in his words, “one grand cubistic glance” (States 2010, 29). For States, this is one of the most fundamental phenomenological issues. What kind of spectacular contortions would allow a person to experience this divine and uncanny, yet impossible gaze?

David Foster Wallace (2011) deals with this issue metaphorically in “Backbone,”<sup>3</sup> an excerpt from his novel *The Pale King*, in which a boy is determined to kiss every square inch of his own body and works daily on his flexibility toward this end. As we immediately suspect from the premise, the boy comes to find that his neck and back are “the first areas of radical, perhaps even impossible unavailability to his own lips” (para. 36). The story can thus be read as an allegory for the limits of self-knowledge, in which the boy embodies our struggle for a sense of wholeness and self-mastery. The back-body, for Maupassant and Wallace, becomes a startling reminder of one’s inherent estrangement from one’s own body. An uncomfortable feeling, indeed.

It would seem to follow that to place equal theatrical value on the front, back, and side body would bring us no closer to representing “wholeness” on stage, given that none of us is whole to begin with. As the disability scholar Lennard J. Davis (1997) notes, “The linking together of all the disparate bodily sensations and locations is an act of will, a hallucination that always threatens to fall apart” (140). And yet, for some critics such as Banu, the equivalency of front and back remains an ideal. Banu associates a greater degree of theatrical freedom, for example, with the “oriental model,” as he calls it. According to him, Kabuki theatre makes “an equal use of the front and back” and “no priority is given to either” (Banu 2014, 67).

If the back-body is always already inaccessible, then it makes sense that we should look to others to describe it (the tattoo scene from the 2000 stoner comedy *Dude, Where’s My Car?* comes to mind) or rely on others to test its very existence and dependability (through trust falls and so on). In this regard, the back is also a timeless symbol of support. See, for example, the human pyramids formed in gymnastics. What are these pyramids if not a testament to the back as a support structure?

Most of the time, the back plays a supporting role in every sense of the word. On the face of it, the back-body is merely a front without features. When it comes to anatomy, the real star of the back is the C7 vertebra at the base of the neck, known as the vertebra prominens (the part of the spine that sticks out the most). Apart from person-to-person idiosyncrasies and the essential (but nonessentializable) difference of all bodies, it might be argued that the back is inherently less interesting than the front, making it more conducive to projections. There is, of course, no universal human back to make these kinds of statements about. But insofar as the material reality of most animals’ forward-oriented existence privileges all things frontal (indeed, life itself forms in that direction, i.e., babies)—it makes sense that the topography of all backs is less feature-dense and therefore less heterogeneous than the topography of all fronts. Think, for example, of Man Ray’s famous picture, *Le Violon d’Ingres* (1924), in which the artist has painted the sound holes of a violin onto a photograph of a woman’s bare back.<sup>4</sup> This image relies on the back for

its homogeneity, its sense of being raw material. If we were to imagine this image reversed, there would be a number of competing features to distract the eye, and to imagine a violin with a belly button gives us a different impression entirely. For his part, Banu (2014) suggests that “the performer turns precisely in order to maintain the expectation of the face” (63). Such an interpretation of the back confirms its secondariness to the front, the sense in which it’s considered lesser-than, a reprieve from persistent frontality.



Katy Perry at the 2011 Logie Awards, wearing a Jean Charles de Castelbajac dress featuring a screen print of Man Ray’s *Le Violon d’Ingres*. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

This essay concerns the dialectical dance between the front-body and back-body. In particular, I look at the ways that back bodies support front bodies, in multiple senses of the word, from carrying to encouraging. So far, I have been talking about “the back” as if it were a universal structure, but as this special edition makes abundantly clear, the back is more than an anatomical model and much more than a physical orientation, too. To take just one example, consider the expression “to have someone’s back,” which connotes emotional support as well as bodily protection. In discussing various performance and dance pieces that treat the back-body as “that which stands behind,” I want to look at how this notion of physical support often tips over into manipulation and a kind of impetus to make wholes out of fragments. The back-body in these scenarios is often a puppet master figure (which I hasten to clarify is not necessarily bad). Sometimes the sandwiching of front- and back-body, to the point of hybridity, is an equal collaboration, which serves both parties in some way. The problems start to emerge, however,

around the concept of “wholeness” and how two bodies work together to produce such an image. This is also Davis’s contention when he says that “the fear of the unwhole body, of the altered body, is kept at bay by depictions of whole, systematized bodies” (57).

### Reorientations: When People Have Each Other’s Backs

On this point, I think of DV8 Physical Theatre’s *The Cost of Living* (2004), which is based on an earlier work for the stage called *Can We Afford This* (2000).<sup>5</sup> The film is a key work in the representation of disability in dance. DV8 is from London, and their work has regularly featured a mixed-ability cast. One of the film’s most iconic scenes—its last—involves the dancer David Toole, a double amputee, mounting the sacrum of another dancer, Eddie Kay, who then treads across the shoreline in a downward dog posture with Toole on his back. From the side, we see the two bodies’ modes of locomotion temporarily reversed. Toole moves (or has the appearance of moving) bipedally while Kay moves quadrupedally, putting equal weight into his hands and legs. By trading places in this way, the two dancers trouble our assumptions about there being a default way of moving. According to Petra Koppers (2014), a performance artist and disability scholar, it is important to consider an “audience perspective that does not take bipedal motion as the center of locomotion” (178). Moving together, as Toole and Kay do, can therefore open up entirely new ways of locomoting.

Writing about the earlier stage production of this performance, Jen Harvie (2002) says that “Here, the ‘disabled’ and the ‘able’ bodies combined to produce a hybrid body, uncanny and newly powerful” (71). What *The Cost of Living* presents us with is thus a nonnormative, non-Platonic whole. The conjunction of front- and back-body creates an asymmetrical being with four arms and two legs that calls attention to the existing asymmetry in all bodies. Toole’s borrowing of Kay’s legs is not intended to compensate for a perceived lack. But if there is a lack, it is not Toole’s alone. For the front-body—Kay’s—is modified at the same time that it modifies. And if it does play the dominant “supporting” role in this physical structure, the front-body does so from a nondominant position, i.e., the bottom. In this way, the two dancers complicate the idea that it is only the disabled body that stands to benefit from a swapping of limbs.

The art historian and curator Amanda Cachia (2016) has argued that when a performer makes work from the lived experience of disability, this “creates complexity and ambiguity in representations of disabled bodies in contemporary art practices” (152). While there is room for complexity in the DV8 film by virtue of its casting, the performance of disability by nondisabled dancers in a production such as Dimitris Papaioannou’s live performance piece, *Primal Matter* (2012), works on the more superficial level of illusion.<sup>6</sup>

With many of his performances featuring steeply raked stages, Papaioannou is a director who often literally elevates and animates the background. Papaioannou directed the 2004 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony in Athens, and in 2018 he was a guest choreographer for Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch. The *Daily Gazette* summarizes *Primal Matter* thus: “A naked man and a man in a suit fight to share the same space, and in the end become one” (Liberatore 2012, para. 1). By “become one” the *Gazette* writer means that the two men’s bodies move together in unison and give the illusion of hybridity. By placing Michalis Theophanous, the nude man, in front of a square of black fabric, Papaioannou, the suited man, is able to make Theophanous’s limbs disappear one by one until he resembles the Venus de Milo.



DIMITRIS PAPAIOANNOU + MICHAEL THEOPHANOUS

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Dimitris Papaioannou and Michael Theophanous in Papaioannou's *Primal Matter* (2012). Photo by Nikos Nikolopoulos.

Later on in the piece (the moment of “oneness” that the *Gazette* describes), Papaioannou becomes a living prosthesis when he stands behind Theophanous and replaces the other man's leg with his own. To pull off this illusion, the front man bends his knee until his calf is hidden behind his thigh, while the back man rolls up his suit leg to the knee until there's just enough leg exposed to substitute it for the front man's “missing” leg. Soon after, both legs get involved when the front man hides both his legs and sits atop the shoulders of the back man, who crouches in the dark, invisible like a stagehand except for his exposed shins (which are now the front man's shins). The two men stumble together, like competitors in a strange lawn race, toward the audience, with the back-body helping the front-body to balance. This is essentially the same kind of partnering that we see in *The Cost of Living's* beach-walking scene, except that in *Primal Matter* we find an able-bodied performer pretending to be an amputee. What should we make of this representational difference? In both cases, the disabled body (real or faked) is endowed with another person's limbs. It could be argued that both DV8 and Papaioannou are working with Surrealist tropes (i.e., monstrosity, making strange), but that the former works more toward subverting these tropes simply by virtue of having a disabled performer who controls, to an extent, his own representation. Here Cachia (2016) writes:

Indeed, it is as if the Surrealists knew that the disabled, deformed, and castrated body is what provoked such fear, and while they searched for it and created art that became notorious for such uncanny characteristics, the disabled artist who objectifies his or her own body before a camera lens is doing something that the Surrealists could never quite attain. Surrealists made ‘normal’ bodies into ‘abnormal’ ones, emphasizing the power of having such fears through these bodily transformations and exaggerations. Yet, as far as I know, the Surrealists did not seek out and photograph actual disabled bodies. (142)

In the end, *Primal Matter* does play out many of these Surrealist tropes, including disabling, deforming, and castrating Theophanous, the nude performer (Papaioannou tucks the man’s penis between his legs). When he begins to remove the man’s other body parts, including his face, Papaioannou invokes textbook Freudian fears and anxieties. These reactions are not found only in response to missing limbs; they are also invoked by excess. One example of this, toward the end of the performance, involves Theophanous reaching through his legs and pulling Papaioannou’s sweaty head between his thighs. Up until now, the back-body has been concealed in absolute darkness, except for the legs that it lends to the front-body. But now, the sudden irruption of Papaioannou’s head into the foreground fully exposes his presence. The invasion of the back into the front breaks the illusion of wholeness that has, up until this point, been held together by choreographic sleights-of-hand. There is no more believing that the unseen back has restored the front-body. Now, the back threatens the front by giving it one more head than it needs, turning it into a symbol of excess. According to Cachia, this is one of the important differences between disabled performers representing themselves and nondisabled performers crippling up. The former is “real” and “corporeal” whereas the latter is “Surreal” and “symbolic” (Cachia 2016, 153). And to be portrayed as a symbol is to have a limited say in how one’s body is perceived. To the extent that Papaioannou, in his own piece, plays the role of a god-like figure or a mad scientist (critics have made comparisons to Frankenstein), is he in any way “watering down the agency of the disabled body, or in this case, the amputee body?” (Cachia 2016, 152).

In its original context, this question is aimed at another work that features nondisabled bodies lending limbs to disabled ones. The piece to which I refer is a 1998 installation film (and photo series) called *Oko za oko* or *An Eye for an Eye*, by the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski. To my knowledge, critics have yet to address the probable borrowing in Papaioannou’s *Primal Matter* from this piece. The Żmijewski film features amputees and nonamputees who join their bodies together in precisely the same illusory way that Papaioannou and Theophanous do, in order to construct an image of “completeness” or mock-completeness. Referring to the possible double meaning of the work’s title (*An Eye for an Eye* could mean either revenge or exchange), Cachia suggests that Żmijewski intends to ask with this piece “whether it is possible at all for one person to ‘compensate’ another for his or her impairments” (152). Between “lend,” “supply,” and “compensate” we find ourselves mired in language that presumes a lack as if the disabled body in the foreground has nothing of its own to provide the “non-lacking” body in the background. Speaking to this issue, Cachia (2016) says that we need “new concepts and language around notions of ‘support’ and insufficiency” (152).

On this point, if we are to think about the back-body as a supporting or augmenting figure that is always behind (and most often in control), how should we think about the dynamic between front and back in a way that recognizes the agency of both figures? Perhaps we should consider how support is distributed between bodies. If one body is doing the lifting, for example, how is the lifted body supporting the lifter? Further, we might think about how various theatrical and is

filmic technologies play a supporting role in framing and lighting bodies. That the DV8 scene is shot from the side and that Papaioannou and Żmijewski's performances are shot from the front important. Regardless of the perspective, however, a body that is behind another body will tend to be called the "back" no matter how that body faces the spectator (in the sense that a conga line that crosses one's path still has a back and a front). It would seem that reorientations of this sort do not supersede one's understanding of directional conventions. In this regard, the quality of "behindness" is different than "backness" in that things can be behind even when they are in the foreground. Probably the best example of this visual paradox is one that Banu mentions: that is, René Magritte's painting *La reproduction interdite* (1937), which features a man who sees his own back reflected in the mirror (à la Maupassant). The back bodies of Magritte, Maupassant, DV8, Papaioannou, and Żmijewski are always engaged in some kind of illusion, the most common of which is a reversal or blending of front and back so that the two cannot be told apart. These disorientations, in Lennard J. Davis's (1997) words, might be described as "the mirror phase gone wrong" (60). Something in us or something in the mirror causes us to doubt our sense of the body's wholeness. What we see, in these mirrors, is our own "repressed fragmented body" and this repression is likewise manifest in encounters with disabled bodies (Davis 1997, 60).

### **Disorientations: When People Bend Over Backwards for You**

In no performance is the phrase "the mirror phase gone wrong" more apt a description than in Xavier Le Roy's solo performance *Self Unfinished*, which was made in collaboration with Laurent Golding and premiered at MoMA in 1998.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the piece, Le Roy contorts and dresses his body in ways that abstract the human form, rendering it alien-like. In one scene, he pulls a black skirt over his upper body and spider-crawls his way around the room on all fours. His arms, now functioning as a second set of legs, seem to bend at an impossible angle. He looks, through crossed eyes, less like a mammal, and more like a molecule—perhaps the protein kinesin as it "walks" along a microtubule. Le Roy was a biochemist before he was a dancer, after all. At one point, the dancer approaches the upstage wall and walks his feet up into a handstand (although he now appears to be entirely made of legs and so it is hard to say what are feet and what are hands, if not visually then definitionally). Once in this position, Le Roy then crab-walks along the wall, right-to-left, with his legs (arms?) in a goalpost shape. Between the black pants encasing his lower (now upper) body and the black skirt encasing his upper (now lower) body, there is a six-inch gap in the fabric where we see his exposed back (now front). The musculature of Le Roy's back—his erector spine muscles—is well defined like abs, furthering the illusion of a front-back reversal.

If he embodies any kind of mythical hybrid here, Le Roy does not resemble any textbook cross-breed that I have seen before; rather, he seems to be half man and half alien. He is made up of two lower halves and thus appears to be a composite of two bodies even though he is only one. But is he all front and no back, or all back and no front? The closest comparison I can think of, watching Le Roy, is that he looks like someone operating a two-person horse costume if that costume had two rear-ends. Once costumed in this form-busting outfit, Le Roy spins in a slow three-hundred-and-sixty-degree circle, showing us his butt, and then his other butt. You can see what I mean now by "the mirror phase gone wrong"—Le Roy's body is mirrored in such a way that it becomes unrecognizable. In an interview, the dancer/choreographer describes his intention to rearrange the body and disorient the viewer in precisely this way: "I was working a lot on fragmenting, dismembering, deconstructing and reconstructing my body mostly to explore what the limitations of my body can produce. I used this strategy to create movements to transform some ideas about handicap and limitation into illusions or other physical abilities" (Hantelmann 2002, para. 6).

Like the other artists I have discussed, Le Roy plays with forms—halves, wholes, and doubles, especially—in order to create Surrealist tableaux. But unlike the all-too-human, posthuman, and more-than-human figures found in DV8, Papaioannou, and Żmijewski, Le Roy abstracts the body to the point of rendering it nonhuman. One might say the very title of this piece goes to the heart of the problem of wholeness. The self, in *Self Unfinished*, is always becoming something else. It wears pants and a dress at the same time. It sometimes hides its face and sometimes conceals it. All the while, it never transcends the fragmentary identity that “precedes the ruse of identity and wholeness,” as Davis puts it (1997, 61).

### Other-Orientedness: When People Back Each Other Up

I would like now to consider one more work in greater detail, which takes up all the themes I have discussed so far and puts the subject of the back-body front and centre. And it is here that we come around to a Canadian context: Mutable Subject’s 2013 performance, *NEW RAW*.<sup>8</sup> The piece was choreographed by Deanna Peters in collaboration with performers Elissa Hanson,<sup>9</sup> Alexa Mardon, and Molly McDermott and was performed at EDAM Dance in Vancouver. On the Mutable Subject website, Peters writes that “*NEW RAW* is a lot about backspace: ass backwards, baby’s got back, back me up, back and forth, back off, back to back, behind your back, laid back, scratch my back . . .” (2015). In fact, the back-body is such a part of the show’s iconography that one piece of promotional material features a well-composed photograph of Peters’s back, which is lit in such a way that the subject’s musculature is exaggerated and eroticized. The image captures a specific moment early in the show when Peters faces away from the audience while wearing a black blazer the opposite way around.



Promotional material for the 2013 EDAM Dance presentation of *New Raw*, by Deanna Peters/Mutable Subject. Photograph of Deanna Peters by Chris Randle.



There is something, however, about the photographic medium that makes this presentation of the back somehow more uncanny than the live show's. Being a close-up, it removes all manner of spatial orientation, so that the back becomes a truer front with less depth behind it. Once again, in treating the back-body as the front-body, we are presented with an illusion. The blazer has a fixed orientation so that when it is worn backwards, it signifies that anything on the buttons-side is frontal. In other words, if the image were blazerless, we would only see a back and not a back-becoming-front. As it is, the image confuses the eye. From far away, the subject of this photograph could be mistaken for George Michael, shirtless under his blazer (no doubt the intended effect). We might say, then, that the back is treated here as a gender-fluid surface. In a very literal sense, the photograph's depiction of the back-as-front challenges the binarism of orientations both gendered and physical, since it treats this ambiguous bodily surface, for which there is no third term, as "both" and "neither."

On the other hand, the live performance deals with various tropes of femininity, e.g., cheerleader stereotypes. The opening scene features McDermott sitting in a chair, wearing a red skirt and a sleeveless sports jersey. The look falls somewhere between vintage cheerleader and point guard. Standing beside the chair and resting a soft hand on McDermott's shoulder is Peters, who faces upstage and wears a backwards blazer, as in the photograph. Slowly, McDermott begins to squirm in her seat, growing more restless as time goes on. There is an element of stress and strain in her movement, but also, perhaps, euphoria. As Peter Dickinson (2015) notes in his review of the performance, "the chair carries associations of decorous bodily comportment (women don't usually get to manspread) against which McDermott might be rightly rebelling" (para. 6). Such a reading echoes Sarah Ahmed (2006), when she asks: "Is a queer chair one that is not so comfortable, so we move around in it, trying to make the impression of our body reshape its form? The chair moves as I fidget. As soon as we notice the background, then objects come to life, which already makes things rather queer" (168). It is almost imperceptible at first, but the chair begins to slide upstage, dragged from behind by an unseen performer, Mardon. At times, the hand on McDermott's shoulder seems like it could be directing the action and causing the seated dancer distress, but it could also be read as a tender and supportive gesture, intended to pacify (which motive may be no less oppressive). Because McDermott's squirming stops for good when Peters's resting hand is removed, there is reason to believe that the hand was active mover rather than passive hanger-on and that it was in fact somehow "behind" the action. The balance of power between the two performers is clear from their respective orientations: one standing and one sitting, one facing forward and one facing backward. Not only is the spotlight on McDermott, who has no choice but to be seen, but the seated dancer holds a craned-back neck for the duration of this sequence so that we, the audience, are invited to stare at a body without a face to confront us in our staring. Here, Dickinson (2015) writes that the three dancers in this sequence all "avoid the (presumptively male) gaze of the audience" (para. 7). At the same time as the dancers avoid the gaze by refusing eye contact, they also create the ideal conditions for voyeurism by abstaining from reciprocal looking and mutual desire (only to dramatically subvert this imbalance later).

Another quintessential Surrealist image comes to mind when looking at McDermott—a 1929 photograph by Man Ray called *Anatomies*, which is an extreme close-up of a model's bare shoulders, neck, and chin. The upward angle of the model's chin defamiliarizes her head, abstracting it into an oblong blur. Although there are elements of the castrated body in images such as this one, Mutable Subject does not play with Surrealism's disability tropes in the same way as the other works I discussed above. In the most general sense, every living person has some kind of face and head, and so McDermott's apparent facelessness/headlessness does not provoke any immediate associations with a disabled body; nor does Peters's turned back call to

mind any stereotypes. If anything, the transformation of the feminine-coded back into a masculine-coded front could be seen to “rupture the normative female form” without disabling it (Cachia 2016, 150).

Other modes of manipulation and support come into view in the next sequence, when Mardon (the chair-puller) emerges from behind McDermott and begins to act as puppeteer. The first thing to surface is Mardon’s hand, which tugs assertively on McDermott’s earlobe. Subsequent tugs and pushes are occasionally timed with the music (a manic hip hop track played at double speed). But Mardon does not appear to have all the agency here, given that McDermott also moves independently of these handlings and mishandlings. There is nothing to suggest that the front-body has any overt control over the back, however. As in the traditional acting exercise, Mardon is “sculptor” and McDermott is “clay.” When the two dancers do trade places for a second, and Mardon briefly comes to occupy the front position, no explicit role reversal takes place, which suggests that the power imbalance is not simply a matter of who stands where. While behind the chair, Mardon tosses McDermott’s head from side to side like a basketball. At one point, McDermott comes to rest in a coach’s pep-talk position, elbows on knees. Coming around the chair now from the side, Mardon approaches and suddenly knocks out an arm so that McDermott collapses. Not a second later, however, Mardon hoists McDermott back up into an upright position. Such an action complicates our view of the back as a supporting figure in this dyad. Why the sudden about-faces in behaviour?

Recalling Peters’s list of back-related themes, it is the “back and forth” in this scene that registers most strongly. Mardon goes between having and not having McDermott’s back. But when McDermott finally stands up, the dynamic shifts somewhat, and their partnering becomes more like a series of compromises and traded impulses. In one instance, Mardon is put into a headlock. And in another momentary levelling out of power, the two dancers perform something akin to a Lindy Hop barrel roll, in which they turn back to back, rotating like gears along each other’s back-body. One imagines that both dancers, in this moment, must become tangibly aware of their own back and that of the other. This point of contact lasts for only a second before we are back to Mardon being the sculptor and literally shoving McDermott around. McDermott, now wilful and combative, walks backwards toward Mardon, only to be shoved three more times. The surreal gold-leaf makeup on Mardon’s face reminds me of a mischievous sprite, the kind of playful yet threatening force that one might wrestle with in a dream. In their final formation during this duet, the two dancers are so tightly hugged together that Mardon becomes a kind of exoskeleton to McDermott, a human backpack. Here it becomes truly impossible to know who is cueing and being cued—who is leading/following, acting/reacting, pushing/pulling, and so on. The various tells, if they could be read that easily, might be found in the dancer’s arms as they expand and contract, stiffen into cactus shapes and soften into a self-hugging gesture. Such sudden vacillations, between cooperation and resistance, make the essences of back and front hard to pin down.

Sometimes, the ambivalence-cum-denial that McDermott shows to the dancer behind her suggests that the body operating in the background is something like a manifestation or a hallucination. To that end, Mardon’s presence could even be read as a metonymic representation of McDermott’s own back made visible—an externalization of the unseeable side of ourselves. For the first half of the piece, both Peters and Mardon appear as guardian-angel figures: the hand on the shoulder, the unmoved mover behind the sliding chair. And so, perhaps McDermott is the Jungian dreamer who experiences these outside forces as projected fragments of herself. According to Lennard J. Davis—here quoting the Lacanian scholar Ellie Ragland-Sullivan—

“because the child first saw its body as a ‘collection of discrete part-objects, adults can never perceive their bodies in a complete fashion in later life’” (139). It is precisely because of the four dancers’ physical proximity in *NEW RAW* that each of them is able to perceive the body as a whole, which wholeness, as I suggested earlier, is always a ruse (Davis’s term). In sum: the behind-body allows a dancer such as McDermott to see, feel, and experience her own back-body as an outward presence, akin to lying on the ground and feeling every point of contact between the skin of one’s back and the surface of the earth.

### **Self-Orientedness: When Everything Ties Back to Me**

This is where I found myself on April 23, 2016, when I took a *NEW RAW* workshop with Elissa Hanson at the Scotiabank Dance Centre—i.e., on the dance studio floor performing a body scan and experiencing the ground as an equal and opposite force to mine. When lying on the ground in any kind of meditation, I like to acknowledge how pressure is distributed. On a flat surface, it pools in my upper back. A full and dull sensation. We began the workshop like this, with a guided body-scan, shortly after introducing ourselves, checking in, and getting comfortable. Hanson then led us through a brief warm-up, which involved listening to Haddaway’s song “What is Love” in order to cut the tension and bring everyone into a fun, unselfconscious headspace. I recall being invited to listen to our bodies and move in our own way, and I can remember doing a few cat-cows (as a nondancer, my movement vocabulary is mostly limited to yoga shapes). Soon after, we got to our feet, about ten of us, and Hanson started to recount the genesis of this sequence and the intentions behind it.

This workshop covered the latter half (the tail end) of the performance, when Hanson backs herself onto the stage with her butt in the air (again, in a downward dog shape). By this point, I had seen the performance twice and knew what to expect in terms of this sequence’s choreography. I also knew that the gestures and shapes here would be fairly accessible to me, given that they do not involve much technical movement, no big turns or jumps. Furthermore, the workshop was marketed to all bodies and abilities. The real difficulty of this sequence, I came to discover, is the courage it takes to meet the audience’s eyes with extreme, bordering on grotesque, confidence (more on this in a second).

The sequence starts with everyone making a surprise entrance, which is played for laughs. In the piece, it is only Hanson that performs this part, but we performed it as two groups of five or so. Because Hanson wears a flowy ankle-length skirt, we were all invited to wear one. There were not enough skirts to go around, however, so I went with a long sleeve shirt tied around my waist. We began with our butts in the air and the skirts and makeshift skirts draping down to the floor. From the audience’s perspective, the resulting figure is a bit like Cousin Itt or the Yip Yips—an amorphous bell shape. One leg over the other, we began to creep out into the centre of the room from the wall, monkey crawling from side to side, using all four limbs for support. The movement is not complicated or athletic, but it is highly physical, requiring a greater degree of flexibility than I had expected. In order to get one’s butt way up in the air (in my experience) one’s hips and hamstrings need to be on the looser side. Mine, however, tend to want to go not much further than a hundred and ten degrees. All the same, my butt is suspended somewhere in space, and I am shuffling backwards toward the spectating half of the group, all too aware of the subtle exhibitionist-voyeur contract into which we have entered.

We were invited to sense our backspace, to lead with our back-body, and to make the back expressive by exploring its personality. I tried to think of my butt as a face, darting about and looking around searchingly, sussing things out like an animal—meanwhile, as per the task, I tried

to hide my actual face in the unseen zone on the far side of my skirt. By this point, a small wave of pain has started to travel up my spine, so unfamiliar with this position is my body. As a result of having done some of the movement from *NEW RAW*, I have a more embodied sense now of the difference between the back-body—a line that runs from heel-of-foot to crown-of-head—and the back as it is known colloquially—namely, a rectangle atop two posts.

After a minute or so of hesitant backwards movement, we were invited to work into a larger travel across the floor, letting our arms hang and sway a bit more, and making our steps bigger, but still taking our time. Moving backwards into invisible space is scary, but it also abolishes some of the fear of being looked at and judged. It is here, at the energetic height of this phrase, that we began to roll up to stand and face our would-be audience. Once standing, I started to circle my hips around in a washing-machine motion as Hanson does in the show.

The subsequent phrase is where “grotesque confidence,” as I previously described it, enters into the equation. Now standing upright with my back still facing the audience, I put on a sinister smile, cultivating a strange mix of oversold enthusiasm and campy desire. To be clear, these were not the prompts nor the words that Hanson gave us; in fact, she kept the exercise rather open, saying something more along the lines of “Imagine you are happy, almost overjoyed, to see them.” My experience of both watching and performing this character is that the smiling face passes through Marilyn Monroe to Jack Torrence, before arriving at Edvard Munch—from charming to scary and finally to horrific. Hanson’s smile becomes abject the moment that its circumference appears more “dental chair” than “dental poster.” It might have seemed like the back was an affront, but this mouth-shape is the more confrontational of the two.

But where has the back-body gone in my discussion? It seems to have gotten away from me, so interesting is the front-body to consider. Now I see, when I consult the *NEW RAW* video, that Mardon has been dancing in the background this whole time—and quite loudly, too—while I have been focusing on Hanson in the foreground. And so it is that the front-body is an attention-stealer. No doubt, my preoccupation with the front is further abetted by the medium of documentation, too, which, being a Vimeo clip, is decidedly depthless. What is more, the reflexive experience I had as a live audience member, whereby the staging of the front-back relationship drew my attention to my proximity to other audience members, is all but non-existent on a flat screen, at home in my swivel chair. On the contrary, *NEW RAW* was originally performed on one of the deepest stages in Vancouver, at the EDAM dance space in the Western Front building off Main, which is twice as deep as it is wide. To my knowledge, the piece was created around that space, and its dimensions determined much of the piece’s movement and its sometimes severe blocking, such that the dancers come to occupy a more extreme foreground or background than they typically would. This already-long space is perceptually lengthened, too, by doors on the upstage wall, which exit out the rear rather than the side, a device that is used at one point when Hanson makes a comically prolonged exit, only to return a moment later. The EDAM stage may be the only space I have encountered where the backstage of the theatre is sometimes visible from the audience, through two open doors, marked with EXIT signs, and as a result, most performances I have seen at this venue take some advantage of this peculiarity.

The group explores these spatial dimensions to a greater extent in the piece’s final sequence, which involves lanework that sees all four of them squared up, marching to an industrial beat. Hanson, Peters, Mardon, and McDermott stagger themselves front to back as they approach the audience at different paces. In principle, this section reminds me of that inflatable party game, Bungee Run, where competitors must sprint down a lane with a bungee cord tied to their back,

to see who can get the farthest. The dancers do not sprint, but they do become possessed with a sudden intent to approach the audience, and upon reaching their furthest mark downstage, they are just as suddenly pulled back upstage by some invisible force. Their dancing, as they move backwards, grows in intensity, until some of them are jumping up and down like a boxer before a fight. By contrast, their downstage movement is dramatically stifled and small. Here, the dancers explore their personal and collective power through their mobility on stage. As they shift from one lane to another, they exercise their ability to queer the straight lines to which they seem bound at first.

This sequence employs a number of tasks similar to the ones we worked on in Hanson's *NEW RAW* workshop, where we were invited to see the audience, to greet them with our nearly-unhinged smiles, and then to feel ourselves carried backwards at the moment we switched our attention from front-body to back-body. One gesture we practised was called "sails" (a shorthand) where we were asked to raise our arms like a Flamenco dancer and, with crossed legs, feel ourselves almost tripping backwards due to an imbalance in our distribution of weight (a prompt much easier felt and observed than written about). As I moved forward and back, back and forward, I reached my hands behind my head to tousle my hair (another gesture in this sequence). Thinking back on this moment of action, it strikes me that the back-body has never really been inaccessible. Sure, there are spots where the sunscreen is hard to smear, but I do not need to kiss the back of my neck to experience it. For can I not reach around with my hands and touch it anytime I want? For those who have the privilege of touch and sensation, this gesture is a given. At the very least, most people can experience their back tactilely by simply lying down, even if it were the case that a person had sensation only in the back of their skull. Now, as I come to write this essay's last few sentences, these sensations creep into the foreground yet again. There's that familiar low-level ache that comes of sitting and writing for long stretches of time (and long periods without stretching). Perhaps you feel it, too.

## Notes

1. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4X3rAg6lhY&feature=youtu.be&t=47>.
2. See <http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Horl.shtml>.
3. See <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/07/backbone>.
4. See <https://www.manray.net/ingre-s-violin.jsp>.
5. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lx4v-oMSmBQ>.
6. See <https://vimeo.com/190056876>.
7. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3rv1TeVEPM>.
8. See <https://vimeo.com/78581284>.
9. Full disclosure: my partner.

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