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Who gets to be fluid in dance?

Taking a risk artistically can become hard if the version of yourself that shows up in the studio doesn't fit the expectations already built into the room

by Cierra Torres

Contemporary dance is often introduced as the place where everything is possible. It is framed as open, experimental, and limitless, a space where bodies can move beyond the rules of ballet or the rigidity of traditional technique. When I first entered university as a dance major, I believed that story. Now? Not so much.

I was nineteen stepping onto my university campus alone for the first time. Suddenly, I had space to choose how I dressed, moved, how I presented myself, and who I might become. After years of dance training through injuries, sacrifices, discipline, and not to mention the financial strain, I thought I had finally arrived at a place where I could fully become myself. I thought here, I can honor that two-year-old Cierra who danced her heart out onstage to “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”...before I learned there were “right” and “wrong” ways to move.

Of course, as dancers, we learn at a very early age that there are right and wrong ways to do a step. Dance training and technique are built on codified systems, passed down from teacher to student. I have always known what a correct first position looks like: heels together, toes apart. The difference between a jazz turn and a ballet one, and what a contracted spine looks like versus a vertical spine. These distinctions are not inherently limiting, they assist in our development and continue artistry throughout various styles of dance.

What I was less prepared for was the policing of gender expression and gender fluidity, but that often existed alongside my newfound freedom. We were encouraged to be artists, to take risks, and to show up authentically as ourselves, but what happens when the version of yourself that shows up does not fit the expectations already built into the room? What happens when authenticity is encouraged in theory, but corrected in practice?

Despite being described as open and variable, contemporary dance training does not guarantee every dancer the same freedom of gender fluidity. My experience revealed an unspoken contradiction: while the form itself is celebrated for its ability to deconstruct fixed categories, dancers who express gender fluidity may find that their authenticity is accepted only in theory, not in practice. Gender fluidity is not simply a quality of movement in space, but the ability to express, shift, and embody gender, beyond binary expectations.

Dance scholar SanSan Kwan, in her essay “*When Is Contemporary Dance?*” argues that contemporary dance is not one stable form, but a shifting collection of practices shaped by cultural, historical, commercial, and global influences. Kwan describes how the term “Contemporary Dance” carries multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings across concert, commercial and world dance contexts. Contemporary dance is already a hybrid. It is already

unstable and multiple, but that raises a question that has stayed with me throughout my training: If the form itself is allowed to be fluid, why aren't all dancers guaranteed that same freedom?

As I moved through my undergraduate years and into graduate studies, I became increasingly aware that movement is never separate from the social world surrounding it. Dance does not exist outside of culture. It reflects culture, reproduces culture, and sometimes challenges it. This is where Judith Butler's work became particularly useful to me. Butler argues that gender is not something we simply are, but something that we repeatedly do through embodied actions, behaviors, and social rituals. Dance training becomes one of the clearest places where those repetitions are shaped and reinforced.

In technique class, gender is rarely named outright, but it is constantly present. It appears in corrections, partnering, movement qualities, and aesthetic ideals. Dancers are told to be stronger, softer, lighter, sharper, more powerful or more delicate, depending on how they are perceived. Over time, these corrections can become attached to assumptions about masculinity and femininity. I believe masculinity, femininity, and queerness are not fixed states but fluid spectrums that shift depending on context, body, culture, and time. No person exists in only one singular way, just as no dance form is ever purely one thing. People continuously evolve, and movement evolves alongside them. The freedom to exist authentically within your own body directly impacts the way you move, perform, and create.

Even in contemporary dance spaces that pride themselves on inclusivity, fixed gender expectations do not disappear. They simply become quieter. Dance scholar Claire Croft writes about how Queer Dance reveals the systems through which bodies become legible. In other words, dance teaches audiences and institutions how to read gender. Certain presentations become familiar and understandable, while others become disruptive. Queerness often exposes the fact that these categories are socially constructed rather than natural. This observation resonates deeply within my own experiences, especially in how I present myself. I am queer, use she/they pronouns, stand 5'6 with a full tattoo sleeve on my left arm and plenty more scattered around my body. I despise wearing tight clothing, even though I completely understand the need when working with technique and other bodies.

In disrupting what is deemed as "right" and "wrong," I no longer enter new spaces fully covered up. Meaning I used to enter with long sleeves, covering my tattoos and full of fear that they would deem me weird or not want to hire me. Now that I have experienced both gender fluidity, and gender expression in ways that support how I feel, not just how I look, I am able to show up authentically. I wear what I want, and if someone doesn't wanna be friends with me or hire me because I have tattoos of oranges and cherries and the sun, then that's not my problem. Your preconceived perception of me is.

Contemporary dance frequently welcomes queerness as an idea and aesthetic or choreographic theme, yet gender fluidity can become more complicated when it appears in everyday training practices. What happens when a dancer refuses conventional gender presentations such as wearing black tights and a shirt instead of a leotard and tights, having hair so short it does not fit in a bun or pony tail, or participating in the *à la secondes* instead of *fouettés*? What happens when movement qualities traditionally associated with masculinity or femininity become intentionally blurred? What happens when a body becomes difficult to categorize?

These questions eventually led me to the central question of this essay—“Who actually gets to be gender fluid in contemporary dance training?” Not in theory, not in the university mission statements, not in diversity initiatives, but in practice. In the classrooms, rehearsals, auditions, casting decisions, corrections, and performance spaces.

Fluidity is often misunderstood. In dance, it often refers to smoothness, continuity, and adaptability of movement. Yet a dancer can move fluidly while still being confined by rigid expectations surrounding gender expression. Fluid movement is not the same as gender fluidity. That distinction reveals that contemporary dance often celebrates openness, while simultaneously maintaining unspoken expectations about which forms of gender expression are acceptable, professional, or aesthetically desirable.

The question of “Who gets to be fluid?” is connected to larger systems of legitimacy in the dance world. Dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild demonstrates how Africanist aesthetics such as groundedness, rhythmic complexity, improvisation, polycentricism, and emotional physicality have profoundly shaped American concert dance—all while often being erased from the dominant narratives in terms of acknowledged influence. Gottschild’s work reminds us that legitimacy is never neutral. Dance histories determine which movement practices are valued, which influences are credited or validated, and which bodies become centered. The same systems that marginalized certain cultural histories can also influence which forms of gender expression are welcomed, and which are disciplined. In this sense, gender fluidity is not distributed equally. Some dancers are allowed to experiment, challenge conversations, and occupy ambiguity while others are encouraged subtly or explicitly, to become more legible, more digestible.

Even highly experimental choreographic practices do not automatically escape these dynamics. Choreographers such as William Forsythe have radically expanded ballet vocabulary and challenged traditional choreographic structures. But disrupting movement systems does not necessarily dismantle gender norms or assumptions about bodies. These binaries often remain intact, even with innovative work. Abstraction does not automatically remove gender. Sometimes it simply makes gender harder to see.

I have found myself returning to an observation from my years of dancing and teaching. That is, dancers move differently when they feel safe. When they have the opportunity to explore what feels or looks good, without the societal expectations placed upon them.

I have watched shoulders soften and breath deepen.

I have watched performers take risks they previously avoided.

I have watched movement become larger, fuller, and more expansive.

Most importantly I have watched dancers become more themselves.

Susan Leigh Foster argues that choreography is not simply the arrangement of movement, but the production of meaning through bodies. If bodies are constantly producing meaning, then dancers are also constantly being interpreted. Gender becomes one of the primary lenses through which that interpretation occurs. This is why gender fluidity is not merely emotional, it’s

structural. It shapes what forms of embodiment are possible and influences who feels permitted to explore. It determines whether gender fluidity is supported or corrected. Contemporary dance already possesses the tools necessary for this work. It is hybrid, evolving, and resistant to fixed definitions.

Recent research done by Danrui Gong; an interdisciplinary researcher, an academic writer known for exploring the intersection of performing arts, sociology, and gender studies, suggests that contemporary dance functions as a powerful site for challenging dominant assumptions about gender and identity through embodied practice. The form already contains the capacity for transformation, but capacity is not the same thing as reality. For me, this is where conversations become most meaningful. It is not simply about representation, it requires examining how training environments teach gender, reinforce gender, and sometimes restrict gender.

So when I ask, “Who gets to be fluid?” I’m not only asking who gets to experiment with movement, I’m also asking who gets to remain open inside their body without being corrected into something more familiar. Who gets to exist beyond binary expectations? Who gets to be fully authentic when authenticity itself challenges the norm?

The answer should be simple.

Everyone.

Yet the gap between that ideal and the reality of many training environments remains significant. Perhaps this is where the real work begins, not by asking whether contemporary dance is capable of supporting gender fluidity, but by asking whether we are willing to extend the same freedom to dancers that we already celebrate in the form itself. In doing so, contemporary dance may move closer to realizing its potential as a space where diverse gender expressions can be explored, affirmed, and embodied without constraint.



Cierra Torres is an MFA Dance candidate at the University of California, Irvine. Her research explores gender fluidity, queerness, embodiment, and inclusivity within all dance practices. As a choreographer, educator, and performer, they are interested in how dance spaces can support authenticity and expand possibilities for human expression through movement.

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