

I am Queer and a Dancer

How taking Gender and Sexuality Courses shifted my perspective as a Dance Major

by Cierra Torres

From the start, I knew I wanted to go to college for dance, and as a dancer, I have always felt sure of myself. Dancers have heightened senses, bodily, emotionally, and spatially, in more ways than we are aware of. From a young age, dancers learn pride and trust within themselves on top of the confidence and determination it takes to pursue the art. Being a college student majoring in dance isn't as easy as people think. Long hours, physically demanding, the silent judgment that comes with the never-ending question, "What are you going to do with that?" It wasn't until I took my first Gender and Sexuality studies course that I realized there was a part of myself that I was hiding from. A piece of myself that had come and gone, never fully acknowledged.

My first dance courses consisted of the usual, ballet modern, and jazz, and I also chose a random course titled "Gender and Power." I figured I could use it to fulfill a GE requirement. The description of the course from the UCI catalog was: "...How are societal institutions and politics 'gendered'? Examines power and inequalities around gender, race, class, and sexuality in national and transnational contexts." How did it connect to dance? It didn't, at first. But realizing that gender is integrated into all structures, this made me question everything.

After the first class, I immediately felt seen in a way that I was unaccustomed to. I had only ever felt this free when I was dancing, and now all the sudden, I felt the same in an (non-dance) academic course. I felt my genuine, true self, the same perception of identity and expression I feel when dancing. It didn't take me long to accept and acknowledge my queerness, and as a result, I started to question how dance can construct implicit biases and binaries within the art. Which then immediately made me question my participation and the gender norms created in reinforced in dance pedagogy.

I came out to my friends and started allowing myself to be authentic in all spaces. I noticed how unapologetic I felt; I was tapping into the confidence I felt in the dance space, and it amplified the previous level of confidence I knew. (I use the words dance and movement interchangeably because I believe in theory that anything can be a dance. Even brushing your teeth.) Nevertheless, it's not easy challenging a gender structure that has been incorporated into the system for years and generations. Dance in itself is generational and informative. The movement and history is passed down through the art, creating dance lineages such as Graham or Limón. We as people and dancers have evolved, so why can't the rigorous binary evolve?

In collaboration, dance and gender and sexuality courses have shifted my outlook on life, and it makes me question why we uphold the binary structures of dance culture. Everything I knew about the dance world seemed to be gendered. Dress codes, techniques, and even movement phrases. For example, ballet men get to do *à la second* turns, while women traditionally do *fouetté* turns. The idea that men are strong and muscular, while women are light and dainty, automatically upholds the structure in which sexism and gendering occur. But, if I am a non-binary dancer, the everyday training and gender arrangement previously set in place no longer

serves me. It can be freeing to break the rules and challenge the structure, but it's exhausting and sometimes it can be dangerous to do so. The Rebecca French article titled "Queer Dance Theory: On smacking the hetero-patriarchy, creating body- and sex-positive dancers, and what it means to be a queer artist" discusses breaking the norm of straight romantic love duets in dance and the underrepresentation of queer artists in their art form.

All artists deserve representation, and just because someone might be uncomfortable viewing challenging work, doesn't mean the work should be avoided or censored. For example, I had never seen a same sex duet until my junior year of college. We were in choreography class, and a fellow dancer was exploring breaking this binary with two female presenting dancers who were choreographed to be in love. I had never felt representation in this way before, and I was so excited and moved to see my love of dance and see the way I love at the same time.

Queer Dance examines how Queer bodies exist in communities, scholarly, academic, and professional mediums. It hones in on the ways identity, community, and inclusivity can be easily inserted into the structure with reformation. Such as, implementing inclusive language and inclusive examples used when referencing movement in academic settings. This helps remove the idea that there is only one way to be a dancer. Queer Dance questions the various ways society upholds the binary in dance, and in my experience queer dance shows the various ways the dance world is actively participating. In "Queer Dance: *Meanings and Makings*," by Clare Croft, the various ways Queer dance has shaped the Dance world that we know of are brought to light. The numerous movements created by Queer people in night clubs, balls, and underground parties also include ways intersectionality, Black studies, and performance art all intertwine to create art. There isn't just one body made for dance, although that may be how it appears. We have the ability to change the world. We as future teachers and dancers entering the workforce have the opportunity to shift the gender binaries.

I realized that self-expression and movement expression go hand in hand for queer dancers. Taking Gender and Sexuality courses allowed me to finally and fully trust myself. Self-expression, gender expression, and movement expression were all separate before, but now create a harmonious cycle of creation and exploration within me. I found people who create safe and welcoming spaces regardless of identity or sexual orientation in the dance major. It was like I beat the boss level and I get to save the princess. I had finally found the missing piece and everything made sense.

Once again, it is not easy being a dance major, nor is it easy being queer. Even so, I would do it all again. Connecting to my genuine self-sparked exploration on a deeper level. More than just doing a body scan to see what hurts. It requires me to constantly question what is "normal" and I challenge it. As a result, the movement I explore and the art I create feel whole. I have learned that it is hard to separate the art from the artist. My art has become an extension of myself. I emphasize inclusivity in all settings and how things feel in your body, sensationally. The education I have received in both the dance and gender and sexuality courses has made me more explorative, more open, and most of all I have created harmony within.

Both through dance courses and those about gender and sexuality, I have found my interest leading to multiple avenues, one being that I am a dance teacher at a Montessori school. The

person interviewing me mentioned my education in Gender and Sexuality Studies. They stated that the awareness I have of the world will shape the new generations for the better. If I can widen even one person's perception of what a dancer “should” be and educate them in an inclusive and supportive manner, then I am changing the world. One mind at a time.



Cierra Torres graduated in June 2023 with a BFA in Dance Performance, a BFA in Dance Choreography, and a minor in Gender and Sexuality Studies. Cierra hopes to dance professionally after college and eventually return to school to earn an MFA or PhD in Dance Education.

Works Cited

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Clare Croft, . 2018. “Queer Dance Theory: On Smashing the Heteropatriarchy, Creating Body- and Sex-Positive Dances, and What It Means to Be a Queer Artist.” *Spectrum South – the Voice of the Queer South*. November 30, 2018. <https://www.spectrumsouth.com/queer-dance-theory/>.