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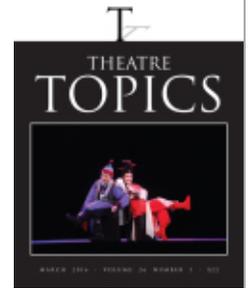
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Dancing toward Queer Horizons

Clare Croft

Dance studies' central premise, that bodies and physical relationships are both socially produced and producers of the social, makes dance an apt partner to queer studies and queer activism, sites that also value the body as a force for making meaning and change. That said, I was drawn four years ago to begin a project I call *Meanings and Makings of Queer Dance* because of my uneasiness with queer studies' frequent use of "the body" more as metaphor than reality, and at the field's elevation of writing over more embodied reckonings with queerness.

Meanings and Makings of Queer Dance (MMQD) is a multiyear project that will be published as a book and website in 2017. The project includes a series of performances I've curated and documented, and a hybrid book/web project that includes artist manifestos, scholarly writing, performance documentation, and interviews with artists. It's been exciting to imagine what generative questions the notion of queer dancing might produce, while also honoring that queer dance is not a new set of questions. Queer dance draws intensely on feminist art-making, activism, and scholarship, and black dance, black dance studies, and activist projects—the intellectual and artistic fields, among others, that have been cornerstones of dance and dance studies' political investments.

I am not interested in *queer dance* as definable category, but rather—drawing on something that choreographer Peter Carpenter said to me in one of the project's interviews—*MMQD* takes up queer dance as a challenge or an aspiration. The question that extends from this provocation is then: What does queer dance challenge us toward? In this short reflection I want to consider three ideas that have been generative challenges throughout my curation of *MMQD*, and then mention two ideas that have arisen in the course of the work.

One productive idea that queer studies borrows from feminism is the one that the personal is indeed political. In this vein I want to share a story. This is the story of the first time someone called me "queer," and how that moment in an Alabama dance studio helps me think about the desires and potentials of queer dancing futures to consider the radical possibilities for thinking with bodies; the relationship among politics, gender, sexuality, and dance; and the lived experiences of LGBTQ people living, learning, and creating work within the dance community, past and present.

I am 8 years old and sit with a group of young dancers in a studio in my Alabama hometown. We are awaiting our turn to rehearse that year's recital, a version of Agnes DeMille's 1942 ballet *Rodeo*. My dance teacher's version (as well as DeMille's original production) followed the female protagonist, the Cowgirl. This feisty heroine cavorts with the cowboys on a Western ranch, but then realizes that her tomboy behavior fails as romantic enticement, particularly on the arrival of the Rancher's Daughter, a vision of upper-class white femininity. The newly arrived beauty's cross-legged curtsies evince the appropriate physical image of femininity, trumping the Cowgirl's wide-legged cartwheels. By the ballet's end the Cowgirl abandons her wild leaps and overalls for a fire-red dress and curtsies, leaving behind her gender-bending ways to get the guy.

I loved the Cowgirl, *and* I wanted to be the Cowgirl. Her space-eating movement, playfulness, and manipulation of physical codes of masculinity and femininity thrilled me. Expressing my love for the Cowgirl out loud is what got me in trouble that day. I remember the 11-year-old's face in

front of me demanding, “What did you just say? Are you ‘queer?’” I did not know what the word *queer* meant, nor, I suspect, did my interrogator.

Buying time to decide how to reply, I leaned back against a wall, placing my head just under a poster of American ballet’s heterosexual icon, Mikhail Baryshnikov. With his legs teetering on my tiny head, I said: “Well, I guess if ‘queer’ means ‘strange,’ then, yes, I’m ‘queer.’” “You don’t know what ‘queer’ means,” she countered. “It means strange. I’m strange, so I’m queer.” I took great pleasure in defining the word for someone else, making my claim to nonnormativity. This exchange could be framed as a proto-coming out, but more importantly it was a claim to a queer future as queer present, a gesture to queerness as less about identity and more about fantasy, desire, and physicality.

Many dance artists have helped me understand this anecdote not as one of solitary experience, but one of several possibilities for what queer dance challenges us toward.

First, we can’t think about representation and the practices and institutions that produce representation as though they’re separate things. There are actual people embodying, desiring, and watching the Cowgirl as she abandons one performance of femininity for another. What does this mean for the stories we tell (and don’t tell), the characters and relationships we embody, and the institutions we build?

Second, how might we embrace the strange—create room for a range of ways of moving, types of bodies, and modes of expressing gender and sexuality? How can we argue for dance’s importance to the larger university without sacrificing the pleasurable strange-nesses, like that embodied in, for instance, Jennifer Monson and DD Dorvillier’s *RMW/RMW(a)* that brought so many of us, particularly so many queer people, to dance in the first place? (See fig. 1.) What if the Cowgirl didn’t have to trade in her overalls, put on a dress, and chase the Head Roper, but instead relish in her nonconformity?

Third, how might dance be a site for thinking queerly beyond narrative, beyond story, in the realm of queer intimacies exchanged in touch and desire? How might we mine the pleasures of cartwheeling in overalls and cowboy boots during a ballet rehearsal?

These ideas have driven *MMQD* since its inception, and in the process of curating this text/website, two additional issues have emerged as central: the gender binary as a painful obstacle to queer dancing futures, and the necessity of thinking queer in a range of localities.

Queer dance demands that the dance community—in its institutional practices and representations—reject the gender binary and imagine a broader range of gender possibilities. This is a project of trans-inclusivity at its broadest, and a project of expanding the possibilities for preexisting categories of “woman” and “man.” Cynthia Ling Lee performing Post Natyam Ensemble’s “rapture/rupture,” and burlesque/drag duo Lou Henry Hoover and Kitten LaRue are two performances within *MMQD* that helped me reimagine gender binaries: Lee as she maintains a butch sensibility within classical Indian kathak’s feminine ideals, asking contemporary dance audiences to imagine femininity and masculinity more broadly as they also imagine the range of queer dance forms more broadly, and Hoover’s work as she borrows from drag queen aesthetics to create drag king performance, moving in a vein more familiar to queer dance audiences but still pushing our notion of masculinity (figs. 2–3).

Both of these examples refuse womanhood as lack and reimagine femininity as productively excessive, borrowing and reformulating campy excess and gender disordering usually reserved for men’s queer performances to expand the possibilities for women and non-male-identified performers onstage.

Just as queer dance is too often synonymous only with gay white masculinity, it is also too often imagined as only linked to New York and San Francisco and only associated with a slim subset of contemporary dance genres. Thankfully, there is queer dance all over the United States and the



FIG. 1. Jennifer Monson (left) and DD Dorvillier (right) perform their work *RMW(a)/RMW* (1994/2004). (Photo: Sarah Nesbitt.)



FIG. 2. Cynthia Ling Lee (foreground) and Shyamala Moorthy (background) perform Post Natyam Ensemble's "rapture/rupture." (Photo: Sarah Nesbitt.)



FIG. 3. Lou Henry Hoover performs in her *There Once Was a Man*. (Photo: Sarah Nesbitt.)

globe, and its presence secures queer futures with decidedly different political ramifications. For instance, dancer/musician combo Nic Gareiss and Cleek Schrey disturb notions of “home” and “family” as they make noises they were taught not to make as part of traditional Irish performance: the scrapes and scuffs that highlight the undertones of unacknowledged, but felt queer desires. Gareiss and Schrey’s symphony of strange noises brings attention to the cultural phenomenon in which adamant refusals of queer presence only confirm the very existence of queer desires and lives. It is the very demand that queer relationalities are not present and that queerness is somehow a threat to the normal that is always the telltale sign of queer persistence and power. In this way their dance of strange, dangerous sounds becomes analogous to the Irish constitution’s unique enshrinement of heteronormative family as critical to the existence of the nation. The fact that the family has to be strictly defined—just as the fact that some sounds have to be labeled as un-danceable—reveals the possibility that there might be other ways of being together. Hearing the scrapes of feet, watching the gaze between two men as they fiddle and stomp: here lies queer dance’s physical challenge to move our bodies otherwise into the queer futures that make our queer presents so rich.

Clare Croft is the editor and curator of *Meanings and Makings of Queer Dance*, a hybrid print/web project, set to be released by Oxford University Press in 2017. She is also the author of *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (2015). She is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan, where she teaches in the MFA and BFA programs in Dance and Interarts.

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