

## Queer Dance

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### CHAPTER

## 8 Queer Dance in Three Acts

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### Abstract

This chapter considers three dimensions of a queer dance ontology: being, doing, and making. The tripartite exploration assumes that there is something called queer, and it can be done, and made, as dance. Through exploration of a collaborative queer work “theory-ography 4.5—a we still queer here” created by SLIPPAGE:performance|culture|technology, the chapter demonstrates that dance enhances queer visibility. A consideration of the essential participation of viewing/recognition that defines queer, the chapter concludes that while dance emerges from being and doing, perhaps, its contents are brought into focus by the making of its various audiences who can narrate the queerness at hand.

**Keywords:** [dance](#), [queer dance ontology](#), [SLIPPAGE](#), [queer visibility](#), [queerness](#)

**Subject:** [Dance and Music](#)

 [theoryography 4.5: we \[still\] queer here](#)

 [in conversation with thomas f. defrantz, Kevin Guy, Gina Kohler, and James Morrow](#)

[queer dance: being, doing, making.](#)

[sister, watch me work.](#)

## being

the **be-ing** is easiest for me: queer me dancing, enjoying a muscularity of longness in effect with my 6'4" frame tearing through movements. plastic-man-like limbs and fingers in motion, hips swinging when i want, tossing my locks to accentuate the beat. dancing, i *am* queer mostimes, and this moving-being aligns with a consistent being-in-the-world realized through my queer identity, inevitably claimed in conversation or in obvious, recognizable action. i am that thing we call queer, and in the being of it, understand it as a sideward inevitability that puts me near some, but further from others. being queer—like being a dancer—puts me in readiness to perform queer contours; alert to possible queer disavowal; but attendant to queer's inevitable arrival and always-already-thereness.

## doing

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p. 170 **doing** queer is harder. not in an “acting femme” sort of way (as if i were a macho butch of some sort, *not*), but in a “making more apparent what is ↪ already present” way. the doing is about *difference* from some other doing; doing it to be *marked as queer* in variance from some other (straight?) mode. doing the dance queerly—well, if i’m doing it, the gesture already has that capacity willy-nilly—but *this* doing suggests these not-always-present modes of being inside it, brought to the fore by effort. i’m not trying to *naturalize* my queer affect by calling out its already-thereness, my queerbeing is not necessarily part of some sort of *nature-nurture* paradigm. like breath, it comes and goes in time, and sometimes matters less to me than at other times. but i won’t discount its importance to me either, this queerness; it tends to **be there**, so amping it up, to **do it more**, takes palpable effort. enlarging the recognizability of queer makes me work against my suppositions of straight, at least, to imagine how you might understand this to be queer. but i do notice that whether i experience my gestures as “doing queer dance” matters little; how you, my collaborators or audience, perceive them to be “done queer” marks their capacity. queer being reflects an orientation to another: a near and far, rather than an address; **queer doing** assumes an interaction of self and other. **doing queer**, then, becomes something always shared, always interpreted and recognized between/among, rather than the kind of essential status that might be embedded in queer as identity. i need you to see me do queer; without you i’m nothing, sandra bernhard/not necessarily queer in gesture.

## making

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p. 171 **making** queer is something like doing queer on steroids (and, okay, i do love muscle). to move an action or a dance to the realm of queer, we assume that queer exists, and that an action of “making” can happen inside or outside of queer terms. in other words, we assume that there *can* be a “queer dance”—which surely does not go without saying. and we imagine a stability that might be possible around its queer contents and their affects. “aha, there! i see *a queer* dance!” we are challenged to ejaculate in the presence of a **queer-made**. there must be something sustainable inside the queer-made so that it might feel formed, structured, and relevant to the discussion of its capacity. queer-mades exist in time, through time, across shifts in temporal contexts. queer-mades prove queer remains, that queer *is-was-will be*. queer-mades tend not to be naturally-occurring; they arrive after extensive jostling and cajoling. and queer-mades come from academics as often as from artists or people in the street; they include the long-winded analytical essays that explain how something done queerly becomes a queer-made, in a sort of self-reflective, always-operating teaching-moment justification. queer-mades arrive from effort, ↪ by we who need its presence, whether we work as professors helping others understand queer resiliency, or as artists bringing queer creative evidence into the mainstream of creative commerce. as with the arrival of “negro” that frantz fanon endures at the provocation of a white child (“Look, a Negro!”), queer-mades come because we are determined to note their presence.

being, doing, and making typify the ways i experience *queer* brought to bear on dance performances and research. the **being** might be the most historiographic here, as in repeated requests to construct queer-positive biographies of dance personalities (Arthur Mitchell, Loie Fuller, Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Merce Cunningham, Lucinda Childs); constructing useful histories to predict possibilities for queer identity in the world today. this is a sort of “queer as antidote” to straight, or a “proof of possibility” for queer within dance, mobilized to account for queer presence in the face of its disavowal. these histories confirm that queer exists within dance across generations, and queer dancers can achieve success not necessarily contained by their queerness. the presence of queers in history might mean experiential queer ontologies of being.

and we need queer ontologies within dance, because so often we are told to not *do* queer in dance. for we boys, we hear, “butch it up,” which tends to mean “pare it down,” a command that calls on our ability to resist non-normative movement behaviors. a queer *doing*, though, calls for extravagance of some sort, an excess so that the queerness will not be mistaken for some brand of errant straightness, or some sort of straight misunderstanding. by 2016, queer still feels rare enough to need an on-the-noseness in its *doing*, as in the men kissing in the beginning of Kyle Abraham’s “Brick” (2008), or the ambisexual children making out in Miguel Gutierrez’s “Everyone” (2007), or Katy Pyle’s fantastical *Ballez* inventions, or Yanis Marshall’s devastating demonstrations of men jazz-video|pop-music dancing in high heels. their very obvious queer-doing stabilizes the being-in-the-world; and yes, we still need the doing to confirm the being.

*making* a queer theatrical dance for a general US dance-going public continues to be elusive and awkward. but let’s leave the bourgeois concert-dance stage out of it: happily, the twenty-first century brings forward all variety of communities in motion who eagerly support most every kind of performance in non-general venues. queer dance and choreography festivals, queer hip hop dance television programming, queer line dancing, queer lesbian bar cabaret shows all proliferate, and these events are populated by queer-mades. essays, blogposts, and books—like this one you read now—offer academic treatises ↪ that make queer acts of performance apparent. these gestures of queermaking may not be mainstream, and they may derive power from their particularity. but they really do happen, all the time now, and we are not at a loss to find representations of queer-made dance here, there, and everywhere.

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so, how could these truisms that matter to me be useful to dance and its analysis? to start, i strive to never forget the being-ness of queer presence in dance, and the many ways its variegated contours hurt, surprise, annoy, replenish, and inspire. queer holds urgent currency in dance, and dance provides a measure of solace and refuge for queer being. our collective willingness to privilege queer presence, and to reflect on sexualities and gender in terms of dance, marks our capacity to imagine together progressively. the largest cohort of dancers in the context of the United States—including liturgical dancers, hip hop dancers, video, commercial and concert stage dancers, folk dancers—embrace queer people in their midsts, even when those same queer people might be rejected outside the context of their dancing. if i begin with queer, and assume our presence among, say, african diaspora dance companies as well as Black dance events, i can be comforted by an assumption of sexual diversity seldom experienced otherwise.

as example, kevin guy’s study “this side faces room: a decolonization of the mind” (2013), performed as part of *theory-ography 4.5: we [still] queer here* (2013), draws on its creator’s willingness to assume his queer body as an impetus and end to his dancing. the work begins with a brief dance film that scrutinizes his musculature, focusing on his broad shoulders and rippled torso, while he moves, a black man in black briefs and black leather shoes, contained by a white circular space. the film ends with the removal of the boots; guy appears live in the performance space in the same black briefs and no shoes, working in slow, thoughtful balance and physical extension to van morrison’s song “ballerina.” guy’s clearly-marked be-ing queer, demonstrated by sideward glances amid the willful display of his gym-bunny body, juxtaposes a tall and buff black man’s ruminative dancing to a white man blues singer’s exhortations toward an offstage ballerina. guy does very little that is queer, or queerly-shaped, beyond the kern of dancing itself; rather he exemplifies queer by his already-thereness, moving in order to discover possibilities at once interior to his own physical process, but shared with the gathered audience as evidence, in and of itself, of queer black masculinity as a reflective, animated presence.

when i was a little boy and not allowed to get my way because of some adult or parental rule, my mother used to say, in the vernacular, “*it be-s that way* ↪ *sometimes.*” guy dancing *be-s* queer, he also does queer at times, with the virtuosity of a finely-trained dancer’s capacity. me, not so much. doing queer, i relax and allow myself to fail, mindful that targeted failure provides an important space for humor and irony. making big mistakes, some purposefully, i confirm a willingness to not try to control an outcome, or predetermine a

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line of communication. i might be cynical or wryly persistent in the pursuit in my queer gesture; extravagant to a literal fault that suggests the outside of achievement as its own end. a hyper-particularity of doing produces queer gesture for me; inevitably, that gesture fails to do what it seems to intend. that failure is usually humorous on some level, to underscore a distancing between attempt and achievement.

two examples help underscore executions of queer failure in dance. consider keith hennesey's bewildering reconstruction of the chosen maiden's solo from nijinsky's "rite of spring" (1913) in his queer version "bear/skin" (2015). toward the end of an hour-long invention, hennesey interpolates nijinsky's choreography: trying valiantly, but failing repeatedly, in his attempt to convey the austerity of personal sacrifice that marked the original ballet's rendering of group communion. moving with a brutal care, always unable to complete the predetermined gestures but trying valiantly again and again, hennesey's dancing inspires guffaws and concern from me in the audience. as he struggles to perform the choreography as part of a patently-fake "aboriginal ritual," his middle-aged, white, queer-maleness pushes against the ambition of the choreography, to accentuate his queer-doing of the dance. watching, i wonder: will he hurt himself? what drives him to keep going, even when the impossibility of the task is apparent? is it okay to laugh at his failure? he dances and fails, trying something queer in taking on the dance for a young "maiden," doing queer as the extended failure of a performance. this is queer failure as an impossibility of execution that all we in the audience are forced to encounter and consider. it is hard to watch, fascinating and disturbing for me; the gestures of a seemingly self-inflicted wounding of dance.

but gina kohler's "dream [factories]" (2009), also included in "theory-ography 4.5," thrives in the repeated failure of its performer to accomplish an entirely queer task. kohler appears naked, seated with her back to the audience on a small square of mirror. she pours blood (beet juice, actually) down her back slowly to the sounds of her bantering with her husband and son watching fireworks. as the soundtrack segues into madonna's "like a prayer," kohler, swathed in blood, and brightly lit and reflected by the mirror stage she now kneels upon, begins to slip and slide unpredictably. at times she seems able to control her weight and its force amid the slippery fluids on the mirror, but as often as not, she skids into a turn or tumble, and finds her way back to face her audience. somehow, she thrives in her falls and recovery; we are invited to cheer when she controls her motions rhythmically. we smile as conspirators to her repeated failings in the impossible dance, queerly-done.

**Figure 8.1**



gina kohler in *dream [factories]*, 2013.

Photo by Sarah Nesbitt.

**making queer** calls up serious creative energy, as queer-mades have to be instantiated in the body as well as the imagination. to do this in dance, we create stabilized collections of gestures that are at once precarious and fussy, and then mobilize intellectual contexts that define those gestures as unequivocally queer. queer-made dances intend to stand as demonstrations of the variability of an outsider space, but at some point they also tend to look like well-made dances that just happen to be somehow queer. this is the challenge of recognizability; that **structure understood** is **structure normalized** and most likely *un-queer*. how to make something that continually demonstrates its non-normativity?

p. 175 queer-mades push against normative gestural expression, even as they push against themselves. “11” (2011) created by james morrow, and included in “theory-ography 4.5,” casts a queer contemporary dancer/b-boy into a series of elusive gestures reminiscent of catholic church practice, intercut with odd, loving manipulations of prop chairs. morrow dances away from the audience for much of this work, often exploring dramatic physical ideas without revealing his facial expression; sudden shifts in movement style signal a moody, always-fragmentary mode of queer production. at times, morrow’s gestures fail and he repeats them, violently; but the dance as a whole fails to offer a coherent movement vocabulary or approach to its own contents. by the time morrow removes his shirt to retrieve a razor and shave his chest, revealing a prominent OBEY tattoo along his arm, his audience imagines an assemblage of experience that combine via their proximity within this performance. morrow’s body engages these varied modes of moving; the work offers queer assemblage that ends with a full-color projection of a beating heart on the performer’s exposed skin. b-boy movement, religious ritual gesture, neo-African dance, intimate personal grooming, and odd media projection collide in the performer’s execution; queerly disagreeing with each as they each assert their presence in the dance. the queer-made of “11” emerges from the fizzy and mysterious montage of method that constitute its whole. morrow makes a queer world in his dance, where his ostensibly straight b-boy can collude with his selves as a contemporary dancer, former catholic altar boy, and sheperd fairey-admiring activist in a dance of unlikely affiliation.

*sister, can you still hear me?*

**queer world-making** has been popular among academic writers at least since lauren berlant and michael warner, *pace* José Esteban Muñoz, enticed us all with a weird utopic ability to imagine outlandish queer horizons, where complex intimacies and public sex could be simultaneously queer and private. but as a queer be-er of color, I’ve never been convinced that rampant worldmaking does the many things we might hope for. we might all imagine temporary queer worlds where we could be anti-racists and anti-misogynists—and still hot. but these ephemeral imaginary worlds aren’t where i usually dance, drive—carefully, as a black man with dreadlocks—or even teach and present my creative work. queer world-making is fun to imagine, and useful when i try to take the time back from the un-queer structures of straight life. in general, i try to be pretty queer-going in an everyday sort of way. but the everyday worlds i go through are fairly constant in their need to reproduce non-queer normativity. SO, i disidentify in many of my daily encounters at work and in the world, resisting the pull of straight life as i can. but i also find this not to be very sustainable as a way of life; the hard work that queers of colors and others engage moment to moment as best we can.

p. 176 to disidentify, i re-configure normative affiliations with my own, preferred, invented meanings and deploy these new mappings into the world. for example, like other choreographers, i make dances, but these works are usually open spaces that allow a group of collaborators to do what they want in response to the prompt of our shared labor. imagining a queer ground from which to move means that i work to reconfigure how a *choreographer* might be understood to function. as the project figurehead, a choreographer is often conceived as a political leader with ultimate veto power, and the ability to engage violence (cutting entire sequences of movement) to define the state (the final dance). choreographers make casting and editing decisions; they might define movement sequences or offer them up from their own bodies. i claim the role of choreographer in SLIPPAGE projects, but i disidentify from that oddly patrician array of responsibility to

mobilize artists from whom i want to learn in creative practice. together, we make dances that are undisciplined; dances that resist pre-determination, but wonder at what might come of shared wit and unusual alignments of material and physical ideas.

as example, the multi-year “theory-ography” project emerged from this impulse toward collective queer creation. disidentifying itself as a stable work of performance, when it really isn’t that at all, its varied manifestations share structural similarities among their iterations as embodied collecting pools for movement thinkers to explore textual and physical ideas together. “theory-ography” brings artists into collaboration around its theme to engage an improvised whole that always requires the participation of its audience. as a whole, the project is rampantly unruly and awkward. it insists on underestimating its potential, as it refuses to be rehearsed into a repeatable form. each iteration of the work contains “set pieces” contributed by participating artists, with the whole stitched together by a shifting set of tasks, texts, rules, expectations, and physical provocations provided by the performers, designers, technicians, and gathered audience members. previous versions of “theory-ography” have explored endings and beginnings (1.0: the end of the tale, 2008); the concept of the ready-to-hand (2.0: heidegger’s hammer, 2010); theory as practice (3.0: we dance theory, 2011); queer presence (4.0: we queer here, 2012); and Black queer futures (5.0: *afroFUTUREqueer*, 2015). imbued with queer intention, the work invariably emerges as a queer-made mobilization of being and doing in relation to a theme of shared interest.

p. 177 for the 2013 *theory-ography 4.5: we [still] queer here* version, we created a short study that i performed, “the weight of ideas” as a live-processing experiment. clad in a business suit chosen to represent a queer public academic/professional, a kinect camera followed my movements to produce data streams from my joints that were then affiliated with descriptive words: performativity, mixed race, penis envy, anxiety, etc. a computer processing patch, created in the visual programming language MAX by slippage affiliate kenneth david stewart, tied the words to different parts of my body as i moved through the space in front of the camera; the words were projected as dancing icons on a screen behind me. stewart discovered and programmed the font types for the words and designed their sensitivity to my gesture; i created a movement score that allowed for improvisation around ideas of how labels attach to people as we see them, and return to those people even as we might know more subtle distinctions of that person’s complexity. moving uncomfortably through the space, i felt the weight of the words on my body; through a queer gesture of slapping my knee, i could make one of the words vanish. i never knew which word/label would disappear, and my physical improvisation grew in relationship to the revelations that the interface provided. we did establish one unchangeable marker for the interface: when the last word was left on the screen, i could control its visual scale directly through the movement of my hands. the final word, *queerlove*, floats on the screen, and folds and opens, like an accordion, as i move my hands toward and away from each other. at the end of the dance, i open the word to its fullest width and with open hands and arms, embrace the audience and move into its number.

p. 178 “the weight of ideas” ties words to gesture to underscore how viewers contribute to the actual making of queer, no matter the intention of the performer. in the revelation of this crucial relationship of object/viewed to viewer/interpreter, we confirm that queer is a collaborative assemblage; queer dance is a distortion, hopefully in a useful way, toward something unanticipated and awe-ful (awful) that exists *now, here, and for this gathered community*. dance enhances queer visibility. queer dance emerges from *being and doing*, perhaps, but its contents are brought into focus by the *making* of its various audiences who can narrate the queerness at hand.

Figure 8.2



thomas f. defrantz in *the weight of ideas*, 2013.

Photo by Sarah Nesbitt.

being, doing, making. this works for me as a three-part exercise worth revisiting again and again. there is something called queer, and it can be done and made as dance. reading emerging theories, participating in dancemaking differently, and navigating queer desires, i shimmy through a shared creative craft with SLIPPAGE collaborators that continually enlivens. as this short essay demonstrates, our work is indebted to writings by lauren berlant, jack halberstam, bell hooks, Zora Neal Hurston, José Esteban Muñoz, Franz Fanon, Hortense Spillers, and many others; we bring these sometimes-queer avatars into our conversations and creative practice as we move together.

p. 179 we should all be so lucky. sadly, we aren't; and our perverse enchantments with queer dance are not easily available to the many people who might need them or enjoy their creation in the world. we don't all get to tell sexy stories in public, joke about queer life, publicly embrace our queer predilections, or collectively mourn our many losses and disappointments. our physical and emotional connections to the devastations of orlando, june 2016, vary. we don't all get to be, do, or make queer. 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; an allowance for more people to understand strategies of queer [black/asian/trans/aboriginal] performance on our bodies, in our imaginations, and among our friends.

*sister, i love you? this is for you. thanku falettin me bemyself—agin.*

Figure 8.3



audience and performers dance together queerly in theoryography 4.5: *we [still] queer here*, 2013.

Photo by Sarah Nesbitt.

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