

In Search of a Queer Gaze

By Matthew Cumbie

What do we mean when we say “queer dance”? What happens when we choose to align our artistry -- or not -- with queerness? Who gets to choose? And how does that inform or influence the way we move through the world?

As someone who openly identifies as a part of an LGBTQ+ community, and whose artmaking and research often emphasize and reflect on LGBTQ+ experiences, I am struck by the growing number of opportunities to identify myself and my dancemaking with -- what I feel is -- a burgeoning part of our dance field: queer dance. And I have so many questions. For context: I began making dances that directly address my LGBTQ+ identity in graduate school, almost 15 years ago. At that time, I was just beginning to make connections between queer theory, dance scholarship, and my artistic practice. While I was aware of other LGBTQ+ artists, and the alignment of queerness and dance, I did not find queer dance as articulated as it is now. Also, around this time I began learning about LGBTQ+ histories, particularly through conversations with older LGBTQ+ adults. As I'm frequently reminded by my 81-year-old friend and collaborator Andy Torres, the word “queer” carries some historical charge. And, like many words throughout history, there has been a process of reclamation for queer, and with it renewed meanings associated with it.

In my search to understand more about queerness in dance, I sought some perspective. Author, feminist and social activist bell hooks says, “Queer not about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.” Queer dance scholar Clare Croft, who literally edited the book *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, goes on to say: “... queer emerges from specific contexts. It is not a label to be categorically applied or agreed upon, but rather it is a force of disruption that simultaneously draws on historical genealogies of queer and freshly imagines ‘queer’ in the contemporary moment.” Clearly, some complexity arises here, especially in how we might come to understand queerness for ourselves,

how that applies to dancemaking and performance, and how we hold onto this notion of queer dance as a force in our field.

To ground this exploration in some specificity, I knew I needed to talk with other artists and experience queer performances. Thankfully, in June, Pride Month provided ample opportunity for me to connect with artists from across the country, all of whom identify with “queer” and whose work brought them together through programming supported by and in partnership with Dance Place.

Here’s What Happened

For many in the United States, and especially here in Washington, D.C., the month of June becomes a rainbow-wrapped menu of opportunities to celebrate, explore and participate in LGBTQ+ Pride. It is a time when many organizations and institutions demonstrate their support for LGBTQ+ communities by hosting Pride-themed events, joining in a Pride parade (or something more virtual, especially during this past year), and -- in the case of arts organizations -- centering LGBTQ+ artists. This rings true for Dance Place, which hosted and presented *GAZE: a Queer research and performance gathering*. Through *GAZE*, Dance Place also partnered with Excessive Realness (ER), a queer-normative dance intensive. As a part of this 5-day virtual festival, Dance Place hosted performances and artist conversations that touched on a range of ideas and experiences; in partnership with ER, participants from across the country took virtual workshops.

When I sat down with Ben Levine, Dance Place’s Director of Production, to discuss how this festival came to be, they made it clear that queer communities and experiences have always found a home at Dance Place. “Dance Place has always been a queer gathering space. And it’s done that throughout its entire history of the organization, since before you and I were alive. But I believe this is the first-ever queer festival that Dance Place has produced. It’s by no means the first queer artists we’ve represented or even the first works that are about queerness very directly,” said Levine. They added, “What is new is that we are talking about it differently. We’re putting it all together and we’re using the term queer to talk about it. We’re galvanizing the community in a different way that we haven’t before.”

We reflected on a remarkable lineage of queer artists who have shown work at Dance Place, among which I'm honored to be included, which led me to wonder about the role that D.C.-based artists and arts organizations play in shaping our city's queer community and landscape. If you've spent any amount of time in Washington lately, you'll know that the built environment is rapidly changing; with that, more and more LGBTQ+-specific places and spaces are disappearing or moving. This migration isn't new, nor specific to our community, though it feels amplified through this past year of pandemic-driven isolation and challenge. To this, Ben said, "It feels like a really important thing to do, maybe in light of these closings -- maybe in spite of them -- that we create a space for the queer community to come together."

GAZE brought artists together virtually. *This Is An Invitation* was the latest project within jumata m. poe's and Jermone "Donte" Beacham's *Let 'im Move You* decade-spanning series. It featured the two artists – jumata based in Philadelphia/New York and Beacham from Houston -- moving in relation to one another and their outdoor environment through J-Sette -- a call-and-response dance form originated by southern Black majorette lines at historically Black colleges. New Orleans-based Creep Cuts shared *CREEP CUTS IN FREEZE RESPONSE!* an evening-length genre-queer cabaret that follows Mz. Asa Metric (Evan Spigelman) and Mqr. En Between (Dylan Hunter) as they crashed together comedy, original electronic music, and dada drag. Featured ER artists Scotty Hardwig, Ya-Ya Fairley and myself joined jumata, Donte, Evan, and Dance Place's Executive Artistic Director Christopher K. Morgan for a conversation on queer identity in dance.

A series of workshops and an evening of performance curated and hosted in partnership with ER rounded out the *GAZE* activities. Co-founded by Anthony Alterio of Fredonia, N.Y., and Boulder's Allison Blakeney in 2017, ER is a queer-normative dance intensive geared toward LGBTQIA+ people who consider themselves dancers or who use dance as a tool for their own artistic or personal practice. This year's workshop leaders included D.C.'s Krystal Collins, Oberlin's Al Evangelista, Seattle's Ya-Ya and myself. They ranged in focus from movement-based practices grown out of necessity (like Krystal's *Groove Theory* and Ya-Ya's *Trans/Eros: A Queer Approach to Bodies in Crisis*) to processes for reflecting on and connecting

with queer histories and archives (like Al's *Dancing Testimony* and my own *Holding Histories, Moving Bodies*). These artists also shared selections of their creative work, along with Scotty and Vivian Kim, in *The Spill*, the culminating concert for ER and *GAZE*.

“Excessive Realness was created out of a desire for belonging. That’s my interpretation of what Anthony and I wanted,” said co-founder Allison. The spirits of inclusivity and belonging both undergird and permeate all parts of the organization’s mission and activity, and seems to be part of the draw for artists to participate. Over the past four years (with a year off in 2020 to navigate the early weeks of the pandemic and hold space and give energy to uprisings for racial justice), ER has moved to different parts of the country in an intentional attempt to bring opportunities to queer folks who might otherwise find traveling to study inaccessible.

“There’s really something special about gathering with people who you share identities with. You know, being of a marginalized community there’s so many spaces where it’s very palpable, and the energy is very thick, with not feeling that you’re supposed to be there,” said Krystal. “What really attracted me to this was a space that I felt ‘I do belong,’ and I wanted to be a part of it.” Participants came from across the country, Zooming together to create a sense of (virtual) community even as the world works to reorient us to in-person activities. One of my favorite moments was the check-in, when people shared their names and pronouns. Because of this inclusivity, each day became a new opportunity for folks to test their feelings *that day* about their pronouns and/or variations on what name they wanted to go by. It felt like a full embrace of being in process, and an acknowledgement that we are forever a work-in-progress.

What does it all mean?

When I think about these experiences collectively, especially in relation to queerness, I am brought back to something jumata spoke about during the moderated conversation: the relationship between disruption and paying attention. In reflecting on *Invitation*, jumata outlined a process of disruption that moves us toward new ways of paying attention or imagining. This reminds me of my own work (among others) around disorientation/(re)orientation, and about what happens in between, something Scotty was digging into during that same discussion. While I want to avoid identifying these embodied and creative

practices as specific to queer dance, I find these ideas useful as I start to chart the space that queer dance holds. Many of these ideas can also be found in the actual work shared or shown through *GAZE* and ER.

Seemingly filmed from their phones, *Invitation* cuts between clips that offered multiple (and sometimes disorienting) perspectives of both artists and brought me into what felt like an incredibly personal and close relationship with the pair: as if I had just been called on Facetime and was fortunate enough to be a part of the performance. *CREEP CUTS IN FREEZE RESPONSE!* offered a similar sense of disorientation as it moved from imagined interactions between Mz. Asa Metric and Mqr. En Between to solo lip sync and comedic performances for an audience of stuffed animals.

Embraces of experimentation and disruption might also be found in ER's workshops: from Krystal's reframing of practice to include highly performative lip syncs in the shower to Al's close reading of oral histories through embodied approaches to my own collaborative facilitation with Jeff Donahoe from D.C.'s Rainbow History Project. This range was intentional, Anthony assured me; ER celebrates experimentation and play within what gets programmed. "I was taught by my mentors that queerness is supposed to be radical," he said. Even in this curatorial practice, I am struck by the commitment to diversity of practice -- the embrace of the seemingly radical -- and brought back to the meaning-making potential queerness has.

And maybe that's it: rather than trying to understand *what* queer dance is, I could instead grapple with different factors that make up this "force of disruption" that Clare Croft offers us. What does it mean to be a part of queer dances? What are the histories that inform or influence these understandings? Who gets to decide these things? And, for me specifically, how does my privilege and power as a white, cisgender person who identifies with maleness intersect with my queerness? Al joined me in asking a series of questions, particularly around how we continue to unpack/re-layer notions of queerness. "So when we're trying to grapple with definitions of queer, where are these frameworks coming from? What are the stories that we don't know? And why are those the ones we don't hear? And that, for me, is a way to be a part of queer dance," said Al.

He added, “What do I want to push against? And what do I want to push with?” This inspired me.

Is inquiry another word for disruption? If we go back to what jumatatu said, asking questions could be one way we practice or enter into disruption. When I was a young queer kid just starting to sort out my identity wholistically and how that differed from where I grew up (not just in terms of my sexual orientation, but also my political identity, gender identity, and so on), asking questions became one way for me to identify the in-betweenness of where I was and where I wanted to be. It helped me gather information, or at least slow down long enough to notice new things, before moving forward.

Queerness is in motion, ever expanding and moving beyond the boundaries we might set for it. Even then, this motion should not excuse us from the rigor of reflecting on what we’re doing and why. As a queer artist, I will continue to use my body to ask these questions alongside other queer dance practitioners.

Matthew Cumbie (he/him) is a collaborative dancemaker and artist educator. His choreography -- considered “a blend of risk-taking with reliability, [and] a combination of uncertainty and wisdom” -- weaves together a physical vocabulary of momentum and clarity, revelatory moments, and a belief in a body’s capacity to meet each moment. He has been commissioned and supported by organizations like Dance Place, Harvard University, and Bates Dance Festival, and by the National Endowment for the Arts, D.C. Commission for the Arts and Humanities, Arcus Foundation, and Massachusetts Cultural Council. Matthew holds an MFA in dance from Texas Woman’s University.