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Charlotte Veal

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Opening Up Endings: Action Performance Practice

Charlotte Veal
Newcastle University, UK

Endings take multiple forms yet remain under theorised within geography. Informed by Hannah Arendt’s assertion that action has no end, this paper argues for the resonances and elaborations of endings, providing evidence from dance choreography. As an art form, dance has been variously conceived as ephemeral but also transient, thus neither capable of being lost nor destroyed. I explore these ideas through Renail Basail’s re/staging of the choreography *Out of the Box*, and it’s unexpected ending in March 2020. I ask, what might dance choreography tell scholars of geography and the geohumanities about how to work with such a sense of endings as contingent and open? This paper contributes to this gap in thinking and theorising by outlining four propositions on endings drawn from dance theory and practice. These are: endings and ephemerality, endings as conditional, endings and liveness, and endings as radical. Where endings are open and congruent, two key implications emerge. First, there is need to situate endings within bodies, articulating how they are practiced and performed, whilst always subject to external forces not fully known. Second, if action has no end, there is political possibilities to creative endings. Key Words: disappearance, endings, performance, post-humanist, practice.

OPENING UP ENDINGS

End. The finale. Let us begin there. In the wings, the stage’s threshold. Dark. Eerily still but bursting with bodies. Atmosphere thick, overflowing with anticipation. Silence gives way to music, stillness to the corps du Ballet. Their ending is first. They run diagonally in parallel lines, two-by-two, circling the space before pausing upstage centre. The rhythm is set. Soloists of the pas de trois claim the space with soft arms and quick feet. The intricacy of movement diminishes as it unfolds. Movement gives way to movement. Diana, goddess of the hunt appears in her signature motif—arabesque en pointe with arms drawing-back her bow—echoing but not wholly capturing her performance since past. The rhythm builds. Upstage, two contemporary dancers in black spring into action with grand jeté’s that suspend bodies in moments in time. The rhythm is building. Next is the soloist from Harlequinade, chaîné turning in her tutu of violet and aquamarine. The rhythm has climaxed. Three pairs enter, recreating a sequence that iterates the gala’s...
Mexican Ballet choreography. The end approaches. It is time for the prima and her prince. She fouetté turns, manipulated in his arms. Her body dissolves as if captured in slow-shutter speed. Animation. The space bursts into motion as 24 dancers criss-cross in circles and regimented lines. The end is here. Women are lifted, tableaus created. Stillness. Marta steps down from her stool, pen in hand. Corrections are read aloud. Positions modified. Entrances reworked. Let us start at the end, again.

As I sit typing on the makeshift desk that has been my companion for the last two years, I recall my final days in El Paso examining dance and the international border. Sieving through my inbox, I reminisce over the abrupt email of March 2020 informing me to return “immediately” to lockdown Britain. Is my inability to reconcile this event because my research came to an end, or simply that COVID-19 prevented the ending being performed how I anticipated? How do we practice endings, and might endings be contingent? What is lost and what resonates in the liminal space of endings? I continue to feel a sense of loss for the conversations that I will not have, the research I will not “complete,” and of the performances that I will never experience. And I grieve for the dancers lost to me as they scattered across the city, state, and international border. Yet, as time has passed (writing this piece to its end), there is also a sense of possibility.

Perhaps this feeling of possibility emerges from the standpoint of the contingency, openness and ongoing elaborations and resonance of endings within dance practice, where further movement seems always possible. Here, I am drawn to the words of Hannah Arendt who proposes “action has no end” (1958, 233). Arendt’s assertion rests in the belief that although action may proceed from nowhere, every action sets into motion a successive reaction. “Every process is the cause of new processes” (1958, 190). This sits comfortably with dance, where each movement is argued to give way to the next. But action always takes place within dynamic, unspecified networks of human and more-than-human relationships. That endings appear seemingly outside the control of the conscious autonomous and intentional human is congruent with the growing body of work in post-structuralism and post-humanism (Panelli 2010; Williams et al. 2019; Flacon 2022). Across the various fields of Actor Network Theory, Affect Theory, more-than-human geographies, and sensory and performance geographies, agency is shown to be distributed through lively forces which humans participate in but do not completely determine. Humans are not singularly responsible for change but enmeshed in a complex web of bio-chemical and physical forces and are moved to action through affects, intensities, habits and reasons that are not always known (see Miele and Bear 2022).

There is a longstanding literature in human geography where endings feature (see, for example, DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). Within these debates, endings are often stated but endings themselves are rarely thought about or theorised. A noteworthy exception is Kingsbury and Secor (2021) recent exploration of “voids” as endlessly generative and work on the “negative” in negative geographies (Bissell, Rose, and Harrison 2021). In the Introduction to this special issue, Raynor and Veal (forthcoming) argue that the ending is a theoretical problem that needs further exploration within geography and the related humanities. Reading Arendt’s account of action with post-humanist thinking through the lens of dance can contribute to this gap in thinking and theorising. More specifically, I elucidate through dance theory and practice, the contingency, openness and ongoing resonances of endings. While it is not my intention to ignore the devastating effects of closures or demolitions nor depreciate the politics of withdrawals, I do suggest dance might offer novel “truths” to some endings.
The western dance academy has devoted much time to interrogating the ontology of dance endings, tracing carefully the nuances and subtleties between endings and ephemerality, improvisation, repetition, practice, and embodied memory (Siegel 1972; Burt 2003; Stanton 2011; McFee 2012; see Derrida 2016 on iteration, see Manning and Massumi 2014 on failure as experimentation). Many of these ideas have found a theoretical home across cultural studies, but the relentless process of embodied inscription in dance, has meant that it is principally engaged with as an embodied empirical issue. The discipline has quired the conditions and forces (embodied, affective, material, socio-political, archival, digital) through which loss takes place. It has approached the body as the medium through which choreographic archives are passed down. And the discipline has found hope in ephemerality’s radical potential. Returning to the rehearsed finale above, it seems that the art form that took me to Texas, and the writings of performance theorists, supports sense-making of endings. As Anne Pakes (2020, 1) notes, dance works are not physical things; “they are neither events nor tangible artefacts that can be picked up, moved around, misplaced or stolen.” If ephemeral but concurrently re/produced through practice and repetition, dance works encourage human geographers to trace that “something” that exists before and survives after an (danced) end.

In what follows, I trace dance’s ontology as disappearance, and more recent efforts to interrogate dance endings as occupying a liminal space between permanence and transience. I argue dance theory and practice can advance thinking and theorising of endings as contingent, open, and ongoing. To do so, I present Renail Basail’s choreography Out of the Box and reflect upon 120 hours of dance ethnography in El Paso, two public performances, and two online interviews with Basail and a dancer I call Susan. Section three takes a step back from Out of the Box to offer four propositions on endings for creative geographies and the geohumanities. I conclude the paper with two key implications. First, endings gain new meaning when situated within bodies that practice such ends. Second, there is radical potential to movement that has no end.

DANCE, ONTOLOGY, AND LOSS

dance exists at a perpetual vanishing point. At the moment of
its creation it is gone (…). (It is) an event that disappears
in the very act of materializing (Siegel 1972, 1)

Within the western academy, scholars of dance have queried the ontology of dance and the forms and frames through which it comes to an end. One common refrain is that dance leaves nothing behind, as encapsulated in Siegel’s (1972) assertion that dance disappears in its materialisation. Unlike fine art or literature, dance does not create palpable objects that “remain “relatively” stable in the sense that they can be touched, felt or looked at in their extant content” (Thomas 2004, 70; see Fraleigh 1987). Dance is dependent on the dancing body, from whose movements, lines, gestures, and stillness it is composed, for its existence. As each movement or action is executed, it gives way to be replaced by another. Construed as such, dance falls into a cyclical trap of creation, appearance, and destruction. For, even though dance can be performed again, Phelan (1993, 146) notes “this repetition itself marks it as different,” whether viscerally, emotionally, spatially, affectively or otherwise. That dance works vanished from the living or company
repertoire has prompted Helen Thomas (2004, 121) to define the history of western classical dance (which I infer as ballet, modern, and contemporary) as one of “lost dances.”

Theorists of performance have equally drawn attention to repetition and iteration in performance (see Butler 2002; Derrida 2016), thus problematising corporeal ends as singular or fixed, but rather, “in the making.” Speaking on repetition Diana Taylor (2003, 31) explains, “scenarios, by encapsulating both the setup and action/behaviours, are formulaic structures that predispose certain outcomes and yet allow for reversal, parody and change.” Because choreographies (or scenarios) are fixed, repeatability becomes possible. This is equally true of corporeal training and dance syllabus whose principal objective is to produce relatively persistent, regimented subjects, evidenced through the highly trained bodies of company members. If endless hours repeating barre work, adage, allegro and petite batterie produced nothing, there could be nothing conceivably to disappear. Examining dance as repetition and corporeal inscription radically alters conceptualisation of danced ends by suggesting that they affect some works more than others and ultimately linger within embodied practice.

Pakes’s (2020) Choreographing Invisible is useful here in identifying three conditions under which dance works end. First, loss occurs in the absence of performance and practice. It can be unplanned, triggered by unexpected events such as financial or artistic reasons, or deliberately engineered because of wider socio-political contexts. Second, loss occurs without sufficient documentary records to re-enact the work (see Franko 2017). Notation can provide material traces (Veal 2016) and film can record a one-time-only event (Mitoma 2002), but “something”—not quite tangible—dissolves. Third, loss occurs through the disintegration of the background practice in the context of which the work was initiated (see Rogers 2020). Recreating such works depends on the dancer’s capacity to perform the choreographed and aesthetic features within their wider societal context. And it is reliant on the audience’s ability to interpret it. Even if choreographic content is remembered, the disintegration of the practice which makes sense of the choreography can mean a work remains lost.

Dance scholarship’s affinity with endings as loss is intriguing precisely because it operates in a different realm to the language of destruction. It implies that something has been mislaid and might be recovered. New documentary records or access to forgotten embodied knowledges may resurrect a lost work, challenging the inevitability of performance endings. Loss may be reversible. Pakes (2020, 248) more radically questions whether a dance work can ever really end in the sense of having “suffered annihilation.” Michelangelo’s David is material and palpable and can be conceivably destroyed. For dance this is less straightforward. How we view the nature of the work will inevitably determine our understanding of what is lost. If a dance work is a performance event, its photographs and videos, sketches and scores, oral histories, and embodied memories, destroying a single component will mean its creative end. A singular loss is a loss to the collective. But if works are performance only, “It is not clear how a performance event could be destroyed, as distinct from merely not taking place” (Pakes 2020, 249).

Taking the lead from Pakes, Out of the Box hasn’t been staged since March 2020, but it has not, nor cannot be destroyed. Might dance thus begin to fill a theoretical gap in discussions on endings through accounting for resonances? Extending Hannah Arendt assertion that action has no end, and post-humanistic thinking that embraces forces of change beyond human comprehension, I argue dance is imbued with potential precisely because it works with repetition and practice, makes space for the ephemeral, and finds creative opportunities in endings. Such
contingency and openness might prove useful for thinking endings within creative geographies and the geohumanities.

OPENING UP ENDINGS: OUT OF THE BOX

Nine female dancers in three regimented rows run forward, each carrying a black box. They deep plie through second, placing their boxes down. The front row break from the group, shooting their legs into splits, balancing from one hand; powerful and strong. The second row joins the sequence, rolling in front of the box into an seated counterbalance. All three rows synchronise with an off-balance sitting position at the boxes’ edge, left arm outstretched. The women ripple their bodies right to left, leaving the head to ricochet from the motion before executing a 90° arabesque. Strength gives way to fragility. Synchronised bodies drop overpowered to the floor, lifting on and off the knees with arms outstretched above with a desperate quality.

In February 2020, I visited El Paso Ballet Theatre (EPBT) for a planned three-month research project examining everyday bordering and creative geopolitics. Located on the USA-Mexico boundary, bordering Ciudad Juárez, El Paso is a culturally diverse city characterised by ebbs and flows in its cross-border community for work, education, and leisure. EPBT stages regular performances across the region (Texas, New Mexico, Juárez), under the tutelage of Executive Director Marta Katz. One such event, featuring Out of the Box, took place on the 6th and 7th March 2020 in El Paso and Las Cruces, to a combined audience of approximately 220. Within a week, the introduction of State-led COVID-19 restrictions saw EPBT’s studios close, and I was booked onto a flight to London. Post-performance analysis and a performance workshop could not be completed and just two interviews were conducted online. Out of the Box is not a choreography about endings. But, it is a choreography entangled with endings. Endings are practiced, they are negotiated, and some pose the promise to re-appear. Out of the Box hints at that “something” which exists before and survives in the liminal space of dance.

Created by Cuban dancer and choreographer Reniel Basail in 2014, Out of the Box is a 20-minute contemporary ballet featuring nine female dancers. Dressed in black leotards and long skirts, the choreography is, Marta explains, intended as a “homage to his mother and sisters.” Feminist politics frame much of the movement content and narrative structure. Reniel explained, the piece tells the story of the “hardship of women,” including their “mistreatment and discrimination.” Shielding and pleading gestures, in conjunction with backward upper-body roles beseeching (the) God(s) (Figure 1) are just some of these motifs that support Basail’s aesthetic vision. But the dance is also “about empowerment and strength” and is “a call for revelation and how by means of that union they are able to (…) overcome any obstacle.” Union here speaks to the politics of assembly. Assembly is understood as the performance of plurality and the construction of collective practices, that for Mouffe (2013, 105) have the potential to “subvert existing configurations of power” (see Butler 2015).

The theme of uniting is buttressed in the choreography’s ambiguous props; nine 30 cm² black wooden boxes. For Basail, the boxes functioned symbolically, serving “as a tool for fighting, building, joining, and above all supporting.” They signified the building blocks of a just society. But their purpose was also metaphorical; “It’s about strong women in Cuba. They cannot be put in a box” Marta explained. For Susan, the box metamorphosised into the hardships of women, opening opportunities to connect kinaesthetically with these experiences. Boxes conveyed “the
hardships and challenges women go through, and how over time they get heavier. After dancing with it for a long time it became harder to pick it up.” Here the box alluded to the illusive slow, seeping effects of violence and adversity. Yet when asked to expand on specific movements examples, Susan expressed her difficulty in salvaging the choreography and the multi-sensual qualities because of her enforced (social) distance from the choreography; “I’m trying to think. It’s difficult to remember (…), to put into words.” Susan’s account is a useful starting point from which to explore the multiple endings and their resonances within the choreography.

Foremost, danced endings appear within the space of the body and embodied practice. For Susan, loss is conceived as a spatial-temporal absence from rehearsal, where embodied repetition and the background context of learning the choreography ensures micro-choreographic knowledge lingers in the body. Susan also hints to the slippery nature of danced movement. Despite 30 years of professional training, my ethnographic notes exhale frustration; of “losing the

FIGURE 1 Backward upper-body role.
movement” or “not quite capturing its complexity.” Each rehearsal permeated difference. Cast members altered, technical execution shifted day-to-day, energy fluctuated, and errors were corrected. Endless hours iterating the desired dancing body meant movement traces evaporated before my eyes. Choreographic phrases and motifs, physical technique, alignments, and
transitions were reworked, stage positionings, tempo and timing were rescripted, and musicality and performativity developed. Embodied learning contextualises repetition as entangled with endings, and of the body as space where, through the act of repetitive practice, sub/conscious decisions are made over what to hold on to (aesthetic, embodied, affective, etc) and what to let go of. Such letting go is essential to the creative process. It is often unsophisticated and underwhelming, drawn and redrawn in the next moment of practice. Photographs of the final motif from the 2014 and 2020 performances (Figure 2) illustrate efforts to let go and innovate, meeting the needs of, not least, different bodies. Dance works naturally resist fixity. Endings are fluid.

Performance spaces—including the studio—also came to resonate endings. This is because Out of the Box 2020 was from the outset a re-staging of its 2014 production. It drew heavily upon the choreographer’s own technical and aesthetic aspirations, what affects it should engineer, subtle and otherwise, and its generative potential for inciting feminist politics. Embodied memories from the one remaining dancer, Laura, informed the physicality and emotional energy of the piece, whilst continuity in the wider background practice was ensured through the Executive Director’s presence (see Pakes 2020). Finally, dancers also salvaged the choreography’s archival fragments from video. Out of the Box was pieced together through hours of practice and conversation, muscle memory and embodied learning, technological (pause, rewind) and corporeal devices (slow/fast processes of embodiment), and experimentation and standardised bodily automation.

Two dancers are teaching a complex floor sequence. They move between the computer charging at the front of the studio and the remaining dancers in the centre of the space. Boxes are lifted high above outstretched arms and placed in front. Bodies extend into a press-up position from the box, and then are experimented with as they transition into a protective ball, curled over the knees. Video footage is rewound. (…) Reniel enters the studio to observe. Realising their confusion, he reminds his body of the phrase, alongside its energy and weight. With exaggerated gestures he breaks down the micro-choreography. (Field Journal, 15th February)

Reflecting on this process, Susan explains: “We were learning it from a video (…) it was hard to get a new group that has never done it before to really embody all that it is.” Choreographer and videography enabled for capturing the choreographed action and aesthetic features of the older work, but Susan’s reference to “all that it is” speaks of something fleeting and multi-sensual lost in its digitisation.

Other choreographic traces absent from video included the tacit knowledge of working with costumes. Executing Out of the Box required intimate knowledge of the danced choreography; that is to say, of translating choreography through the labour of doing. Here, the internalised kinaesthetic knowledge Laura gained through performing in the 2014 production proved paramount.

The dancers have put on their skirts and are exploring how they move against their bodies. Laura explains “today is skirtography day.” Laughter fills the studio, but quickly subsides when she adds it is the “hardest part.” To execute the piece effectively they will need to become proficient in the tacit choreography within the choreography. Laura runs the piece, focusing entirely on the skirt: of flickering movements of holding material during an arabesque, the circling movement of a toe to drag the material, the preparation of the skirt in advance of a lunge, and of balancing it over the forearm during runs. The intricate details bear invisible traces of embodied knowledge gained in and through first-hand practice. The dancers slide and trip during the first run through. One falls over. (Field Journal, 15th February)
In/visible fragments of the choreography were recovered through research, experimentation, and corporeal memory, opening for the possibilities for performances ended to reappear. That Out of the Box’s ended in March 2020 is therefore open to contestation. With a rich written, visual, audial, and corporeal archive, Out of the Box occupies an awkward existence, somewhere between permeance and disappearance. Its ending might, more productively, be understood within a longer time span, dating to its creation in 2014. Where the boundary between transience and permanence can no longer be determined, it is necessary to disentangle what has ended, what remains, what lingers, and what might be salvaged. Much that was “lost” in 2014 was restaged; choreographic structure and content, music and costume, even pathways, alignments, and multiple emotions were replicated. Re-watching video footage, it is not the choreography that seems most lost, rather, a third space of creative endings is the once only performance event (Figure 3).
A distinction might be made regarding endings within the creative process and the end of the performance event. While the former may be a cause for celebration, where creativity thrives, the latter is conceived as problematic. Here, I refer specifically to “live” performance. Liveness is a situation of the here and the now. Foster (2003, 4) observes, “it is this suspense-filled plenitude of the not-quite known that gives live performance its special brilliancy.” Presence, from the Latin præsēntia, meaning “being at hand,” dominates discussions of live performance. More than simply occupying the same spacetime, presence implies mutuality; an active awareness and exchange between performer and recipient. Building on post-humanist and post-structuralist approaches, performances are “generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38) of forces known and unknown, meaning that every performance differs. Living, breathing, moving bodies imbue performance spaces with different intensities and affects; “vague but tangible senses of resonating augmentation and orientation” (Mc Cormack 2014, 33). Two diary entries are helpful here.

As the lights fade the audience escape their seats. The atmosphere is thick, budding with intensity. Out of the Box has produced illusive qualities that I understand as affects. I join the circulating bodies. A father I recognise moves toward me, expressing his enthusiasm for the “powerful” and “moving” choreography. Reniel’s pieces, he explains, are always emotive. He is drawn back into the buzz and replaced by a mum. She tells me that the music was “moving” and the dancer’s synchronicity gave an energy to the piece. “Being in the space was so intense.” (Field Journal, 6th March)

The audience is subdued this evening and there is not the energy that I felt last night. I approach the photographer who notes, “the atmosphere wasn’t the same.” It didn’t have that same force. “The piece didn’t feel as strong.” I nod. Later an elderly lady tells me the piece demonstrated “excellent technique” but with a restricted view, it was hard to gauge its full emotive qualities. We agree to switch seats. (Field Journal, 7th March)

Affective qualities of live performance pervade both accounts and are anecdotal illustrations of the types of responses people have when seeing live performance. Such qualities shape how individual performances are experienced as well as how they evolve and are indicative of what might be perceived to be lost. Video footage feels cold and distant. I am unable to recapture my sense of the performance event, of being in that moment, with its energy and emotions, and of a shared presence in experiencing the choreography, albeit in profoundly different ways. And yet these diary entries elucidate how liveness is always felt differently. Choreographically speaking, the piece was the same, and yet with a slightly different cast, in a different locale, with a differing audience, (and other forces unknown), the movement didn’t affect equally. As bodies and locale change, the structure and other qualitative components of the original alter (McFee 2012) (Figure 4).

A final creative ending within Out of the Box is a more speculative space and resides in my hope for its prefigurative politics; to disseminate beyond individual dancing bodies and the studio into the world. Put differently, what seems lost is the possibility to delve further into the choreography’s thematic content. If the choreography is a feminist call for action, its unexpected ending prevented the leveraging of dance performance to extend the debate on the strength, fragility and often-hidden struggles faced by women. The choreography’s absence from current performance space seems to compound this sense of loss. Yet for Lepecki the critically creative possibilities imbued in dance’s disappearance rests in returning to those tracks and steps, bodies and gestures, performed by past dancers. Experimentation with choreography’s past enables
performers to rework past works, escaping what he describes as “Orpheus’s curse of being frozen in time” (Lepecki 2010, 29). Of course, there is a political-performative force of the (f)act of mediation in performance, but for Lepecki (2010), in following Massumi (2002), past works are non-exhausted creative fields of impalpable possibilities.

To illustrate, take the social performances sweeping Latin America; Un violador en tu camino. Flash-mob’s see women assemble in public space to denounce patriarchal violence. For Serafini (2020: 291), “performance actions can achieve multiple things, from holding space to harnessing media attention, (…) and eliciting reactions from those present.” But they can also enact transformations on multiple levels. Theatre and dance became powerful performances of defiance against rape, femicide and judicial-political complicity, and I argue, support the demonstration of prefigurative political action. Un violador has been restaged internationally, with its choreography replicated and modified by different women, and its lyrics edited to reflect local vernaculars. Un violador speaks to the potential of Out of the Box to be recreated, and more radically, adapted according to new agendas. To return to Arendt (1958), performances re/made
might therefore achieve the space of appearance. The space of appearance is always a potential space that finds its actualisation in the actions (understood as never ending) of individuals who assemble to undertake some collective project.

In beginning to answer the question, what might dance choreography tell scholars of geography and the geohumanities about endings, *Out of the Box* presents endings as existing within the liminal space between transience and permanence. Embodied re/workings, repetitions and practice, creative salvaging from performative fragments, embracing fleeting affective forces and liveness, and a hope for prefigurative possibilities, collectively illustrate how we might think and do endings in ways that are contingent and open. This is to affirm Arendt’s vision of action having no end and as shaped by a complex network of forces—emotions, affects, people, and materialities (and we might add, sound, set, technology and other). Below, I step back from *Out of the Box* to begin to fill a gap in thinking and theorising on the contingency, openness and ongoing elaborations and resonance of endings. I offer four propositions informed by dance theory and practice that have application for creative geographies and the geohumanities: endings and ephemerality, endings as conditional, endings and liveness, and endings as radical.

**PROPOSITIONS ON ENDINGS**

**Endings and Ephemeral**

There is a danger in viewing endings as inevitable and final. Geographers have not shied away from interrogating the complexities entangled in assumptions over the end. Pertinent here are those concerning the end of public space. Not unlike other endist propositions, such claims can neither be read literally nor accepted uncritically (Paddison and Sharp 2007). In such contexts “ends” are rooted in questions over what geographies are told. They are intended to evoke the encroaching trends of capitalism and privatisation whose forces expose the fragility of public space (Madden 2010). But as Don Mitchell (1995) resoundingly argues, the end of public space has always been in doubt. Decisions to frame space as “open” rather than “public” for example can radically alter perceptions, but also shape values about what is argued to have come to an end (see Leyshon, French, and Signoretta 2008 on financial exclusions). To claim the end of public spaces is to extenuate these spaces, romanticising a period of apparent free (and equitable) access to them that never existed. It is, as Mitchell (1995) continues, to ignore its production as the outcome of struggle. Such struggles are never complete but re/made.

Dance scholar’s ephemerality refrain can add criticality to thinking endings. If ends are always about what geographies are spoken and which are ignored, then ephemerality invites scholars to tell a different geography of endings; one that does not lament the end, but finds value in the transient, the liminal, and in the immediacy of the present. To follow Walter Benjamin (1991–1999), it is to explore “the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral” and the continuity of what is ephemeral in experience. As experiences collide, they become something different in the process. Of course, ephemerality would have us believe that dance’s inability to be recorded is a problem. It is to position those things with substance that can be documented against those more intangible that fall outside the realms of the archive. This both denies the agency, as well as political aesthetic power of things that fade and that which exists in the liminal space of creative practice.
Language seems worthy of further consideration. Pedagogic decisions to frame dance as “ephemera” rather than destroyed pose unusual opportunities. From the Greek, *ephémérios*, meaning “of, for, or during the day,” ephemerality asserts disappearance as a constitutional component of its existence. And it is suggestive of a process founded on repetition and renewal. Within dance, endings do not conform to pre-defined processes with distinguishable beginnings, middles and ends (although they have these). As I argued through *Out of the Box*, endings are on-going, shifting daily with cast members, memory, energy and technical proficiency at that moment, or through modifications to tempo, positioning or alignments. Such endings are unsophisticated and underwhelming, but integral to the creative process and part of the (apparent) value of once-only performances. To follow choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (Sadler’s Wells 2014), “Dance is always a temporary drawing; it disappears when the movement ends. (...) Each performance has to be drawn again the next evening.” Creative ends are never stable but repeated, reworked, laboured over and, crucially, practiced. Dance’s creative force originates from its vanishing, fading from view with every performance to be replaced by another. Movement gives way to movement, but that *process* is what gives performance it’s meaning. To extend Nietzsche (1996), not every end is the goal, but if each movement did not disappear, the dance work would not reach its goal. This reorients endings, placing emphasis on embodied processes and as existing in liminal practice. Disappearance is not merely inevitable, but part of the integrity and quality of what makes dance performance what it is. Dancing bodies question what it means to create and to end creatively, without fetishising the creative process (Veal and Hawkins 2020).

Endings as Conditional

Endings are fragile, open to interrogation and subversion. They are caught in a tension between things that can end (life, objects), and an apparent in/absoluteness of ends, who endure as im/material traces. Geographers writing on ruination have explored endings in relation to various cycles of creative destruction (Mah 2012). In such contexts, endings are the product of multiple temporalities and un/planned acts. Others have seen opportunity in endings. Dobraszczyk’s (2017, 169) *The Dead City* calls for a radically different approach to ruination, that “acknowledge and accept limits, vulnerabilities and endings.” Privileging the materiality of urban endings risks negating a ruin’s non-representational power to activate memory, affect, and provoke sensuous experiences long after their demise (DeSilvey and Edensor 2013). Explorations with architectural endings can support alternative multi-sensuous engagements with the past and re-write the parameters of endings in terms of permanence and transience.

Dance’s emphasis on loss enables for a broadening of the conditions under which endings take place, and for thinking endings as always conditional. In *Towards a Sociology of Endings*, Crow (2005) argues that endings are not necessarily perceived by those living through them, because of imperfect information, persuasion, denial, or nostalgia. This speaks to the indeterminacy of ends as they unfold including the subjective and not uncontentious socio-political reasoning that shape decisions about what is (not) lost. But it also points towards the centrality of practice—always embodied and lived—through which endings are rationalised. What remains, what lingers, and what might be salvaged are open to interpretation. DeSilvey (2017) might include mundane objects here, but for dance scholars the salvageable spans more-than-representational forces.
Prominent amongst which are emotions, muscle memories and first-hand performance experience (e.g. skirtography) through which individual and collective bodies remember. 5100 miles away, it is tempting to view Out of the Box as having been brought to an irreversible end. Yet the showcase is testament to the possibilities for performances ended to be re-performed. Indeed, the 2020 performances were based on the re-staging of an early performance, made possible from oral history, digital records, and embodied memories. And it lingered on through the social context in which the performance was first staged, including enduring training regimes. My own ethnographic notes are imbricated in whether the 2020 “end” is permanent or transient, partial or aligned to its performance predecessor.

Thinking endings conditionally is to situate them beyond established (humanistic) timeframes, shaped by those imposed on us (chronometry) and, in line with post-structuralist thinking, those entangled with our passions. With reflection and emotional distance, the 2020 performance is subject to an ongoing process of endings, rather than the end per se. Distinguishing between those endings that are material and those that are immaterial requires careful interrogation. It requires extricating between the end of physical material “substance” and different “outputs” that are emotional, affective and atmospheric than can’t fully be defined or captured. Unlike other endist propositions, dance scholarship’s emphasis on loss suggests that something might be returned to the frame. Individualistic readings of the end are, therefore, reoriented by disciplinary-specific pedagogies. Loss, within a Western choreographic tradition, does not occupy the same position as lost. But more than this, loss is productively viewed as a constituting part of repetition, practice and performance. Out of the Box is not lost, rather it is currently not being practiced and future performances have not yet happened. Conditionality calls for nuanced thinking on endings, both in terms of the materiality, embodied and textual information that contribute to the “thing,” alongside the emotional, more-than-representational and temporal qualities driving endist proclamations.

Endings as Liveness

Endings are subject to mediation and experienced with varying degrees of immediacy. Geographical research on the un/making of spacetimes through digital technologies (Graham 1998) is useful here. Early critics warned of the demise of liveness through mediation and the end of the physical over the virtual. Yet wired cities and the information economy hail new (uneven) geographies, while digital technologies continue to alter how work, home, school, and leisure are mediated (Castells 1996). Digital technology did not herald the end of geography, but the production of complex global networks and new mediums of human encounter. In contrast to claims of the disembodying effects of digital technologies, we see how screens are producing new embodied imaginaries and political realities (Williams 2011). Disentangling what qualities or experiences are lost, those that remain, and those which are gained within digital domains has never been more pertinent. If subject to mediation, and experienced with varying degrees of immediacy, then endings are best understood in relational terms to liveness.

Much of the discussion on performance endings has concentrated on liveness. That theatre is performed live, with “real” performers and audiences, has been central to its definition (Jellicoe 1967), and by extension, conceptualisations of what is lost. Liveness places emphasis on relational exchanges with living bodies, who connect and receive feedback through all sensorial
channels in synchronous time. Visual, audible, material, or affective, such feedback, human or otherwise, shapes the performance form and progression. No one performance will happen again. For Phelan (1993), technological interventions “fixes” the performance, mediating encounters and filtering live events and its multi-sensuous qualities. Once recorded, that performance enters the realm of the hyperreal; its liveness ceases. Others challenge this as uncritical. Auslander most vocally notes, live performance is not only fashioned upon the very idea of non-live performance (2008, 52–53), but also, digital technologies are increasingly mediating liveness. Milli Vanilli’s (2008, 52–53) lip-synching of mediated recordings during live performances, exemplifies how the live and the mediatized function relationally. Out of the Box’s digitisation does not substantiate the end of the performance but marks a transition toward mediation in ways that I can yet fully grasp. Eroding the ontological differentiations between the live and non-live foregrounds multiplicity within creative endings. Digital tools and interfaces network liveness, extending the parameters of a performance’s “end” and stretching its afterlife. And yet, if audiences are unable to discern the live from the recorded, can a performance end ever completely take place? What emerges is a much more complicated relationship between the live and the non-live, the end and not-the-end.

Liveness has also evoked debates over immediacy, variously conceived as unmediated experiences. Live performance stirs viewers and performers with a sense of presence, or direct, authentic connection with another (Mehrabian 1971). Emphasis is given here to an (apparent) emotionally direct experience of encountering live performance. Liveness is distinguishable via its dynamic, atmospheric, affective, felt, perceived, and intuited aspects, and perhaps explains why kinaesthetic responses can be so powerful (Bresnahan 2015). A full appreciation of the event is derived here from its aesthetic value; as an event that “you had to be there” for (Bresnahan 2014). One might have a meaningful experience watching the 2020 production of Out of the Box, but s/he cannot alter the event. Immediacy interrogates the experience of creative encounters, outlining a need to both identify the boundaries of, and value that which ends within, live performance. Creating dualisms between live and mediatised performance is thus unhelpful for understanding the experiential impact of liveness on actual audiences, and of the sense of immediacy and emotional, affective or elusive qualities gained through different tools. I argue creative geographers and scholars of the geohumanities would benefit from examining liveness and technology in relational terms and how they are producing new intensities that challenge liveness as performance’s end.

Endings as Radical

Endings seep with defiance, as evidenced in the flourishing geographical literature on the unfolding effects of austerity (Power and Hall 2018). Closures act as reminders that “ends” are rarely experienced evenly or equally. Nor do they go uncontested. Day-to-day coping strategies can offer insight into how endings are encountered and experienced, managed or ignored. Everyday struggles can also reveal how closures are resisted. They emerge as fraught battles, including public demonstrations, to subtle moments of weariness. Where endings constitute a slow form of violence, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019, 157) propose slow resistance: “a form of politics that is not spectacular or public, but instead often hidden, gradual and difficult to detect.” Defiance can also take artistic form. A fictional play for Raynor (2017, 208) became a tangible
object through which austerity could be given substance; to bring together “affective, atmospheric and material traces of austerity” (see Veal 2017). Both strategies have implications for geographer’s sense-making of the radical possibilities bound up with endings.

Dance endings are envisaged productively precisely because disappearance is held to offer numerous political possibilities. Rather than lament dance as an art form lacking in permanence, Reason (2004), following Phelan (2006, 1), argues disappearance invests “performance with a unique value and radical politics of resistance.” If performance’s only life is in the present it cannot participate in “the circulation of representations” (Phelan 1993, 146; Phelan 2003). Performance sits outside of capitalist systems. The allure of performance is its immateriality and its slippery-ness. Others place importance on the radical creative potential of disappearance. As new performers revisit choreographic work, they transform them. Dance’s disappearing form can liberate contemporary makers from the constraints of performance canons (Pakes 2020). Disappearance is conducive to experimentation, fostering the reinvention of ends - to do them again. Differently. Choreographic forms, movement motifs, and sequences of motion are hijacked and reinvented. New readings of past works allow choreography to reflect shifting societal values and to be reflected onto society. Choreographies like Un violador en tu camino travel and are transformed gaining new meaning and socio-political force in the world. For Lepecki (2010) there is a political-ethical imperative for re-enactments to reinvent. Reworking a performance can remind audiences that the present is different from the past, or it can attest to shared injustices. Doing performance anew can also suspend “economies of authoritative authors who want to keep their works under house arrest” (Lepecki 2010, 34). If one outcome is to oppose the ideological burden of a sanctioned version of dance history, the other is to reveal the social context of that work’s creation, including structures of power and/or class, gender, or race relations. Disappearance has generative potential. Revisiting Out of the Box may reveal other feminist narratives concerned with oppression and hardship; it is a non-exhausted creative field of impalpable possibilities.

For Arendt, part of the radical potential of dance lies in the unpredictability of endings and their in-absoluteness. If dance performance is movement that is re/written, then it is an ending with no end. Choreography might therefore operate as praxis. Arendt outlines praxis as action or doing and foregrounds two central components: freedom and plurality. The former refers to the capacity to start something new, while the later recognises that actions cannot be achieved in isolation. It requires making oneself known with others in public, whether through debate, protest, theatre, or dance. The polis is actualised through the performance of deeds or utterances, only to disappear with the dispersal of actors or the activities themselves. The space of appearance, d’Entreves (2019) continues “is secured whenever actors gather together for the purpose of discussing and deliberating about matters of public concern.” To return to dance works, the replacing of one movement by the next, and its openness to reperformance, operates within Arendt’s understanding of action; one that is unpredictable, and oriented toward matters of concern. No individual (or more-than-human agent) can control its outcome; dancers, choreographers, musicians, audiences, stage directors and lighting engineers all inform the unfolding event. Each set in “motion an unlimited number of actions and reactions which have literally no end” (d’Entreves 2019). “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end” (Arendt 1958, 233). Every performance sets out new possibilities. Movement is a promise to start over. If action is achieved through
performance, then might choreographies like *Out of the Box* achieve the space of appearance, where through deeds and utterances a radical (feminist) politics might be enacted?

**CONCLUSION**

This paper was about resonances and elaborations within endings. It told the story of a dance performance that came to an end and the multiple endings therein. But it is also about endings that did not happen and the radical potential of danced endings to be returned to, experimented with, and rescripted. Backstopped by emerging interest in endings as a theoretical problem, and the well-established post-humanist literature, that recognises wo/man is not solely responsible for change, this paper has searched out hope within dance endings. Informed by Hannah Arendt’s claim that action has no end, dance and dance works prompt further thinking on endings as existing between permanence and transience, where some qualities remain, others linger, and others fade. Dancing bodies illustrate how endings are tied to corporeality. They are stored in muscle memory and reclaimed through training. They are laboured over and worked on in unsophisticated and underwhelming ways. And endings are archived in a multiplicity of ways (digital, oral history, notation, muscle memory) and thus hold the capacity to be recovered and reimagined. In putting forward this argument, I begin to fill a gap in thinking and theorising of endings within geography and the humanities by offering up ways to work with such a sense of endings as contingent, ongoing and open. Four propositions were outlined through which geographers might do this: endings and the ephemeral, endings as conditional, endings as liveness, and endings as radical. Working with resonance in endings has two key implications.

First, the resonances and elaborations of endings demand closer attunement to bodies and practice in the doings of “ends.” I started this paper with a rehearsal of the finale and proposed that endings cannot be thought of as fixed, absolute, or bound to an inevitable linear framework, but reworked, returned to, and laboured over. Considerable bodily work goes into endings, creative or otherwise. Endings are learnt. They evolve. They are iterated, repeated, replaced, and rescripted in each (danced) movement, each time being shaped by a network of forces unknown. Practice or more broadly bodily labour—whether improvised and experimental or perfunctory and mundane—are entangled with endings. Through the body and the act of repetitive practice, decisions are made over what to hold on to and what to let go of. Without wishing to fetishise the creative process, improvisation and experimentation allow for embellishment and repetition for technical mastery. This is what gives movement its meaning and through which danced movement achieves its goal. If, as Lepecki (2004, 128) writes, “movement is both sign and symptom that all presence is haunted by disappearance” than disappearance is a source of limitless possibilities. Viewing endings as practiced might reframe endings as complete, but open and ongoing, grounded in knowledge gained in iterating and doing endings.

Second, in dance works, endings have been shown to be a performative project, iterating performances past. In this repetition there is a radical potential to creative endings that geographers might find hope in. To follow Arendt, in dances works performance and re-performance, endings and not-endings, the space of appearance emerges where the potential for change can take place. Each action is unpredictable, altered according to an unknown web of human and more-than-human relations and outcomes, where the final outcomes cannot be controlled. Performance has limitless possibilities and literally no end;
“action has no end” (Arendt 1958, 233). It is a space experimented with, that can be taken up again and explored anew. Performance offers hope to some endings, for while they continue to be articulated (or acted upon) they might be reimagined. To return to the end, in claiming we are at the end, and accepting it uncritically, we risk the end of radical polities itself (Smith 1997).

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ORCID

Charlotte Veal [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9272-4396]

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CHARLOTTE VEAL is a human geographer and Lecturer in Landscape Architecture in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at Newcastle University, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK. E-mail: Charlotte.Veal@ncl.ac.uk. Her research investigates the cultural and political geographies of performance and practice.