

# Collaborative Movement: What Queering Dance Makes Possible

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Résumé de l'article

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## Collaborative Movement: What Queering Dance Makes Possible

Claire Carter

**ABSTRACT** Collaborative Movement focuses on an ongoing research collaboration centred on supporting trans/genderqueer/non-binary/queer community dance/movement programming and mentorship in Regina, Treaty 4 territory. Incorporating queer feminist community research methods, this article demonstrates that collaborations between community organizations and academia can be productive in their grounding of ideas (about gender and bodies) in everyday complexities and specificities of place in ways that hold potential for new forms of interaction, new ways of relating to each other, and new possibilities for action.

**KEYWORDS** Queer and trans dance, feminist community research, queer methods

*“If anything, the unmet challenge for queer theory and queer dance might be an opening of access for anyone who wants to think-move queer.”*

- DeFrantz, 2017, p. 179

*Queering Dance* is a collaborative community project that began in the fall of 2018 as a pilot study that offered three dance workshops to trans/genderqueer/queer/body diverse individuals. In our first workshop, I remember sitting on the floor in the FadaDance Studio, feeling uneasy about the idea of moving my body in any sort of coordinated or stylistic way in front of people. I love being active and in my body, but have always been uncomfortable with impulsive or creative social play. As we were led through warm-up exercises—walking assertively around the room, making eye contact as we passed each other, using our bodies to carve out space around us—I began to feel the joy and power of moving with others. While we did not know each other, there was a growing familiarity accruing to our bodies as we were moving around each other, taking up space, and building a sense of intimacy and connection. This experience demonstrated for me not only the dance instructor’s expertise and craft in making this dynamic come into being but also, as an academic, what becomes possible when you are vulnerable and step outside of the comfortable and familiar ways of doing research.

Feminist and social justice research has an explicit commitment to work and learn in support of social change, to address structural and systemic inequalities, and to centre experiences and

voices that have been marginalized or denied within dominant narratives (Kirby et al., 2006; Moss, 2002; Reinhartz, 1992). Both community engaged and participatory action research use collaborative approaches to research, where decision-making is shared at every stage, including the issue to focus on and/or the action that is needed, the processes for carrying out the project, analysing the impacts, and next steps (for example, Reid et al., 2006). As such, these approaches to research are grounded in and accountable to community identified objectives and needs as well as to community members themselves. Collaborations between community organizations and academics can be productive in their grounding of ideas (about gender and bodies) in the everyday complexities and specificities of place in ways that hold potential for new forms of interaction, new ways of connecting with each other, and new possibilities for action. The focus here is on a specific community-academic partnership that endeavours to ‘open access’ to practices that encourage participants to think-move queerly. I would argue that these forms of collaboration matter—for trans and queer dancers and research collaborators, but also for what they make possible—openings to rethink ways we can move collaboratively together (DeFrantz, 2017).

This paper explores the relational possibilities for learning together that emerge when intentional commitments to collaboration are fostered at the level of access to embodied movement. Based on the community partnership between Claire Carter with the University of Regina, Common Weal Community Arts organization, and instructors with FadaDance Troupe, the analysis provided involves two projects: the first, a pilot study entitled *Queering Dance*, which involved three dance workshops in 2018, and the second, a current SSHRC Connections Grant project, called *Queering Dance, Moving Communities*, which builds on the pilot to offer training and mentorship in trans/non-binary/genderqueer dance and choreography as well as community workshops led by local, national, and international trans/non-binary/genderqueer experts. Previous research on the relationship between queer exercise spaces and gender, body image, and community reveals that trans/genderqueer/queer individuals experience exclusion, discrimination, and discomfort in community leisure spaces as well as a desire to be more grounded in their bodies (Carter, 2021; Caudwell, 2020; Sykes, 2010). Our collaboration endeavours to provide a space for participating individuals to be in and with their bodies in new and creative ways, to embody gender/queerness, meet other gender/queer individuals, and enhance community building.

Central to the pair of sequential projects discussed here, has been a focus on establishing programming and space in support of trans and queer community well-being in Regina, sustained by community engagement and consultation, research team reflexivity and training, and relationship building between artists, community organizations, and the university. I begin with some background on the two projects, and then provide a brief discussion of the racial and class dynamics of conventional European dance, which inform, in part, the openness of space and form within queer dance. This moves into a discussion of why these types of collaborations matter, notably through their potential to make possible—even if temporarily—new ways of relating, moving together in space, and doing better research. The discussion is divided into two sections: *New Ways of Relating* and *What is Made Possible*.

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### **Community Kinaesthetics: How *Queering Dance* Came to Be**

*Queering Dance* grew out of a coffee between new friends; as is often the case within feminist and queer research, intimacy and community frequently serve as motivators for our work. Talking about our lives—the interweaving of work, community connections, and our everyday routines—led to a shared interest and focus. Nearing the end of a project on queer community sports and excited about what is possible within community movement spaces among diverse bodies, abilities, and genders, I reflected that there was not any exclusive queer or trans leisure programming in Regina that I knew of. Risa Payant, the Executive Director of Common Weal Community Arts (at the time), talked about her experiences with FadaDance—about finding a space to move her body that felt collegial, accepting of diverse bodies, fun, and one that fostered a plutonic intimacy (her words). Our conversation centered around the connection and expressive power of community movement opportunities—such as queer sports leagues or FadaDance classes—that resist and reflect shifts away from exceptionalist practices.

As a Saskatchewan-based arts organization, Common Weal Community Arts (<https://commonweal.ca>) supports creative partnerships between artists and communities that are rooted in social justice. Risa noted that they currently did not have any focused 2SLGBTQIAP+ programming, and so the idea of a collaboration emerged. We reached out to Frank Gilboy, a mutual friend who teaches dance/movement and has a long-time involvement with FadaDance Troupe. Frank is a respected community builder through her efforts and actions to create a queer and gender affirming space and in bringing people together. In our many conversations, Frank has spoken about her desire to learn about how movement can support different bodies and more recently offering classes to people living with Parkinson's disease. Frank recommended that we connect with Heather Cameron, who is also a dance instructor with FadaDance Troupe. Frank and Heather have co-taught on several occasions, and compliment and trust in each other's practice and abilities.

The four of us agreed to collaborate on the pilot project with the objectives of providing a sample of prospective leisure programming and to determine whether there was interest and/or need in programming for 2SLGBTQIAP+ on a longer-term basis, in particular for trans and genderqueer community members. Based upon feedback we received from the pilot, specifically, the need for programming led by trans and non-binary instructors, we submitted and were successful in securing a SSHRC Connections Grant. This Connections project has two parts: training for the research team by well-known international and national trans and queer choreographers and dancers; and community workshops and mentorship opportunities within Regina led by the same experts for trans, non-binary, and genderqueer community members as well as the queer community more broadly. This latter project was funded during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, there have been many pauses and re-imaginings. Therefore, the bulk of discussion here focuses on the pilot workshops, what we learned from that experience, how we are collaboratively moving forward with the SSHRC project, and implications for finding new models of inclusive collaboration in community-university research that challenge structural exceptionalisms at the level of embodied subject formation in community spaces.

Learning from community sports leagues in my previous research, I felt inspired to support programming and community building locally. Regina is a small conservative city, with a trans and queer community whose members face varying levels of discrimination and acceptance tied to the intersections of their identities (race, class, ability with sex, gender, and sexuality). There are very few spaces and/or community programs that are queer exclusive and/or publicly queer positive, let alone trans and genderqueer affirming. There are many factors that inform the lack of engagement in leisure programming and spaces by 2SLGBTQIAP+ community members that range from change-rooms politics and heightened bodily visibility, to issues of accessibility informed by transphobia, colonialism, ableism, racism, homophobia, and fatphobia (Brackenridge et al., 2007). Specifically, Caudwell (2020) found that “transgender and non-binary people face a set of inequalities when it comes to physical activity participation...[and] these inequalities impact on participation rates” (p. 3).

Leisure and sports spaces, in particular dance, have emerged out of Euro-Western colonial discourses and practices around race, sex, sexuality, and health that continue to inform programming offerings and priorities, and experiences of leisure environments, as well as forms of creative resistance and the formation of community-based movement spaces (e.g., Sykes, 2016; McDonald, 2009). Lavallée and Lévesque (2012) speak of the dual impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples’ experiences of physical activity and sport. Colonialism, through the Indian Act, residential school system, and other correlated policies and practices, enacted a direct attack on Indigenous cultural practices and traditions. Notably, potlach and pow-wow ceremonies “that involved the coming together of Aboriginal people to celebrate, dance, and play sports” were outlawed (Potlach Law of 1884 Indian Act) and forbidden within residential schools (Lavallée & Lévesque, 2012, p. 209). Alongside these actions, the federal government enforced assimilationist strategies, in which physical activity and sport were central. These initiatives continue to this day and privilege European based sports and the “values taught through that system over Indigenous sports and the values embraced in those contexts” (Lavallée & Lévesque, 2012, p. 210).

Sport and physical activity have also been used as strategies for development and assimilation globally in ways that reinforce colonial-imperial dynamics, notably with respect to the Olympics and major international sporting events (Sykes, 2017). Sykes (2017) notes how the inclusion of gay athletes has been held up by some as an indicator of modernity and progress, when in actuality, this inclusion only “promised new forms of belonging to white, body-normative gay, lesbian and trans folk,” while racialized trans and queer athletes continue to experience racism at all levels of their participation in sport (p. 141). Dominant constructions of the ideal ‘athlete’ (white, able-bodied, thin, often cis-male, and heterosexual) limit which bodies are imagined, encouraged, and supported to engage in physical activity. Physical activity is often coded as something only an athlete (or dancer) does and, as a result, when diversely identified fat people “move their bodies, fatphobic discourses code these forms of physicality as a remedy or solution for ‘obesity’” (Cameron & Oliver, 2021, p. 283). Fatphobic discourses informing physical activity “foreclose the possibility of fat subjectivity,” leaving many to feel unwelcome

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and that there is little possibility that their fat bodies will be legitimized or validated within sports and dance spaces (Sykes & McPhail, 2011, p. 49).

Within dance specifically, the European-colonial history and embodied norms are well-documented. Carter (2017) for example, notes that the history of dance within the Paris Opera Ballet—the oldest national ballet in the world—is rooted in “institutional hierarchy and the way it materializes and aestheticizes a deep cultural tradition of social inequality” (p. 114). In her critical essay on whiteness and leisure, McDonald (2009) presents a case study of ballroom dance in a small Midwestern US town and finds that “forms such as modern ballroom dance with roots in European aristocracy typically have served as the aesthetic standard in contrast to other presumably less sophisticated forms” (p. 13). Further, McDonald (2009) argues that the normative power of this aesthetic was evident in the way dancers and dance instructors of diverse racial backgrounds spoke of ballroom dance; as “rational, refined, and beautiful in contrast to the seemingly more physically primitive, carnal, and exoticness of Latin dance” (p. 13).

This set of differential attributions speaks to the division and segregation within the historical development of dance and dancing forms “in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the mobilization and justification of racist stereotypes” of Black dancers as “extraordinary performers” but lacking in “Euro-American dance techniques” (Chaleff, 2018, p. 71). The Euro-western tradition of dance has been “structured by the exclusionary mindset that projects a very narrow vision of a dancer; as a white, female, thin, long-limbed, flexible, heterosexual, and able-bodied” (Cooper-Albright, 2001, cited in Green, 2021). The spaces of dance “are shaped by the enduring legacies of choreographers’ and performers’ race,” body size, and gender binaries (Chaleff, 2018, p. 71), and these legacies are illustrative of the extent to which systemic discrimination forms “the constitutive ground of a great deal of what we know as the ‘canon’ of dance history” (Desmond, 2001, p. 4). *Queering Dance* is rooted in these intersectional histories and structures of oppression that have and continue to privilege some bodies and forms of movement over others.

Body movement/dance is recognized as a unique and valuable form to explore gendered embodiment and connection to community, offering nonverbal expression of experiences of oppression and trauma, individually and potentially collectively (Cantrick et al., 2018). Queer dance, according to Croft (2017), has the “potential to teach us new ways of looking, to help us see beyond the ruts in which we ride,” (p. 16) in relation to intersectional experiences of gender and sexuality and assumed connections with bodies, desires, and sex (see also Desmond, 2001). Queer dance can thus function like pedagogy, “teaching someone what it might look like or feel to refuse norms” (Croft 2017, 16-7). The predominance of Eurocentric and colonial, fat phobic, cissexist, and heteronormative traditions within dance, supported by the policing of alternative interpretations or forms of gendered movement (for example, see Broomfield, 2011), reinforces and upholds the normative form as *the* form within mainstream media and many dance schools. As a result, many have sought to leave conventional dance due to experiences of segregation or exclusion within dance practice, as the restrictions and limitations did not allow for a varied range of embodiments and stories to take shape. After having been told as a young dancer that their body was unacceptable, Katy Pyle, the lead choreographer for *Ballez*,

came to question if it was their body that was a failure or the way they moved within ballet? How could ballet be re-imagined and their body seen as success? And what were other ways of moving and receiving others to explore outside of conventional ballet? (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Zp5UdjPOwE>) To dance queerly is not like an elective class or special “queer” performance within a conventional dance program, something different, a one-off that does not disrupt the normative frame.

Queer dance has a rich history, emerging out of queer activism and various forms of using bodies to forge connection “in actions, in protests, and on stages,” (Croft, 2017, 13) challenging “us to document the role of these physical actions in our pasts, recognizing what people have been able to do with their bodies” (Croft, 2017, 14). Queer dance presents a challenge to dance traditions “to overcome unimaginative categorizations” that are based in essentialized notions of physical difference (Croft, 2017, p. 6). Similarly, queer dance draws upon expanded notions of what might constitute spaces of performances, such that “the stage for instance, is not confined solely to the theatre, the dance club, or concert hall” (Johnson, 2005, p. 140; see also Desmond, 2001, p. 5). Everyday spaces and interactions inform and are a part of Black queer performance practices, from the “street, social services, in picket lines, loan offices, and emergency rooms among others” (Johnson, 2005, p. 140). For DeFrantz (2017), there is an inherent interconnection and relation between dance and queerness, such that “queer holds urgent currency in dance, and dance provides a measure of solace and refuge for queer being” (p. 172). Within all forms of dance, DeFrantz (2017) argues he is “comforted by an assumption of sexual diversity seldom experienced otherwise” (p. 172). Thus, dance provides a medium to resist and rearticulate dominant and intersectional scripts about bodies and their power in moving together. As Muñoz (2001) articulates, after the live performance, queer dance “does not just expire;” rather, it is about “understanding what matters” and “it matters to get lost in dance or to use dance to get lost. Lost from the evidentiary logic of heterosexuality” (p. 441).

As my previous research shows, queer community sport powerfully demonstrates how everyday spaces inform our movements—individual and collective, and how our bodily movements shape the everyday spaces we inhabit (Carter, 2021). They are grounded in principles of collegiality, fun, and inclusivity over winning and competition at all costs (Caudwell, 2007; Lenskyj, 2003). This grounding sets the stage for leagues to undertake continual reflexive work with respect to more effective inclusivity, given the predominance of normative discourses informing the construction of “athlete” within leisure spaces (whiteness, able-bodiedness, cissexism, and thin). In my recent research, leagues were actively putting into play new policies around accessibility and inclusion, including: different forms of scoring, cheering that is visual rather than sound based, and having someone run for you when you go up to bat; reserving registration spots for queer and trans people of colour and Indigenous queers; changing language to be trans and non-binary inclusive (website and in-play) and initiating pronoun rounds; and supporting fat identified teams and individual players.

These actions, along with others, challenged dominant assumptions about what bodies are expected within sports (and in what roles/positions) and queer spaces and how they can open up new ways of moving and relating with each other. For example, as I have discussed elsewhere

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(Carter, 2021), the shift to become more trans-inclusive challenged players' assumptions about what bodies were expected in play and what moving, playing bodies should look like. As one participant shared:

So it's an expectation now of each individual not to assume somebody else's gender identity. But with that, also comes, more comfortability with bodies. Because now bodies can be any size and shape...anytime there is not one ideal body type, there's more comfort (Carter, 2021, pp. 48-9)

Within a society that is heavily focused on body/fat shaming and disciplining body size and shape in accordance with fat phobia, a normative gender binary, and healthism (Crawford, 2006), to experience moments of 'comfort' is no small thing (see for example, Ellison et al., 2016; Riley et al., 2008). This proactive investment in inclusion reflects the potential of the queer movement spaces that *Queering Dance* supports, and what Pyle says informed the formation of *Ballez*: to "create a space where dancers of any body type could express themselves through movement" (Green, 2021). Social dancing, queer dancing "is a political practice conforming, contravening, or rewriting social relations," and as such, it offers critical space and potential for new ways of recognizing bodies and moving in relation with each other (Desmond, 2001, p. 6). Croft (2017) speaks directly to this potential when she asserts that "queer dances' investment in bodies as sites to imagine, practice, cultivate, and enact social change is not just an aspiration. It is a documented outcome of our queer dancing pasts" (p. 14).

Experiences of transphobia and homophobia within leisure/movement spaces have been well documented (Brackenridge et al., 2007; Caudwell, 2014; Sykes, 2011; Young, 2005). Within these spaces exceptionalist approaches remain ubiquitous and reinforce cissexist and heteronormative ideas of sex/gender, such as use of sexed changerooms and regulation of style of movement and/or participation by sex and gender identities. Therefore, supporting community spaces that are exclusive to trans and queer people holds the potential to explore other ways of moving, being in one's body, and moving with other bodies that push us beyond the limitations and exclusions of mainstream dance. Critically, this is not only of benefit for trans and queer dancing communities, but also opens up possibilities for seeing and thinking about all bodies and collective movement in new ways.

Queer and trans communities are diverse and as such, individuals have different needs and levels of awareness and, within a small city, there are ever present interpersonal dynamics and histories that inform spaces and individuals' embodiment within them. Examining how notions of community and queer politics are made meaningful through collective body movement has been at the fore as we shifted from the pilot project involving three stand-alone workshops to our current project. Ahmed (2006) argues that the "differences in how one directs desire can 'move' us and affect even the most deeply engrained patterns of relating to others" (p. 101); as such queer desire can be rethought as a "space for action, as a way of extending differently into space through tending toward other" queers (p. 102). Can queer leisure spaces "move" us—individually and collectively? What community building is possible and/or can



arise from spaces of collective body movement and from collaborations between community organizations and the university? Can these collaborations and spaces of body movement foster new ways of relating to ourselves and others?

Two guiding questions frame our discussion: what new ways of relating have emerged? and what is made possible through collaborations like *Queering Dance*, especially between community organizations and the university? In speaking to these questions, I draw on notions of queer methods, specifically as discussed by Brim and Ghaziani (2016), and Love (2016), as well as Edward and Greenough's work on queer literacy (2020) and Creese and Frisby's (2012) work on Feminist Community Research.

Queer methods, in similar fashion to feminist methodology, are focused on how one approaches and engages with the processes of research. Brim and Ghaziani (2016) identify two innovations that queer methods offer: first, they "question the origins and effects of concepts and categories" as they do not always "align with lived experiences;" and second, they "reject the fetishizing of the observable" (p. 16). They refer to Nash and Browne's 2010 edited collection as marking a shift within social sciences and humanities research from a focus on 'what is queer theory?' to 'how is queer theory done?' (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016, p. 14) Some of the central tenets informing how queer theory is done involve challenging the normal business of academia (Warner, 1993, cited in Love, 2016) and a prioritization of relationships over standard research routines and schedules, including grant and/or reporting deadlines (Edward & Greenough, 2020). Further, a commitment to social justice / social change (which bridges queer methods with feminist community research), requires a more fully reflexive approach to research (Al-Hindi & Kawabata, 1993). This includes taking account of and being accountable to the messiness of doing research as well as recognition of the "violence of *all* scholarly research" (Love, 2016, p. 347). Within the two discussion sections of this paper, *New Ways of Relating*, and *What is Made Possible*, I address the practices and approaches our collaborative projects utilized and embraced that reflect queer methods and feminist community research, including researcher vulnerability, and processes of consent, consultation, and reflection, which are informing our collaboratively produced knowledge.

### **New Ways of Relating**

Community engaged queer methods offer a framework for "making space for what is" (Brim & Ghaziani, 2016, p. 18), including the contexts of research, the messiness and complexities of research relationships, and historical and current socio-political dynamics informing research. Further, tied to the desire to support social change and disrupt traditional academic processes, feminist and queer community research "operate[s] largely beyond theory and in the service of 'the fundamental issue of how to...make life livable'" (Butler cited in Brim & Ghaziani 2016, p. 18). As stated, there is a prioritization of relationships over research reporting schedules (Edward & Greenough, 2020, p. 717), while at the same time an acknowledgement that these relationships are often contested. Creese and Frisby (2012) identify that "academic and community partners receive little if any training on how to build trusting and mutually productive relationships that avoid or at least minimize the numerous and serious potential

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pitfalls that can arise” (p. 2). Through discussion of examples from our collaboration, I argue that queer feminist community research has enabled new ways of relating within research relationships that also extend into everyday community, academic, and interpersonal interactions, and that illustrate some of the ways queer theory is done.

A primary goal of our collaboration is to provide leisure programming and mentorship for trans, genderqueer, non-binary, queer, and body diverse individuals, based on our awareness that exclusive recreational services do not currently exist and the importance of moving our bodies and being in community for well-being (Carter, 2021, 2017; Caudwell, 2021; Sykes & McPhail, 2010). As white cis-identified queer and straight collaborators, we incorporated two strategies into our project to enhance our knowledge and prioritize current trans and queer community needs. First, the research team undertook positive space training, led by UR Pride Centre for Sexuality and Gender Diversity. This training and subsequent conversations about the planning of the workshops offered a space to talk about language and pronouns, issues tied to the studio space (for example, washroom/changeroom access and bodily visibility/mirrors) and specific to the workshop instructors, as well as ideas about how to make dance exercises more inclusive for gender and sexually diverse participants. This process also included reflections on our social locations as white and cis, and acknowledgement that our role as facilitators could serve to reproduce the exclusions we sought to address. To promote participation in the workshops we reached out to community organizations and groups within the city, including Common Weal Community Arts and FadaDance Troupe, the Heritage Community Centre (which supports the neighbourhood the workshops were held in), the Two Spirit Program, and UR Pride Centre for Sexuality and Gender Diversity.

The second strategy we incorporated was a community consent process at the start of each workshop, which was an expansion of the ethics process required by the university ethics board. At the beginning of each workshop, we did introductions, including pronouns, our individual affiliations and connections to the project, and reasons for collaborating around dance. Self-identifications, including pronouns, are a recognized and common practice within trans and queer community spaces that serve as an important self-affirming and inclusive practice (Caudwell, 2020). As part of the introductions, Risa and myself—the two research team members who are not dance instructors—would initiate the community consent process. We explained that we wanted to participate in the dance workshops, to be a part of a developing community of dancers/movement, but recognized that as white cis queers, our presence may hinder or take away from what we hoped to foster in the workshops. We handed out slips of paper and asked people to write an ‘N’ or a ‘Y’ to reflect no we could not participate or yes we could, and left the studio. Frank and Heather handed out the slips and then collected them once people had finished. They would then come outside and let us know if there were any ‘N’ slips. In addition to issues raised earlier, Risa and I were aware of several reasons participants might not want us to participate in the workshops, ranging from interpersonal connections with members of the trans and queer community within Regina, to former or current students and former or current participants in Common Weal programs or events. We wanted this process to be simple and anonymous, and hoped it would reflect the prioritization

of community access over academic or community organization objectives.

We were given consent to participate in all three of the workshops, but I confess that I almost wanted an N slip to be handed out, and to be told that I could not participate, especially at the first workshop. Undoubtedly, this was tied to my insecurity about my (lack of skill at) dancing, as well as the vulnerability I knew I would inevitably feel about moving my body—having my body visible—in front of others. My experiences of having coaches comment on my body size and recommend that I diet, both pride and discomfort in having an active, strong body that quite noticeably sweats (and thus counters the expectation for ‘feminine’ bodies to glisten), and a general sense that I lacked ‘feminine’ physicality of grace and shape, have all come to inform my engagement within leisure spaces; notably, preferring individual sports and women’s/trans inclusive hours at the gym or pool. I knew I was not alone in this vulnerability and was aware that many people avoid various forms of recreation for this reason, both anecdotally and based on previous research. Our fatphobic, transphobic, racist, homophobic, sexist, and ableist society makes being comfortable in our bodies challenging at the best of times, let alone when having our bodies on display while learning new body skills in a space that may include former lovers, crushes, people we work with, and community members. In addition, leisure spaces are steeped in histories of inequalities that privilege certain bodies (white, thin, heterosexual, cis and able-bodied) and certain conventional forms of movement and movement aesthetics.

Embodied collaboration and physical methodology can draw attention to your “vulnerability and limitation as a researcher,” as Seko found working on a collaborative improvisational dance research project (Van Katwyk & Seko 2017). Part of challenging traditional academic ways of knowledge production necessarily involves disrupting the role of the researcher, which in my case involved being a participant, who is new to dance and open to experiences of vulnerability alongside others. The varied roles I play as a white cis queer able-bodied academic—researcher, dance student, community member—speak to the layers of relationships within queer feminist community research (Creese & Frisby, 2011, p. 4). My outsider status and vulnerability as a dancer may go some way in challenging traditional conceptions of ‘the researcher,’ but other layers of my status speak to “differences in power, access to resources, and control over meaning making” from those I danced with (Creese & Frisby, 2011). Drawing upon vulnerabilities and correcting for privileges are useful strategies in disrupting exceptionalisms.

Edward and Greenough (2017) suggest that “acts of emotional engagement as an enterprise...allows fruitful, co-produced knowledge and understanding” (p. 717). One example of this involves the wall of mirrors within the dance studio. I spoke to my own vulnerability early on in the first workshop, asking for the curtain to be drawn over the front wall mirror; I immediately sensed that the mirror would prove a distraction from my ability to open up and move in the space. This initiated a conversation among the instructors and participants, on co-produced knowledge and understanding about the mirror, diverse moving bodies ‘on display,’ and forms of bodily oppression that inform dance’s history and practice. The instructors suggested having the curtain drawn for warm-up exercises and then, in the latter part of the workshop depending on everyone’s comfort, a section of the curtain could be opened for those who wanted to use the mirror while learning choreography. This dialogue

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and approach allowed participants time to get comfortable in the space before potentially seeing themselves reflected, and encouraged everyone to speak up about other ways to make the space more comfortable. While this is one example of how vulnerability invited discussion about the space, there were other facets that were not spoken about during the workshops; notably its whiteness. There were very few participants of colour, and while the research team acknowledged our whiteness as part of our introductions, we did not speak in the workshops to the whiteness of leisure spaces nor the Euro-colonial history informing preferred dance forms and bodies. The four of us reflected on this after the pilot and on the necessity of building into the next stage of our collaboration, the invitation to Indigenous, Black, and racialized trans and non-binary choreographers and dancers to lead community workshops in support of mentorship opportunities and to disrupt the whiteness of community leisure spaces. This invitation involves dialogue with Black, Indigenous, and racialized dancers and choreographers about different forms of movement practice and/or modes of instruction as well as desired places to dance and move together, that may be outside of dance studios or typical recreational spaces. An example of this arose in our current project, when we had a productive exchange with the invited choreographers about bridging the types of workshops we were planning (one set of workshops for current movement instructors and one set of workshops for community participants). Rather than offering a strictly 'train the trainer' session and then a community workshop, these invited choreographers endeavoured to blur the division between trainers/instructors and community participants and opted to open up the workshops.

Community consent, positive space training, researcher vulnerability, and critical reflection all contributed to queer feminist ways of doing research and new ways of relating within research processes that prioritized relationships and access to programming. As community collaborators, we each brought expertise and an openness to learn and be moved from, by, and with everyone engaged in the workshops. Central to this commitment was discussion with participants about the limitations of our knowledge individually and collectively (about dance, gender and sexual diversity, bodily abilities, and bridging those in communities) and a desire for their input and feedback, on elements such as language, access, spatial needs, and particular exercises or activities.

Endeavouring to build trust through openness and honest dialogue between us as collaborators as well as with participants has been critical. After each workshop, we invited participants' feedback in two ways: an informal debrief at the end of each workshop and an anonymous survey sent to all participants. Feedback from the first project (the pilot), *Queering Dance*, revealed that there was an interest in exclusive programming for queer dance expression to be led by trans, non-binary, and genderqueer community members. Building upon the pilot workshops, the second project, *Queering Dance, Moving Communities*, which is still underway, has two objectives: first, to support training for the research team in trans/genderqueer/non-binary dance and choreography by leading trans/non-binary/genderqueer dancers and choreographers who reflect diversities with respect to race and body size; and second, to host local community workshops led by the same trans/genderqueer/non-binary experts. As a research team, we see these twin projects as building blocks not a solution or end

to the work. When we applied for funding, we did not know of any trans/genderqueer/non-binary dance instructors locally/in Saskatchewan; therefore we wanted Heather and Frank, as well as other local movement instructors, to receive training in trans choreography to enrich their knowledge and practice with respect to gender and sexual diversity.

Our hope is that community workshops led by experts will support the development of trans/genderqueer/non-binary mentorship opportunities. We are holding in balance the need and request for programming led by trans community members, with our desire to support this development through mentorship and community collaboration. As articulated by Risa, “it’s a scary place of tension for me, I believe these are the right people (our current research team). Certainly we have to be very careful about how we approach it” but also feeling “shouldn’t we be having trans folk teaching? But maybe they don’t exist in SK.” Collectively, we have been actively working on how we support changing that. We have since discovered, happily, that there is, indeed, at least one trans dancer and choreographer—Miki Mappin—in our province, who is involved in our second project. We remain committed to resisting the forces that contribute to trans and other erasures, perpetuated through majoritarian practices and lenses within leisure spaces and community/municipal spaces more generally. As Love articulates, academic work “always involves the betrayal of the communities whose experience we claim to represent” (2016, p. 348) and so while we are committed to supporting trans/genderqueer/non-binary mentorship and programming, we acknowledge that we will make mistakes that may cause harm, and that aspects of our work may be experienced as a betrayal or form of violence. We remain open to feedback and to making necessary changes to the project based on community input. We have endeavoured to provide several forms of community outreach (anonymous surveys, having different community groups involved, and on-site support during workshops) so that when an issue or concern is brought forward, we can respond and change it as soon as possible.

Our collaboration as a research team brings together community leaders and experts with an academic researcher, and as such, different roles and expertise that enrich our project. Some of the interactions have been immensely frustrating as navigating academic grant and research ethics applications are challenging, to say the least, and there were moments that nearly led to several computers being hurled out of windows. Some of the issues that came into play had to do with the disbursement of funds, notably the university holding the purse, and the often quite bureaucratic and problematic procedures for providing honourariums and artist fees. For the most part, however, the experience has been just as immensely productive and meaningful; drawing upon our collective expertise, our projects interweave extensive experience working with artists and supporting community programming, years of training and experience teaching different forms of dance to different groups of people, and training and experience researching and teaching about gender and sexual diversity. Our different entry points and lenses meant that our discussions and project planning are dynamic and reflect our diverse skill set; the collaboration pushed us outside of our professional comfort zones and challenged our assumptions about ‘normal’ ways of doing things.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that we have had to pause and move more slowly

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with the second project, *Queering Dance, Moving Communities*, as we were not able to travel for training, and dancers and choreographers were in the midst of navigating their own scheduling, health and safety, and impact on their careers. This extended planning phase has been productive (though also challenging), allowing further consultation with community members, and research into different workshop and training options (virtual, mixed online, and in person) and people/choreographers. In effect, this delay has reinforced our queering methods approach; it has centred the necessity of making space for what is because none of us could have predicted the pandemic, let alone the length and impact of it. How we begin to re-integrate socially and physically will be messy; everyone will have different comfort levels and anxieties in addition to the ones we had originally anticipated about moving in community with others. The sudden move for many to work online/from home during the pandemic, has led to new and creative options for programming—not just solely online/virtual or in person, but new ways of dancing and sharing space (in a Zoom room). This was powerfully demonstrated in my own dance class experience with Heather in 2020, where she played with different ideas from building your living space into your movement, such as a couch or door frame, to close-ups of eyes or hands, all of which reflected the different intimacies of dancing on screen, in each other's homes. Thus, this unanticipated pause has encouraged us to be more creative about the range of options available to support community members' needs and comfort levels, such as the ability to turn our cameras off, and is making possible choices that we could not have imagined before the pandemic. The impact of the COVID pandemic, alongside significant delays in obtaining ethics approval (in part the result of new COVID requirements and a backlog resulting from the impact), as well as organizational changes within Common Weal Community Arts has meant that they have had to shift from being a collaborator to having a consulting role.<sup>1</sup> So this is where our current project, *Queering Dance, Moving Communities*, currently rests; we finally received research ethics approval and have started making formal invitations to choreographers and dancers to lead training sessions and host community workshops in 2022. Inviting discomfort, uncertainty, and vulnerability to inform our work, we build upon feminist queer community research efforts to do research differently, with greater accountabilities, and to contribute, we hope, to meaningful social change.

### **What is Made Possible**

Critical to our collaboration is continual reflection and dialogue about what it means to move together given the interweaving of the layers of our relationships, individual social locations, socio-historical legacies of dance/movement, and our commitments to supporting community programming and mentorship. These ways of relating reflect feminist and queer ways of doing research that remain different to standard approaches within academia, but this difference makes possible new ways of being in space and thinking about bodies that extend beyond our project. Queer dance, as Croft documents, is more than a leisure activity and/or art form

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<sup>1</sup> The shift to a consulting role took effect at the start of 2022. Common Weal Community Arts consulted on the ethics application as well as on the list of dancers and choreographers invited to host workshops, and has provided critical support with respect to artists' contracts and sharing information about the workshop events.

(though these are important elements in their own right); it represents forms of physical and political action that empower “sites to imagine, practice, cultivate, and enact social change” (Croft, 2017, p.14). Ahmed (2006) theorises that “spaces and bodies become straight as an effect of repetition” (p. 92). Bodies come to repeat certain movements and gestures, in accordance with compulsory heterosexuality, and thus become orientated in particular ways that put some objects of desire within and others out of reach. Repetitive bodily movements shape the formation of spaces they occupy and limit their ability “for other kinds of actions” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 91). Queer desire “is a way of reorienting one’s relation not just towards sexual others but also to a world that has already ‘decided’ how bodies should be orientated,” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 102) affecting how we move through space, what objects are or are not now within reach, how we relate to each other, and what actions we are able to do. The heterosexualisation of space (Valentine, 1993; 2002), and sports and leisure spaces in particular, impact queer movement and engagement in those and other spaces. Brackenridge et al., (2007) argue that “homophobic [and transphobic] bullying is driving down the chances that LGBT athletes will start, stay or succeed” (p. 136) in physical activity or leisure. A participant who shared a previous dance experience confirmed this: “The most recent dance class I took was a weekly introductory Salsa class. I eventually stopped going because of my discomfort each week. EVERYTHING was gendered.” The privileging of heteronormative gendered movements and roles within traditional forms of dance intersects with the privileging of Eurocentric and fat phobic bodily ideals, which reinforce historical and ongoing exclusions of many fat, Black, Indigenous, and racialized people from participating.

Informed by feminist and queer community research, we prioritized relationships and worked to support programming that would ‘make life livable’ for members of the Regina queer and trans communities (Butler cited in Brim & Ghaziani 2016). As referenced earlier, the work queer sports leagues are doing as part of their efforts to be more trans and genderqueer inclusive, through examination of current policies and practices, has had benefits beyond the intended purpose; becoming more trans inclusive opened up what queer sporting bodies look like, which challenged normative sporting/athletic body ideals. We received similar feedback from the *Queering Dance* workshops. For example, one participant spoke directly to our intention of creating a space where gender and sexual diversity was welcomed and supported: “What I have noticed about queer exclusive spaces is the ability to be my entire self without having to worry about how my identity might affect others.” The emotional labour of worrying about how their identity will affect others serves not only as a deterrent from participating in recreational programming, but is indicative of the labour required to move through everyday spaces within a cissexist and heterosexist society. This reinforces Caudwell’s (2020) articulation with respect to trans and non-binary leisure participation that “compounding structural and ideological inequalities are the unequal social relations of spatial and the embodied” (p. 3); thus not only are there structural and institutional barriers but also “sets of assumptions about who can participate, when and how,” that trans and non-binary folx are aware of and have to navigate when they seek out community programming as well as within everyday routine activities (Caudwell, 2020, p. 3).

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In addition to the benefit of exclusive spaces for trans, genderqueer, and non-binary participants, participants also shared that the space opened up other possibilities. In response to our question about what was most beneficial about the workshops, one participant shared: “not having pressure for my memory as an acquired brain injury survivor.” This comment referred to the choreography section of the workshop, where Frank stood at the front of the class and repeated movements as she added to the steps, ensuring everyone could see and follow along. Designing an introductory workshop for participants with a range of backgrounds in dance—from skilled to no experience at all—had the above stated unanticipated benefit; not being expected to remember steps made possible the ability to relax and enjoy the workshop without having to do memory work. Another response to this question spoke to boundaries around touch and safety: “I need to feel my motion is more than a sexual invitation to men, as an assault survivor I feel very afraid that I may be misinterpreted and not safe if the message of motion is not clearly about dance.” Clearly articulating that there would be no physical touching in the workshops and that participants could opt out of any exercises and movements, holding space to talk about boundaries, and incorporating exercises to build comfort moving among other bodies all contributed to the creation of a safer space of dance.

This feedback speaks to what is possible within queer and feminist community research, and specifically what our collaboration enabled. Chaleff (2018) articulates that “artistic spaces are activated by the bodies that inhabit them” (p. 71). Making space for non-traditional approaches to dance specifically around gender prompted other forms of opening, access, and, notably, movement that are tied to body diversity, accessibility, racism within community spaces, and experiences of sexual harassment. The integration of expertise in dance instruction, community arts programming, and research about trans and queer community sports enriched our planning conversations and development of our projects. This work is ongoing in our current project and led to a much more robust ethics application that includes a range of ‘consent’ cards (developed by our research assistant Caitlin Janzen), including “Taking a break,” “I withdraw from the study,” “Please check in with me,” and “No hands-on assistance” that empower participants by enabling them communicate without disrupting the class or drawing unwanted attention. In addition, our commitments to support community programming needs and social justice more generally necessitate continued reflection and dialogue at each step of the process, openness to feedback by making changes, and a collective awareness of our limitations, including that we will make mistakes and need to be accountable for them, and a willingness to make improvements as we continue our work.

I have referenced some of what was made possible through the queering dance workshops themselves, but our collaboration has also led to shifts and changes in our individual work and everyday practices. One of these changes was the renaming of one of FadaDance’s classes from FadaMan to FadaMasc. Community artist and doctoral student Evie Ruddy (2018) wrote a piece in *Briarpatch* about their experiences with dance, participating in the queering dance workshops, and in the newly named FadaMasc class. As Ruddy describes in the piece, they were interested in taking a dance class with FadaDance and approached Heather and Frank after the *Queering Dance* workshops about available options. After discussion amongst the



artistic leads of FadaDance and in consultation with UR Pride Centre for Sexual and Gender Diversity, FadaMan was renamed FadaMasc and promoted to all “who identify with a more masculine way of moving in the world” (Ruddy, 2018). This shift represents a significant programming move, opening up leisure spaces beyond the sex and gender binary and is one powerful example of how university/community collaborations can spark social change.

Frank and Heather have both shared that *Queering Dance* has deepened their thinking about various ways to support diverse bodies in movement. Since our pilot project Frank says that working on this project has led to increased awareness and thoughtfulness about “habitual language and [language] in dance class – [of] having to refine language [and] music choices [that] have 100% carried over into every area of my life.” Similarly, Heather reflected that, changes to “that one thing shifts your entire world,” such that strategies to make the space and movement more inclusive for gender and sexually diverse participants inform not only her other classes but her life more generally. Previous to being a part of the collaboration, Heather shared that she probably would have thought, “Oh it doesn’t matter who I am working with, I don’t even think about gender, it’s about the body, it’s about moving.” But now, having worked with queer and trans community members and having sustained conversations about bodies and gender, she feels a greater awareness of and appreciation for the need to “create a space that is gender focused because it doesn’t exist...and it does matter, it matters a lot actually.” Having academic conversations about gender and sexual diversity and the discrimination and harassment trans and queer people face when trying to access community services are important, but they are made ever more meaningful when they are grounded in everyday actions and reflections on ways we can move together.

*Queering Dance* is a collaboration that prioritizes trans and queer leisure programming, and consequently, community well-being that has effectively, as comments above reveal, queered dance in many ways in Regina. Our collaboration endeavours to work differently in accordance with core facets of queer feminist community research that prioritizes relationships and acknowledges the challenges and potential violence of doing research. Collaborations like *Queering Dance* are vital because they foster a space to name, be accountable to, and queer conventional, dominant, and normative way of doing things—doing dance, doing community work, doing academic work. In our experience, community/university partnerships have enabled new ways of relating that do not depend on normative binary discourses (of gender and sexuality or community and academia) or exceptionalist practices within leisure programming. They reveal some of what is made possible through collaborative movement.

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The Queering Dance project received ethics approval from the University of Regina Ethics Board in 2017, and the current Queering Dance, Moving Communities project recently submitted their application for ethics approval (no qualitative research has begun on that project).

## About the Author

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