

Erin Brannigan, Siobhan Murphy, Tia Reihana-Morunga

Editorial

**Moving South:
The Reconceptualisation of Dance Research in the 2020s**

This issue of *Performance Paradigm*, “Moving South: The Reconceptualisation of Dance Research in the 2020s”, edited by Erin Brannigan, Siobhan Murphy, Tia Reihana and Emma Willis, is the result of an open call asking: What model of Dance Studies might be relevant in our local context, encompassing Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Asia and the Pacific, in the 2020s? How can we embed distinctiveness in our work and enhance dance research in a way that reflects and responds to our communities? The answer to our call shows how dance research that is in dialogue with our changing local conditions can enhance understanding of society's political, cultural, aesthetic and social complexities. When such complexities are advanced by the people to whom the knowledge belongs, the reclamation and re-animation of what dance means can support culture's growth, visibility and vibrancy.

The issue launches a special focus on dance and choreography at *Performance Paradigm*, a journal created for a region where dance, theatre and performance have long exchanged forms, practices and communities. It is in dialogue with existing work in publications from this region such as: [Brolga](#), [Dance Research Aotearoa](#), and [Writings on Dance](#) and important recent milestones such as the Undisciplining Dance conference in Auckland in 2016 and the anthology that issued from it (Brown and Longley, 2018). “Moving South: The Reconceptualisation of Dance Research in the 2020s” responds to Elizabeth Dempster's provocation to “undiscipline” the art form (Dempster 2005). It showcases new interdisciplinary approaches and features case studies from an expanded cultural field of practice, placing emerging, established and practice-led researchers side-by-side. The editorial team includes members of the international network Dance Research Australasia (DRA), and their aims here are in line with DRA's intention to curate, connect and activate research toward building capacity and

invigorating dance praxis locally and globally amid the ever-present histories and current critical discourses in the region. This issue sits alongside “Southern Oceanic Choreographic Practices”, a recent issue of the journal *Choreographic Practices*, also edited by DRA.

Through the broad range of its contributions, this issue brings new voices to a field that, in its short history, has been heterogeneous in its foci and methodologies. Scholarship had been broad in scope, ranging from historical analyses, pedagogic and ethnographic case studies, practice-led studies by artist-scholars, through to dance analysis via feminist, cultural studies and philosophical lenses, particularly phenomenology. Historically, research conducted in the postgraduate sphere indicates this breadth of field. For example, Rachel Fensham’s literature survey of postgraduate research in Australia from the early 1990s to the early 2000s shows an eclectic range of topics, methods and lenses (Fensham 2005).¹ This heterogeneity is sustained when looking through lists of postgraduate theses from 2000 until now, although it should be noted that this research lacks First Nations-focused theses by First Peoples. Although in general terms, the breadth in foci and approach at postgraduate level is significant, the visibility of dance practices and productions from our region has not always been maximised in published research. When scholarship has been published, it often remained within discipline-specific readerships such as education. Moreover, scholarship intended for dance studies readerships has often focussed on the various lineages of modernism/postmodernism in the region. This issue goes some way to address this gap in published literature on dance from our region, and we hope that this focus at *Performance Paradigm* will lead to much more.

Beyond post-graduate work, an increasing focus on the professional dance and choreography of First Peoples and distinct Indigenous and diverse communities has, here as elsewhere, had the most compelling impact on the profile and relevance of dance studies. In Australia and East Asia, important scholarship from practitioner-theorists such as Vicki Van Hout (2013, 2024), Rachael Swain (2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2020), Dalisa Pigram (2015, 2023), Garry Lester (2020), Marilyn Miller (2012), Tess de Quincey (2018, 2019, 2021) and Cheryl Stock (1998, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2018) has shifted the paradigm away from North American modern and postmodern dance and European conceptual-dance frameworks.² The work of scholars Rachel Fensham (2013) and Carol Brown (2010, 2017) has been important in tracing the intricate legacies of dance pioneers such as Columbian-American Eleo Pomare and Austrian expressionist Gertrud Bodenwieser in flows of influence across Australia and Aotearoa. The collective work of this group of scholars has been formative in articulating nuanced understandings of intercultural dance practice specific to the region, in the studio, on the concert stage and on the page.

Within Moana Nui a Kiwa, contributions from Māori and Pacific researchers have offered a rigorous landscape to reconcile the multi-modalities of the moving body to community genealogies and environmental agencies that attend to the climate crisis and mobilization. Within the vast Pacific region, Moana-nui-a-kiwa, which includes Micronesia and Melanesia, Indigenous or *Mana Oceania* dance research contributions by Naomi Faik-Simet (2017 and 2021), Katarina Teaiwa (2018), Tru Paraha (2020a and

2020b), Tia Reihana (2023) and Ojeya Cruz-Banks (2009, 2020, 2024) have explored concepts of Indigenous creativity in ways that provide a counter to the common relegation of Indigenous dance and culture to the zone of preservation (UNESCO, 2001). Their research has advanced important community frameworks for knowledge generation, acquisition and dissemination. Recent redefinitions of the art form deploying disciplinary tools (for example the newly expanded notion of “choreography” that can be applied to many things beyond dancers dancing) have combined with First Peoples and other cultural knowledges to unsettle and re-envision how we understand dance in our classrooms, on our stages, and in our communities in a way that encompasses place, environment and country/whenua, alongside critical practices.

The ongoing work of reframing dance scholarship in our region occurs in conversation with international contexts. See, for example, the list of conference foci over the last decade by the US-dominated [Association of Dance Studies](#), the largest dance research organisation in the world. A notable shift can be traced with topics that focus on formal concerns, such as sound/movement relationships, giving way to topics that are predominantly contextual, encompassing a plethora of ways of considering how dance relates to its cultural contexts, including how racism and oppression can be inherent to dance’s production. The Association’s recent event, [New Books on Asian and Asian Diaspora Dance Studies Virtual Series](#) (Dec-Jan 2024-2025), as well as book titles in their [Studies in Dance Series](#) and online [Conversations](#) editions, feature articles on dance in Puerto Rico, Fiji, Sri Lanka, and the Caribbean as well as popular dance genres such as hip hop and salsa, marking the new directions the flagship dance organisation is taking.

Given that in our region opportunities for scholarly publication have been limited, it is important to acknowledge the role of dance reviewing and criticism in tracking the field. As has been the case elsewhere, much local dance historical work has been carried out by journalists and scholarly reviewers who have provided crucial written archives of performances. Michelle Potter’s work on Meryl Tankard, Valerie Lawson on 20th-century Australian ballet, and Maggie Tonkin’s extensive reviewing of Australian Dance Theatre have all culminated in monographs (Potter 2012, Lawson 2019, Tonkin 2017). Additionally, collections of review-scholarship such as that of [RealTime in Australia](#) and Vicki Van Hout’s [review blog](#) for FORM Dance Projects (2013-) in Sydney provide crucial archives of works that may not have been covered anywhere else.

This special edition continues the conversation. A dialogue between Juanita Kelly-Mundine (First Nations Collections Coordinator, National Museum of Australia, Canberra) and Tammi Gissell (Collections Coordinator, First Nations, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney) acknowledges the increasing appearance of Indigenous performance in museums and galleries and addresses some ensuing issues for both artists and institutions. The possibilities for a renewal of international performance archive practices that is First Nations led is mapped out in their discussion of care for intangible cultural practices. Supported by the release in 2003 of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the leadership of Dr. Terri Janki through her work on Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights, Australian Indigenous artists and arts workers bring ancient methods of choreographic

transmission and preservation into dialogue with the indigenising policies that are revolutionizing the GLAM sector.

Jodie McNeilly represents the strong thread of dance-philosophy in our region, led by senior scholars such as Phillipa Rothfield, Elizabeth Dempster, Sally Gardner and Amanda Card. Here, McNeilly's *choreocraftivism* offers a creative practice that speaks back to philosophical distinctions between phenomenology and new materialism. By threading the world of *things* as it might operate outside subjective encounter with the phenomenological tradition of attending to the kinetic logic of things, she proffers a "less human agential way to be with matter" through dance. Such a strategy is then put in the service of environmental activism through choreographic "responses with a somatic saving capacity." McNeilly calls out other artists from the region working within this orbit; Latai Taumoepeau, Jo Pollitt, Dean Walsh, and Kay Armstrong.

This 'de-instrumentalising' of the world around us through dance is also present in Rhiannon Newton's creative approach to scholarly writing. Newton brings internal and external landscapes together in a model of the embodied environment to challenge and extend upon creative praxis. Ecologies of the self, as phenomenological scores, play alongside choreographic potentialities. Newton gently unsettles expectations of the *dance* and offers a re-conceptualisation of the moving body as being open to creative trans-corporeal habitats.

Susannah Keebler's reflection on her own dance practice in Mallacoota, a regional town in Victoria badly affected by the 2020 bushfires, tells the story of life as an independent artist away from urban centres and on country, in this case the lands of the Bidwell, Bidwell-Maap, Yuin and Monero Ngarigo nations, and Gunnai-Kurnai people. Keebler introduces embeddedness, disruption and continuity as her framing concepts to discuss the specific needs and benefits of a dance practice in such a context, telescoping out to connect her work with peers both nationally and internationally such as Deborah Hay and Elizabeth Cameron-Dalman. Her research introduces to this issue the fundamental topics of how arts policy impacts arts practices, how we can better care for our artists, and the function of choreographic work in social and ecological conditions marked by crisis and trauma.

Maggie Tonkin's article discusses works by three high-profile Australian choreographers: Lucy Guerin's *Structure and Sadness* (2006), Meryl Tankard's *Inuk 2* (1997/2008) and Garry Stewart's *South* (2019). Through the lens of Australian cultural theorists Ross Gibson and Paul Carter, Tonkin unpacks settler positionalities and the legacy of colonisation therein as they manifest in these works. Tonkin argues persuasively that settler anxieties about spatial locatedness persist in Australian contemporary dance through recurring motifs of unstable physical conditions: fracturing, precarity, instability, collapse, disintegration and destruction.

Two offerings of writing-from-practice draw on rich cultural resources, knowledges and states of embodiment to locate the labour of specific creative work and translate it for the page. Paea Leach offers a "long score", written through her dancer's body, that maps

“a pluriverse for inhabitancies” informed by her Māori Ngāti Kuri whakapapa (genealogy). Calling in the many knowledges, roles, voices and ways of being that Leach fields in her life, work and practice, “a K Ō R E R O & a H U I : a conversation and a meeting in three parts” is “sent down the page” in a choreography of graphic formats, language modalities, barely contained corporealities, and conjured images.

Alesha Mehta turns to kama in Vedic philosophy as a means to decolonise both her own contemporary performance practice and how her performance might be received through Western concepts associated with the English translation of Vatsayana’s *Kamasutra*. The sense-based concepts and models offered by kama open onto a performance work, *Mukti Vidhi*, in which Mehta explores her identity as an emerging artist in Aotearoa and the power of transformation through corporeal exploration.

Finally, we agree with Fensham’s claim in 2005 that “without good writing and comparative analysis, dance research cannot be sustained” (Fensham 2005). This means ‘good reading’ too, and the visibility of dance scholarship work from our region through publishing on open-access platforms like *Performance Paradigm* means we can access and share such work to build the bodies of knowledge that will sustain the future of the art form and its discourses.

Notes

1. Both Fensham and Dempster’s articles cited here were first presented at *Dance Rebooted: Initializing the Grid* in 2004 in Melbourne. It has been 20 years since this national dance studies conference with only industry focused national fora since then.
2. The various lists of writers and scholars in this editorial do not presume to be comprehensive but to give a sense of the scope of work in the field historically and currently.

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ERIN BRANNIGAN is Associate Professor in Theatre and Performance at the University of New South Wales. She is of Irish and Danish political exile, convict, and settler descent. Her publications include *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), *Choreography, Visual Art and Experimental Composition 1950s -1970s* (London: Routledge, 2022) and a companion monograph to the latter, *The Persistence of Dance: Choreography as Concept and Material in Contemporary Art* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2023). She has published various chapters and articles in film, performance and dance journals and anthologies and regularly presents on dance for ABC Radio National. Her research project *Precarious Movements: Dance and the Museum* (2020-2024) with Tate UK, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of NSW, Monash University Museum of Art, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Shelley Lasica and Zoe Theodore produced an online sector resource, precariousmovements.com, and an anthology *Precarious Movements* (Melbourne: NGV, 2024).

SIOBHAN MURPHY *choreographs and directs dance on screen and writes in the field of dance studies. She is of Irish settler descent, living near Naarm, Melbourne. Her current projects focus on the intersection of solo dance and portraiture, seen in journal articles, podcasts, screendance curation and screendance works on this theme. She makes works for single channel and gallery installation outcomes, with works screened in festivals throughout Australia and New Zealand, as well as London, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Lisbon, Toronto, New York and Edinburgh. Siobhan is a curator of Dance(Lens) at Dancehouse (Melbourne) and a researcher on the Australian Research Council Linkage project 'Re-Activating Australian Dance Theatre's Archive for the Future' (Adelaide). With the research team, she is co-curating an exhibition for the Adelaide Festival 2025 to mark the 60th anniversary of the Australian Dance Theatre.*

TIA REIHANA-MORUNGA (*Ngāti Hine*) *is a senior lecturer in Dance Studies, Creative Arts and Industries at The Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland. Dr Reihana has been an educator in the secondary and tertiary sectors for over 20 years. Her research in the arts and education sectors focuses on culturally responsive pedagogy reflective of Indigenous knowledge systems, revealing challenges that formal education systems present to teaching Indigenous dance and students. Her work with leading Indigenous arts practitioners and communities navigates intercultural praxis. Dr Reihana works extensively in Arts, Education and Health with Indigenous communities in Aotearoa and the wider Pacific as an artist, researcher, and community facilitator. She is also the Co-director of the newly established Centre for Co-Created Ageing Research (CREATE-AGE) at the University of Auckland.*

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