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A Gap in the Narrative: Exploring the Experiences of Trans Dancers Today

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Abstract

The scarcity of trans dancers in dance history, dance spaces, and dance research suggests a need for greater understanding of this group and how their needs are and are not being met in dance. This qualitative study explores the experiences of transgender, nonbinary, and otherwise gender-nonconforming dancers in concert, commercial, and social dance forms. Interviews with 10 participants from the US and Australia emphasize dance as a valuable space for gender exploration, but also highlight a lack of media representation for this population and argue that what representation does exist is often objectifying and tokenizing. Participants also shed light on a variety of barriers to participation in dance including highly gendered technique, body expectations, dress code, and dance roles, ignorance and discrimination form instructors and directors, and gendered dressing rooms and bathrooms. In future, participants hope that dance will become more inclusive and intersectional, that roles, technique, and facilities will become less gendered, and that facilitators will move towards more trans-inclusive attitudes and language use.

Introduction:

US and European dance – especially concert dance – have an undeniably queer history. Ted Shawn, Alvin Ailey, and other queer dancers are staples in any dance history lesson, and yet this representation skews notably in the direction of cisgender[i] gay men – there is almost no record of trans history in any contemporary dance form, with the notable exception of the Ballroom and Vogue scene (Bailey 2013). Indeed, there is a lack of recorded trans history in general prior to the current generation, (Crandall & Schwartz 2015) but in the field of dance it is especially pronounced. The earliest readily accessible records of prominent trans and nonbinary[ii] dancers appear to be as recent as the 90s and early 2000s, and largely focus on American modern dancer and choreographer Sean Dorsey (Burbank 2019) and Chinese ballet dancer and choreographer Jin Xing (Yue 2020). Significantly more coverage of trans dancers has appeared in the last decade, largely within queer-specific dance spaces like Katy Pyle's *Ballez* (Burke 2018), queer Latin and ballroom spaces (McMains 2018), and the Dancing Queerly festival (*About: Dancing Queerly*). Some dancers have made it in mainstream dance spaces as well – receiving notable attention in ballet especially, but these dancers are notable primarily for their scarcity, and articles about them tend to note a multitude of barriers for trans people within the dance world (Bauer 2019, Sulcas 2018).

The present study aims firstly to build on the limited existing information about trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming[iii] (hereafter T/N/GNC) dancers by interviewing a sample of trans dancers on their experiences in dance. As previously mentioned, the literature that does exist is generally focused on concert dance styles, and this study aims to look at a variety of styles including concert, social, and commercial styles. Secondly, media coverage of trans dancers often comes from cisgender writers, who are not always trans-competent. This study and all its interviews are conducted by a trans researcher and collects information on participants view of trans dancers in the media. Further, the results are presented with the intent of using participants' words directly wherever possible, so as to allow trans, nonbinary, and gender-

nonconforming dancers to speak for themselves, rather than being spoken for or over as they so often are. Finally, the study aims to compile T/N/GNC desires and dreams for the future of dance, in the hope that the wider dance world may take them as inspiration and direction.

Discussion of literature:

T/N/GNC people face a variety of barriers in dance, which vary across styles and spaces. A 2019 Pointe magazine article reported the experiences of a handful of trans and nonbinary ballet dancers, who reported backlash for their transitions that ranged from blatant transphobia to difficulty finding work, poor quality training opportunities, dress code and costume disparities, highly gendered technique, and dance teachers and directors ill-prepared to work with the changes that come with some medical transition options (Bauer 2019). Sean Dorsey reports similar issues in the world of modern dance, arguing that while individuals within the dance world are becoming more receptive to trans dancers, the institutions that they work within are not necessarily reflecting that progress (Burbank 2019). Dorsey brings up another point – the majority of these barriers are external. Of course, some trans people experience dysphoria and shame, but those are not the issues that come up in discussions of barriers to dance. Rather they are literal and figurative structures of the dance world – gendered bathrooms and changing rooms, binary gendered roles and costumes, strict man-woman partnering – which simply leave no space for a dancer who does not conform to the gender binary (Dorsey 2018).

The lack of T/N/GNC dancers due to these barriers is also a self-perpetuating issue – where there are few dancers, there is a lack of representation, which prevents dance from being seen as a reasonable or even safe pursuit for T/N/GNC people. As a glaring example of the lack of representation, Croft's *Queer Dance* (2017) – a collection of articles on queer dance – is nearly entirely lacking in trans representation. Even though there certainly were trans dancers around in 2017, this anthology of "queer dance" focuses nearly entirely on lesbian and gay performers, with some coverage of drag as well. If that is the way T/N/GNC dancers are (not) represented within the world of queer dance, how can they possibly be represented in the wider world of primarily cisgender, heterosexual dance?

The answer is not often, and not particularly well. Dorsey points out that when he started choreographing, there were no other visible trans dancers (Dorsey 2018). In the initial research for this project, articles on T/N/GNC dancers available online were few and far between – and often were covering the same few dancers, primarily in ballet and modern dance. There is also an issue with the quality and contents of media representation of trans dancers. Jo Troll points out two major issues with trans representation in the media, the first being that these articles frequently objectify dancers – discussing details of medical transition when they would never discuss the medical history of a cisgender dancer, and the second being that they assume that trans people are pushing gender roles. They may be, and nonbinary dancers generally are, but there is nothing radical gender-role wise about a trans woman dancing a women's role. To imply that there is suggests the transphobic belief that trans women are not really women (Troll 2017b). A third issue could be added to these, pulling from Troll's criticism; these articles are often written by people who do not seem to be familiar with the T/N/GNC community, its language, or even the basics on how to respect trans people. For example, Schaefer's Dance Magazine article "Dancing Transgender: Performers and Choreographers Are Challenging Dance's Gender Norms" (the subject of Troll's criticism) talks extensively about dancer's transitions and "discomfort," without ever using the widely accepted term for this experience – "dysphoria"

(Troll 2017b, Schaefer 2017). An even worse example, Liu's 2011 article on trans woman ballet dancer and choreographer Jin Xing uses the wrong pronouns for her throughout, failing even the most basic form of respect (Liu 2011).

In spite of these problems, there are T/N/GNC people who are fighting to dance, and strong suggestions are being made to make dance spaces more welcoming to them. Nyugen emphasizes changing the language in audition notices to be more gender-inclusive where possible and explaining the reason for specificity when a dancer of a certain gender presentation is needed for narrative reasons. Going even further, Nyugen urges creators to consider the kind of work they make and points out that hiring token T/N/GNC dancers to check boxes is not much better than not hiring them at all (Nyugen 2018). Greenhood's 2016 paper traces the lack of diversity in ballet back to Balanchine's preference for thin, light skinned, heteronormative dancers, and argues that ballet must adapt to represent the diversity of the surrounding world. The paper presents a variety of options, including nondiscrimination laws for dance company hiring, and argues that this change will not happen from the inside (Greenhood 2016). The work of these and other authors indicates a promising and perhaps growing interest in working towards a more welcoming dance world, and yet for T/N/GNC dancers dealing with these systems today, progress is moving slowly.

Methods:

In order to gather in-depth responses, the researcher conducted a series of one-time remote interviews (See appendix for questions). Participants were gathered through social media posts (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook), and emails to several US college dance departments and companies. Individuals who identify as "trans, nonbinary, or otherwise gender-nonconforming," and have some level of experience in any form of dance were asked to contact the researcher by email. Participants who responded were asked to sign a consent form and scheduled for a 40-minute online interview. 13 consent forms were signed, 2 of these individuals failed to schedule meetings or contact the researcher further, and 1 scheduled a meeting but was unable to attend. The remaining 10 participants were interviewed over video call by the researcher. Participants were asked to keep their cameras off for confidentiality purposes, and each 30–40-minute interview was recorded. Interviews were transcribed using Word auto-transcription or Word dictate. Transcripts were then edited for accuracy and scrubbed of all identifying information, including names, organizations, and all locations besides country names. Transcripts were then color coded for recurring themes. After transcripts were completed, original videos and communications with the participants were deleted.

Of the 10 participants who completed the interview, 9 participants were from the United States, and one was from Australia. Participants ranged from ages 18-57, with the majority in their 20s and early 30s, and had experience variously as students, teachers, and choreographers. Due to the advertisement methods, college students were somewhat overrepresented (at least 5, a 6th was college age, but was not specific). All participants were transmasculine or nonbinary/genderqueer/GNC, presenting a notable lack of trans women or explicitly transfemme dancers. All participants reported experience with a variety of styles, but in their responses 3 focused on ballroom/partnered/social dance styles, while 7 focused on commercial and concert dance styles.

Results:

During the interviews, four main themes became apparent in the participants' responses: (1) dance as a space for gender exploration, (2) media representation of T/N/GNC dancers, (3) transphobic and exclusive structures in dance, and (4) desires/solutions/dreams for the future.

To ensure confidentiality, participants are quoted using pseudonymous initials. In order to give a broader picture of the speaker, age and country of residence are included. Participants use a variety of pronouns and are referred to in the way that they prefer. Some participants use more than one set of pronouns, in which case those are used interchangeably. Quotations are edited to remove filler speech, including superfluous "like," "um," and "you know."

Dance as a space for gender exploration:

Many of the participants felt that being a dancer had an impact on their gender exploration, and framed dance itself as a valuable space for gender exploration. E (32, US) described her experience with exploration in social dance roles, saying "I really do see, you know, lead and follow roles when they're gendered as a reflection of really a subset of gender roles. And so, because dance is a creative medium, it can be a really fun place to play with gender roles and to defy expectations and mix things up, or even like play with the rules themselves and recreate, and so I think that I have definitely used partner dance specifically as a way to express gender creativity." A (30, Australia) similarly stated, "leading in dance has actually been […] really meaningful to me in terms of gender." B (29, US) talked about gender presentation and clothing in swing and blues, saying, "that was an extra excuse for me to like dress up and dress up in what are very typically male ways […it] definitely gave me a venue to explore expressing my gender through clothing in admittedly an often-stereotypical way." Selective compliance with – and deviation from – the sometimes-rigid gender roles of social dance, in that sense, serve as a means of gender exploration and expression. Concert and commercial dancers described similar experiences. I (21, US) connects the values of improv to gender exploration, stating: "I'm involved in a lot of kind of improvisation and […] the philosophy is "use pleasure" or "use […] what interests you in order to inspire what you do next" and I think - you know the discourse on gender is always like "oh, poor trans people, They feel so uncomfortable," when actually it's about finding what you like and finding what feels good and then asking for it." D (22, US) had similar experiences in regard to medical transition – "one of the things that I wanted to try for my gender was to go on testosterone so that changed a lot of stuff too, you know. So [dancing again is] like re learning how to walk as like the way I want to walk now and just figuring out how to function in this identity." This suggests the importance of dance for T/N/GNC people as a tool for exploration – all the more reason to ensure that dance spaces are open to them.

Another facet of this connection between gender and dance comes up in Troll's writing. In discussing the importance of dance for trans people, Troll emphasizes the body-mind connection built by dance, and states, "To dance is a chance for trans people to rediscover our bodies. Instead of having to look at ourselves through the lens of "feminine/masculine", "passing/nonpassing", "acceptable/dangerous", "for me/for someone else", we gain the lens of anatomy and physiology and art – what actually is going on in our body? How does it fit together? How does it work *for* us?" (Troll 2017a). Trans people are simultaneously reduced to their bodies by ignorant media coverage (e.g., reporting on medical transition where it is not relevant) and disconnected from their bodies through dysphoria and social pressures. C (23, US)

made a similar statement about the body-mind connection, saying "I think gender non-binary transness etc. tends to feed this idea that your body and your brain are very separate entities. And I think dance, for me, really bridges that. […] You don't have to love your body to have fun in it, and I think […] dance can help you find ways to have fun in it. […] I think dance really helps me not like, hate it. I think I would be a much unhappier, transmasc person if I was not dancing." H (21, US) agreed, stating "dance has allowed me […] that physical exploration that I think is really tied in to like your mental and emotional exploration. I think an advantage of you know, being someone who engages in a lot of dance practice is I see my body as less of like something I'm encased in, but something that I you know, can utilize to experience the world." This body reclamation and reconceptualization showed up for several participants in their experiences with gender euphoria[iv] as well. F described a moment of seeing himself in the studio mirror and seeing himself "as beautiful for the first time. I didn't see a trans person. I didn't see someone uncomfortable with their body. I just saw a dancer. […] So often as trans and gender nonconforming individuals we are uncomfortable in our own skin all the time and it was super powerful to have that moment of wow like I can be beautiful, and I can be OK in my body because of dance. And I continue to have those moments to do this day." Both D (22, US) and J (57, US) also described similar experiences with gender euphoria and increased comfort with their bodies as connected to dance.

While the responses related to dance and gender exploration were generally positive, there were certainly exceptions, and for many experiences were mixed. While the gender constructs that exist in many dance forms may serve as a space for play and experimentation in some circumstances, in many cases they are limiting. C (23, US) alluded to this issue when they stated, "I think there's something about dance that like put off my sort of – gender experience? Like I just was - I compartmentalized a bit so that I - because I was just like, 'oh, I'm just doing what I'm told to do.' And I think it sort of stunted figuring [gender things] out earlier." The prescriptive and rigid gender roles of many dance spaces can indeed be limiting, especially for young people raised in those environments.

Media representation of T/N/GNC dancers:

As previously mentioned, there are a variety of issues with how T/N/GNC dancers are (and generally are not) presented in the media. The first hurdle that became apparent from the participants' responses was the general scarcity of representation. When asked how they felt about the way T/N/GNC dancers were represented, A (30, Australia) summed up the issue concisely, saying simply "what trans dancers in media?" This sentiment was generally echoed by nearly all of the respondents. J (57, US) elaborated, "as far as how we're represented right now, I feel like we're nonexistent. It's upsetting because I feel that way about dance about movies, about books like, we as artists, I feel, are ignored," and H (21, US) said "I feel like I have to go looking for the trans and nonbinary representation in the dance world, and even then, it's like not a big, you know, you have mainstream and dance mainstream, and then you have like trans and nonbinary dancers." This scarcity connects to the argument made by Page about the lack of recorded trans history in general – "If you never see anyone like you achieve anything like your dreams, it's easy to begin thinking your dreams aren't possible" (Page 2017, 136) It is not just that existing T/N/GNC artists are not receiving recognition, but this lack of representation reduces dance's validity as a pursuit for T/N/GNC people.

When T/N/GNC dancers are represented, however, participants noted that the representation was lacking. B (29, US) expressed the importance of "being seen in a in a way that's not about like, oh god, we've got another bathroom bill, you know. Like being seen like on an individual level. Like 'hi, we're here and we're normal people,' it's just such a big deal, you know." Many participants saw T/N/GNC dancers as sensationalized and found that their negative experiences were often emphasized over the positive. J (57, US) expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "if there's anything that I see in any kind of movies or books or anything, it's this total angst of our transition and the pain and the suffering, and I don't ever see any joy represented like where - we can be happy - like you know and I don't - I don't see that." When asked how they would prefer to be represented, A (30, Australia) also said "I want representation of me to show like what is what is so positive and fun about being a genderqueer and getting to play with gender and dance." The desire for positive representation was echoed by several other respondents. The more sinister facets of poor representation also came up in several responses, including J's, who went on to say "I don't want to be represented as some sad depressed freak who's like trying to sneak into the wrong bathroom all the time. But I also don't want to be just...paint on the wall." C (23, US) also discussed clumsy representation of nonbinary characters by cisgender authors, saying "we're not prevalent enough that you can make a clumsy choice about this kind of character. Because then all we have are clumsy choices to choose from" The situation of desiring representation and simultaneously dealing with the repercussions of representation done badly is one faced by the T/N/GNC community in general – in 2015 trans people saw increased visibility in the mainstream, but with that came an increase in murders of trans people, and an increase of anti-trans legislation in following years (Page 2017, 142-4). When the mainstream narratives around T/N/GNC people are not controlled by T/N/GNC people themselves, there exists the possibility for negative and ignorant representation, which presents real dangers for the community.

Another facet of poor representation that was discussed revolved around the tendency for existing representation to imply that one T/N/GNC dancer's experience could represent the entirety of T/N/GNC experience in dance. C (23, US) put the issue this way; "I think some people almost see it as an instruction manual of like, this is how you're supposed to treat these people […] It gets tiring having to tell people gender is a very individual experience, and just because they see it on TV this way it doesn't mean that's everybody." Several other participants expressed similar concerns, and when asked how they would prefer to be represented mentioned that it should be made clear that one person's experience could never represent the entire community. D (22, US) said he would be okay with his journey as a trans dancer being shared, but only "as long as it comes from a humanizing perspective and not an objectifying or putting [me] on like a pedestal to represent all trans people. 'Cause I'm just one, just one person. My views are not…you know my identity is going to be completely different from another trans man or another trans person." This topic generally came up with regard to concern over the accuracy of media portrayals of T/N/GNC dancers, but Gossett and Huxtable make a similar argument about trans representation in the larger art world:

> "People don't actually want to deal with the idea that they're innately uncomfortable and that their entire lives are built around reinforcing really strict structures of sex equals gender, you know what I mean? And, the sabotage is to invite two trans artists to an event, to post the image on Instagram, to share the Facebook article, and to not actually deal with the structural assets" (Gossett & Huxtable 2017, 45)

Thus, the issue of tokenistic representation in media has become an issue of tokenistic hiring and opportunity in the very real world. When those who control funding, education, events, etc. within dance are able to include one or two T/N/GNC dancers and pass their experience off as the monolithic experience of all T/N/GNC dancers, the pressure to make dance more welcoming and accessible to T/N/GNC dancers at large is put off.

In a similar vein, participants felt that T/N/GNC dancers were too often represented only for being trans, and that their work and accomplishments should come first – as they generally do for cisgender artists. "I think trans dancers are represented for their transness, because they are trans, because they have a differing gender identity or sense of expression, and any story I read about a trans dancer is more about their gender journey and less about their artistry as a dancer," F (19, US) said. He went on to express that he was happy to have representation at all, but that "it's difficult to reconcile that when the only important thing about an article or a film that has a trans dancer is that the dancer is trans, not what they do with their art, not who they're impacting with it, not whose lives they're changing." Rather, F argued, "I would want [media] to focus on what I'm doing with the self that I've created. Something that has created me is not what you should focus on, you should focus on what I am giving to the world and what I can offer to other people." D (22, US) agreed, saying, "being trans is definitely a big part of my identity, but I wouldn't want that to be the only thing that defines me because [...] it's one part of me." D went on to emphasize that other parts of his identity, including race/ethnicity and disability, were also important parts of what made him who he is as an artist, and so while being trans is an important facet, it should not be overrepresented. While D, along with several other participants, was comfortable with details of his trans identity being shared, I (21, US) presented another view on how respectful representation could be accomplished, saying "I think part of being trans friendly and trans inclusive involves not knowing things about other people and accepting that there will be things about another person, either in their identity or their body, that you either don't get to know, like you don't have a right to know, or that you simply won't understand." While feelings were mixed about exactly how many details about a T/N/GNC dancer were too many, the general consensus was that when the dancer's gender identity became the primary focus, it drew away from and devalued the art they were creating.

Transphobic and exclusive structures in dance:

Perhaps the most universal topic among the responses was transphobia and other barriers in dance. These took a variety of forms, including strictly gendered technique/roles/costuming/ dress code, transphobic and trans-exclusive physical and figurative structures, and the general lack of T/N/GNC peers and mentors. Participants found that the gendered and sexed expectations for dancer's bodies, especially in ballet, were often directly exclusionary to T/N/GNC dancers who may not fit those expectations. I (21, US) put it thus –

> "we can talk about gender and performativity forever, and that's not going to change the fact that people are obsessed with biological sex. And that's something that you know…I think that's a huge reason why there aren't a lot of trans people in the dance world. Because when you're in a form that's obsessed with your body and doesn't acknowledge the fact that your body can change and mean something else It's really hard to be a trans person." He elaborated, "I think the other part of kind of transphobia in the dance world,

> in terms of medical transition, is that dance is all about the body, and there are people who talk about gender in dance based on body types. They're like, 'men lift, men are capable of these things, men […] inherently have these movement qualities and women have these inherent movement qualities,' or like this kind of pelvic structure."

These expectations are held as truth in ballet and other concert dance forms (French 2018), and yet they are not objectively true. As D (22, US) puts it, "your center of balance isn't going to consistently be in alignment with what your gender is, and then there's also like the 'oh yeah, women are not good at jumping' and I'm like – 'but I'm great at jumping,' you know. Even though technically I was assigned female at birth like it doesn't…I'm able to do everything and it's the way it's taught, not necessarily the bodies we have" Unfounded expectations about what bodies can do likely harm everyone in dance, but they can create real barriers for T/N/GNC dancers. For example, when a dancer wants to take a traditionally "male" role, there is a set of physical guidelines they have to meet. F (19, US) talks about the rigid gendering of ballet partnering, saying, "I am a very small boy, so it's really strange for someone to pair me with a woman, because most women are taller than me, and be like, 'OK, lift her.'" Many dancers don't have the opportunity to get even that far – I (21, US), said, "I think being trans, especially also being very short and trans masculine, has weeded out a lot of like 'we're looking for men who are over 5'9" and can lift women.' And so, well, I won't have the chance to take those opportunities." But, for T/N/GNC dancers, part of finding roles is finding them with companies that are trans-competent or at least accepting, and I went on to say, "I also think that those opportunities, even if I were 5'9", would not be the type of spaces that I would want to be in anyway as an artist." Nevertheless, these expectations seem to harm everyone – there are cisgender men who are shorter than 5'9", and cis women who are told they are too tall to dance professionally. Certainly, these standards serve to maintain the traditional "look" of ballet and other concert forms, but at what cost?

Following in the same vein, participants found the gender role rigidity of various dance forms to be limiting and faced increased scrutiny when they attempted to subvert them. E (32, US) talked about this issue in social dancing, saying,

> "when I used to look more femme and lead in classes, other leads, often folks who at least presented as cisgender men or normative men would ask like, 'why are you leading in this class?' Or sometimes if I'd be on the dance floor and I'd ask woman to dance and she didn't want to dance, she wouldn't just, you know - I'm happy to get a no, 'No' is a wonderful answer - but some people would kind of get like really flustered by that and not just say no, but also like appear distressed."

J (57, US) described a similar issue in ballet – "in the ballet world even now, where it's you know, girls dance on pointe and boys don't. Girls dance like this, and boys basically sort of lead them around the stage. You know, there's this very, very gendered way that you see in ballet." I (21, US) experienced this firsthand, "[there was] the inability to play with or try on other types of gender roles. Like I used to learn all the men's variations in the back of the studio, and it was something I was allowed to do, I was allowed to sit in and take the class, but I wasn't allowed to get credit for that or perform it." G (18, US) faced similar problems in commercial dance, "I've always wanted to be a commercial dancer, but I always meant to do the hip hop route. I didn't want to go like the sexy high heels situation, like normal girls do, I guess. 'Cause that's

commercial dance and that's what you do. And obviously I will do it if that means like - 'cause I love dance and that's what I want to do. But does make me comfortable? No." For these dancers, the rigidity of gendered roles in their particular forms prevented or limited them in filling roles and learning technique that "matched" their gender. For D (22, US), however, they had the opposite effect. D – a trans man – started ballet training after medical transition, and was stealth[v] for a period of time, during which he described being limited to traditionally "male" techniques. As he put it, "It was more like, oh, I'd like to do some pointe work, but at the time I was like 'but I don't want to be associated with anything to do with being a female 'cause I just transitioned. I'm definitely a man.' I didn't want anybody to question my gender. So, I developed this male persona that's more aligning with our society versus aligning with what it means to me to be male and be a dancer and doing what I want to do in dance and ballet." Thus, it seems that even in spaces that allow T/N/GNC dancers to dance in their preferred role, the rigidity of the roles themselves still creates barriers.

One could argue that the gendered division of technique (lead/follow, men's/women's class, lifter/lifted) leads to less well-rounded dancers. The more techniques and styles a dancer is competent in, the more knowledge they have to draw from when dancing, so what good can it possibly do for any dancer's development to confine them to only one role? To advance this argument, several participants reported that disadvantages and discrimination came less from their stated identity, and primarily from their inability or refusal to conform to the gendered expectations of the space. In discussing social dancing, and especially Latin dance, A (30, Australia) said, "it's very gendered space. There's a lot of a lot of gender expectations that come with dance, and it's stepping outside of those roles that can get you into trouble." For this reason, they said "I can imagine someone who is a woman who is highly gender nonconforming but cis might have a pretty similar experience to mine. There's so many contexts in which they wouldn't know the difference." C (23, US) faced a similar problem in concert dance audition spaces, saying "gender expression is such a big deal and I feel like choreographers are always like 'we want to see who you are' and I'm like, 'I don't think you do though.' Because you want to see what my best friend looks like and she's gorgeous and wonderful, but she's a beautiful femme dancer. Like if you want to put me with this other huge man then that's not going to match your narrative." J (57, US) faced a similar issue in auditions – "when I did commercial dance work, I found it difficult because I just didn't fit the look. Even - like I could dress the way I was supposed to, [but] my dancing style, the way I presented, I felt inhibited in getting work." In this way, T/N/GNC people are frequently barred from dance spaces even when they do not disclose their identity, simply because the rules of the form have predetermined what dancers should look like, determined primarily by stereotypes about how cisgender people look and dance.

Participants also discussed issues with gendered costuming and dress code in dance spaces. In a lot of ways, these issues boiled down to rigid gender roles, but also consent. E (32, US) talked about acrobatics costumes, and said "I didn't really have a way to advocate for a costume that I felt comfortable wearing, and so I wore the like feminine costume, but it really felt like a costume […] the costumes were distributed, you know by the attributed gender characteristics of the people and it also, you know, it's not my home culture, and so I didn't feel - I didn't feel right kind of challenging it in a lot of ways." In this case, E was teaching in another country, in a culture that was not her own, but this seems to be a pervasive issue, specifically in concert and commercial dance. F (19, US) brought up a structural issue with gendered costuming, "I will choose the male costume or the male option, but also my body is not that of a typical masculine person, and so the costume doesn't fit, or it doesn't look right, or it doesn't

work as well on my body." When costume designers do not design for the body they are dressing, but rather for some imagined "male" or "female" body, not only do they fail to create effective costuming for T/N/GNC dancers, but also anyone else who might not fit their body ideal. Dress code for classes has similar issues. G (18, US) discussed gendered dress codes and being forced to choose between binary options, "'cause I'm like, a female and I have to wear these things, because it's that class and that's the dress code, and then the guys will wear what they have to wear. There's no like inclusive middle ground." Several participants expressed a desire to have more input in costuming. G went on, "it was like, why couldn't I just tell you what I wanna wear and then, you listen to me? There was never like, nobody forethought to ask, you know. It was just this is what you're gonna do, this is what I'm giving you, deal with it.'" D, too, expressed a desire for more input. He talked about dancing shirtless for the first time post-transition and said, "I just wish I had had the first experience where I did decide to dance more or less clothed by my own comfort and by my own choice. That's…it didn't really feel like my own choice." It is no secret that theater and the arts in general have a consent problem, but it is easy to forget that the practice of good consent starts with these "little" things, like not forcing dancers to do or wear things that they are not comfortable with.

Technique and roles were not the only exclusionary structures participants encountered, however. Frequently, dance spaces were simply not designed with T/N/GNC dancers in mind, and instructors, choreographers, and directors sometimes proved to be ignorant or outright transphobic. In some cases, the structures which inhibited participants were very much literal. Several dancers mentioned the issues of bathrooms and changing rooms in both social and concert dance spaces. C (23, US) – who is nonbinary – had trouble getting access to a dressing room they felt comfortable using – "I had to really argue my way into that dressing room, and I justified it with the fact that I'm on crew. […] But I had to. I was like "why am I having to lie about wanting to be in a more comfortable space?" Or like the concept of my work is a better justification than my like, deserving of a space?" Although they did get access, the dance space's policy on changing dressing rooms generally requires dancers to choose either the men's or the women's, leaving no space for other genders. This was a problem for C, who said, "the literal physical building is having to say to me you're basically a girl." D (23, US) had a similar issue – although he used the men's locker room, it was not designed with privacy in mind - "I don't wanna you know, out myself by changing in front of any of the other guys who are cis because I'm like - I don't feel comfortable doing that. But then there's only one bathroom in the locker room for the men of the program." When the literal spaces in which people dance prove unwelcoming to T/N/GNC people, it is difficult for them to even begin to make a space for themselves.

The transphobia and lack of consideration for T/N/GNC dancers showed up in less physical ways as well, through ignorance, discriminatory attitudes, and a lack of space to bring up issues that may arise. J (57, US) described a discussion he had with a cisgender gay man in dance, who argued that doctors should be allowed to deny trans people healthcare. He described his bafflement at that, saying,

> "[it's] like just this idea that somebody that I figured was part of our own community would say, 'oh yeah, it's okay. It's okay to discriminate against you.' And I'm thinking, well, maybe as a gay man in dance, you don't know what it's like to be discriminated against when you're - 'cause everyone just assumes 'Oh well, you're gay man, you're a dancer,' or 'if you're if you're a man [and] you're a dancer, you're gay.' But they don't

> assume oh wow, like trans people can be dancers or lesbians can be dancers and he didn't seem to understand how much that discrimination affects - affected me."

On perhaps a more mundane level (although not less harmful), C (23, US) said, "I have experienced a lot of the general concept of 'you're basically a girl.' Which is a statement that makes it easier for the teachers, administrators, whoever, costume people. But it is not easier for me." Similarly, I (21, US) described an experience in which their identity was also ignored and invalidated:

> "I identified as nonbinary for a little while before coming out as like trans masculine or trans, and I was put in this piece about the experience of womanhood. (Which was being choreographed by a cis man so what the hell?) And I talked to him after rehearsal one day and I was like look, I'm not a woman, so I understand that that's what you're making this piece about, but I'm you know, being featured pretty prominently in this, and this isn't my experience, and he was like 'thank you so much for speaking to me' and didn't change anything. And. Yeah, there's a big…I don't know it made me feel very dysphoric because […] when I'm seen for only my body, I'm seen as a woman."

In these cases, T/N/GNC dancers' identities are simply ignored or are seen as something optional that does not warrant real respect and attention. In other cases, these dancers' identities served as points for veiled discrimination. In social dancing spaces, E (32, US) said, "I've never been, you know, barred from the door. But I have been questioned and I have been put in uncomfortable situations and I think the questions can be benign or they can be more aggressive." D (22, US) found that after he came out, some of his teachers started treating him differently, "some of them seemed to be supportive, but then some of their behavior indicated they were a bit transphobic, just like ignoring or just weird, like passive aggressive things." T/N/GNC people in general are used to some ignorance, and to educating the people around them, but some participants expressed that there were no convenient opportunities to bring up issues of gender and misgendering when they arose. H (21, US) said "what if my teacher misgenders me? Like should I say something, or you know… 'cause dance classes are - a least ones I've been in like a lot of the time - a really fast pace and you don't want to feel like a burden and [cis dancers] don't have to think about that per se."

As long as there is no opportunity to even communicate their needs, T/N/GNC dancers are bound to be marginalized and excluded from dance spaces. Indeed, several participants described situations in which they avoided or removed themselves from certain dance spaces and roles in order to avoid discrimination. For some, this meant avoiding certain spaces or even dance forms altogether. Despite seriously pursuing ballet, D (22, US) said, "the way that ballet companies are right now I'm not sure if I'm going to go into a strict like traditional ballet company, even though initially that's really what I wanted to do." Similarly, H (21, US) found themself drawn more towards modern and contemporary forms, which they found to be more welcoming. They felt they would face more discrimination in ballet or commercial dance, and that "I would be more self-selecting […] like I would count myself out before I would have someone to do it for me if that makes sense, because I wouldn't wanna have to encounter that rejection not based on merit or skill but based on something that's just like. Yeah. Part of who I am." In other cases, participants did not leave dance spaces or forms altogether, but they did feel that their identity forced them into alternative pathways or spaces than they might not originally

have planned. F (19, US) talked about transphobia in ballet auditions beyond college, and said, "It's pushing me into an advocacy realm of dancing, and making me think about, OK, do I want to start a studio that's, say, dedicated to queer and gender nonconforming youth?" C (23, US) talked about not really auditioning for roles anymore, beyond those that offered financial support – "I'm more happy working with my community that I found where maybe it's a little bit incestuous because we're all like doing each other projects, but we know […] we're the queer art family and we're not going to hurt each other." In social dancing as well, both A and E found themselves sticking to queer dance spaces over more general ones when possible. As E put it, "I definitely prefer and gravitate towards queer spaces, dance spaces whenever I can. And I do hold back when I'm in spaces that are - where I'm afraid of prejudice and so I think that affects my future in dance." Of course, all of these spaces – a queer-focused studio, a queer dance collective, queer social dances – are valuable spaces, but why should T/N/GNC dancers be forced out of the mainstream and into those spaces when they don't necessarily want to be? The transphobia and exclusionary structures of mainstream dance spaces exclude T/N/GNC dancers, and in so doing harm institutions by barring exceptional dancers from roles and spaces they could excel in.

In this process of exclusion, dance spaces are creating a whole other related issue – the nearly complete lack of T//N/GNC peers and mentors in dance spaces is both a reason that some of the aforementioned barriers remain so prevalent, and a barrier in itself. Of the participants who responded, 4 had no T/N/GNC peers or mentors in their dance spaces, 4 had only peers, and 2 had some peers and mentors. For all but one of these participants, T/N/GNC peers and mentors were rare, if they were present at all. F's (19, US) response paints a similar picture to that of several other participants who had T/N/GNC peers. He said, "I have never had a trans mentor. I have run into two dancers who are…another trans male and one nonbinary individual, but that's out of like dozens and hundreds of dancers I've met there are, there have been three of us who are not cisgender." The scarcity of peers showed up in two main ways in responses: firstly, as a magnifier for aforementioned barriers, forcing dancers to advocate for themselves in a space not built for them, and secondly as its own barrier, showing a lack of support for the validity of T/N/GNC dancer's place in dance spaces. Those dancers who did have peers found they faced these issues less and received more support.

In the first category, T/N/GNC dancers found that the scarcity of peers and mentors forced them to advocate for themselves more strongly in spaces where they were the vast minority. A (30, Australia) said "I literally never thought before you asked that question like, did I have any trans mentors or teachers or anything and I now wish I had, because […] I'm now considering how work I had to do on my own, I wouldn't have had to do if there had been someone whose footsteps I could follow, you know. […] the number of times I've had to forge my own path and insist and make space for myself, it's been a lot of times." For E (32, US) having peers was a matter of safety as well. As they put it "I enjoy dancing in mainstream spaces [vs. queer spaces], but I think because of the lack of representation, especially among instructors and in leadership, I am always looking over my shoulder." I (21, US) described transphobia in experimental dance – interestingly one of the areas that is generally less gendered – saying "in the sort of like […] women power energy of the experimental dance world, there is a lot of like lurking trans exclusionary radical feminism, or sort of like exclusion of trans masculine people, because of the kind of second wave feminism that a lot of the [unintelligible] dance world is built on. Which is, you know it gets complicated because it's nuanced and also […] basically, all of my superiors in the dance world are cis white women." For dancers in the minority, self-

advocacy was necessary, and spaces tended to be less welcoming. In sharp contrast, however, H (21, US) described their experience taking class with a nonbinary teacher, saying, "I don't know if I can ask people to use these pronouns for me, even though they're the ones that I need to feel like myself. I feel like I'm asking for too much, you know, but being in a space now where I have a teacher who not only […] has had similar experiences but is open to that, I feel like […] what I'm asking isn't too much, or it's not like being a burden like it's just basic humanity. So yeah, it's been really affirming and like feels really, I feel like really secure." It's not just about the pronouns, but also the ways in which having a T/N/GNC teacher/mentor can open up the space to discussion of pronouns and other potential issues. When there are visible T/N/GNC dancers in a space, dancers know the space will likely be a welcoming one, but when there are none, the opposite is true – dancers know that their needs and identities may not be respected, and they may have to fight harder for that respect.

In the second category, participants felt less confident or secure in dance spaces where they were the minority. E (32, US) said, "I'm you know, keenly aware when I'm the only queer person in the room that I can identify, or the only one who is you know dancing in a way that is - that is kind of not in the norm regarding gender expectations in this space." For some this feeling of standing out was merely uncomfortable, but for others it discouraged expressing their own identity in the ways they would prefer. I (21, US) fell into the latter category. As he said, "I think not seeing other dancers who push the limits of [gendered] assumptions made me feel really hesitant about, you know, going forward with the types of body modification and transition that I knew I wanted." In this way, a lack of peers affected not only external pressures for T/N/GNC dancers, but also internal ones. When participants described having other T/N/GNC peers and mentors, they generally felt more confident in experimenting and falling outside of the gendered expectation of the space. B (29, US) was the only participant who regularly had trans peers in zir[vi] (primarily contra) dance spaces. For zir, "the fact that I was seeing other trans men being like, yeah, heck yeah, I'm wearing a skirt, I want to be twirly, they very much helped me get over my like 'I have to prove myself' mentality." E (32, US) described an experience with a social dancing class where the teachers used a lot of binary-gendered language and technique. But, she said, "There were enough students in that class who presented as queer that I felt safe and comfortable like, playing with my gender expression and kind of being free and expressing my queerness, even though the teachers did not express themselves in a way that felt queer competent." In both of these cases, it was specifically the presence of other T/N/GNC dancers that allowed the participants to participate in and enjoy the dance space more fully. Having these peers around also served as validation for some dancers that their dreams in dance were in fact possible. G (18, US) gave an example of this when they talked about taking class from a nonbinary teacher:

> "it was just very interesting and very inspiring to see that there is a dancer that is nonbinary and so confident and so just out there and like 'this is who I am, I don't care. Whatever. You can say what you want to say, this is who I am. I'm gonna do this I'm going to wear this I'm going to live my life.' You know, and that was something that I was like 'wow that is possible' and I knew that it was possible but for it to become reality I was like dang, okay, so like anybody can be what they want to be. Boom, they just did it."

These experiences hearken back to earlier discussion of representation, and Page's argument about the necessity of seeing people like oneself achieving one's dreams (Page 2017, 136). It is one thing to know that other T/N/GNC dancers exist out there somewhere, but its wholly another to be able to dance with and for them, and these participants' responses suggest that the latter is something sorely lacking for T/N/GNC dancers at present.

A plethora of barriers to T/N/GNC success and participation in dance have been brought up in this section, but so often when T/N/GNC dancers bring up issues themselves to their own programs or dance spaces, they may not be taken at their word. When C (23, US) brought up issues in their program, they faced pushback. C said, "a lot of my experiences with administration has been, 'where are you getting that information?' When I complain about things, and I'm like what do you mean? Where am I... I am experiencing it […] but there's a lot of like 'what are your sources?' And I'm like, is my experience not enough? And it feels like it's not enough, like it's not academic enough, or it's not scientific enough that nonbinary-ness is a thing." This intentional or unintentional ignorance in cisgender dancers and administrators connects to a point made by Ahmed, who says "[an] institutional wall is not something that we can point to: 'There it is, look!' An institutional wall is not an actual wall that exists in front of everyone. It is a wall that comes up because of who you are or what you are trying to do. Walls that are experienced as hard and tangible by some do not even exist for others" (Ahmed 2017, 231-2). Cisgender dancers cannot be expected to see boundaries that are not real for them, but nevertheless if progress is to be made, they must listen when T/N/GNC dancers say they exist.

Desires/solutions/dreams for the future:

The final major theme in participant responses concerned their desires for ideal dance spaces, potential solutions to the myriad barriers for T/N/GNC dancers in the mainstream, and dreams for the future of dance. For the majority of participants if not all, inclusivity, intersectionality, community, and representation were important intersecting dreams for the future of dance. D (22, US) stressed the importance of valuing various identities and dance forms, stating,

> "I think the future that I would really like to help contribute to is something that's based in collaboration, where it disassembles the hierarchy of having one person director, usually belonging to all the dominant identities, in charge, where it's more of a collaborative effort between all the artists, the choreographer, maybe multiple choreographers. Because […] if you have collaboration of people coming from all different marginalized backgrounds then you can have so many more voices that contribute to the project."

I, (21, US) among others, also emphasized diversity and inclusivity, and broadened the category to include diverse bodies and levels of dance experience. He said "it's a weird struggle because all of my dance training has been for concert dance and to like, improve my technique in order to be better than the average person and different from the average body. But I also feel it feels kind of immoral to look at one body and be like "that body's better than another body." So, yeah, the future of dance is everybody getting to dance together ideally." Even in an ideal and inclusive future, the dance mainstream is not for everyone, and C (23, US) illustrated an ideal queer dance space, emphasizing stability, diversity, and community – "I don't dream about being in a dance

company that tours and…I don't know. I dream about having a - a salaried like job 40 hours a week, stable finances, but I also dream about being in a space with people who are like me and also people who are unlike me and. I don't know, like [a] queer creative think tank." J (57, US) also emphasized inclusivity, and argued that it needs to be overt and intentional; "I think it's really important for studios to consider equity and not just equality when dealing with gender, you know transgender or nonbinary, or you know, whatever, because we have been shunned for so long that sometimes we need to know that it's going to be a truly embracing environment, not just tolerant, but that they were going to be embraced."

Several participants expressed that it is not only important for dance spaces themselves to be diverse and inclusive, but that the histories shared about the dance form and the stories told in performances also should be more diverse. A (30, Australia) described how one social dancing space they spent time in had posters of famous dancers on the walls, but that there were no queer dancers represented. For them, "another feature […] of an ideal dance space is one that brings up the very queer and trans history of these dances and treats it as a natural part of what these dances are." Not only would this representation provide a more complete history of the form, but it would also allow queer dancers to belong in the space. D (22, US) had similar hopes for concert dance performance material; "I do love ballet, but currently the types of narrative stories they're telling really don't appeal to me. I wish…and I mean this is one of the things I would like to do eventually myself, but like collaborate with other people to make newer story ballets that tell, you know stories of marginalized people and put them in the spotlight." For D, this is not just for the benefit of marginalized people, but for the dance form as well. As he said, "in my opinion [ballet is] going to die off if it doesn't start becoming more reflective of all the different types of people in the world that may want to do ballet but watch you know, Swan Lake and be like "well I'm not in that narrative so why on earth would I ever want to do that?" Or "why on earth would I ever want to support that?" Although discussed in a variety of forms, inclusivity, diversity, and community seem to be the overarching principles of participants' dreams for the future, and they extend far beyond T/N/GNC inclusion.

Unsurprisingly, changes to physical structures such as bathrooms and locker rooms also came up in participants' responses, although they generally opted to spend more time on areas that are less well-explored in the mainstream. Both B and D brought up gender neutral bathrooms explicitly, and D (22, US) said, "I would like, you know, gender neutral bathrooms and different locker rooms that don't have genders assigned to them where you know there's one that's like a private locker room in case anybody just doesn't feel comfortable." Beyond physical structure changes, D also brought up another concept for studio/company structure: "advocates and advisors who can be there for [dancers] as part of the program, where that is their job. So, then you don't feel like you're just advocating for yourself." While the option for employed advocates was not brought up by any other participants, it suggests an option for cisgender-dominated dance spaces to make themselves welcoming to T/N/GNC dancers early on, without relying on their T/N/GNC members to do advocacy work on top of their usual participation.

While again not every participant saw some semblance of divided roles as bad, every single one of the participants made a suggestion concerning the de-gendering of some part of their area of dance, be it technique, roles, costuming, etc. For those in social dancing spaces, the primary focus of gender role deconstruction was the lead/follow position and differentiated technique. B (29, US) said, "I would very much like to see a deconstruction of attitudes in social dancing circles such as blues and swing circles where you know, you can go pretty much anywhere and not have it assumed like 'oh you look ... you appear on the surface to be X gender,

therefore you must, you know, be dancing this role'" A (30, Australia) described dance experiences that, for them, met this ideal. In these spaces, there was some marker besides gender that denoted leads and follows – in one case blindfolds for follows, in another, armbands for the leads. In these situations, A felt "They made the barrier to access a lot lower because I didn't have to insist for myself. I didn't have to say like every time no, I lead. […] it just made it really smooth and seamless, like just putting on an armband." A also found their ideal in classes where the teachers swapped lead and follow roles regardless of gender, casually normalizing the practice. The desires expressed for de-gendering technique in concert dance – and especially ballet – were similar. More than one participant suggested that "women's" and "men's" technique class should be de-gendered by allowing anyone to take either one, and also offering a more neutral option. D (22, US) suggested, "[in] partnering - you have a problem with not having enough men, so just don't make men be the only partners anymore. Like, have people who do pointe, have people who can do partnering, then anybody can do any role and then it becomes more of - What style do you like doing and how can that pair up with someone else, versus what your gender is."

Participants' interest in de-gendering concert dance technique also tied in closely with de-gendering casting and performance roles. For C (23, US) "it's definitely about breaking down this binary system. And it's so attached to aesthetic, like I don't know what a man means, but I can tell you what a man is supposed to look like from the choreographer's point of view." Stating the issue a bit more strongly, I (21, US) said, "I think, you know, basing an artistic practice around someone's gender without allowing room for exploration or change is transphobia." But, said D (22, US) "in a world where people have less biases, then [roles] would be cast based on what the character represents, and it could be anyone from any gender background, from any cultural background, from any race background, the disability or non-disability...whatever. they would just be the character. So, anybody could become a main character of this, or a partner of someone else. It wouldn't be tied to any expectations that already exist." D's ideal goes back to the overarching concept of inclusivity and intersectionality, while at the same time suggesting a wholly different way of looking at casting roles – based on who is best suited to the part, rather than who checks the boxes of the choreographer's predisposed notions of who can and cannot embody the character. F (19, US) had a similar statement - "regardless of gender roles, you should pick the person who can do this role the best, not the person who biologically is predisposed to do this role the best." While there may be good reasons to cast a dancer with a certain identity to portray a character of that identity, participant responses suggested that perhaps choreographers should think carefully about when that is really necessary. For example, if you are tied to having people of certain genders play characters with certain fixed gender roles, are you creating roles for all genders? Because if not, certain groups are being entirely excluded from the choreography.

Participants in concert and commercial dance also expressed hopes that costuming and dress code would become less gendered in future. F (19, US) described seeing a piece in which all of the dancers regardless of gender wore skirts; "they did not make a differentiation between the costumes for men and women, and I think that's something else that needs to be represented a lot more. Not only because the just – the fairness of gender expression and letting anyone wear whatever they want and whatever they feel comfortable in, but also the uniformity of the piece." F did not argue for constant uniformity, but rather for the consideration that costumes do not need to be different along gender lines – binary or otherwise – and sometimes arbitrarily gendering costumes can make certain dancers stand out in ways that make no choreographic or

narrative sense. G (18, US) expressed similar ideas for a more flexible dress code, saying "maybe even tailoring the dress code to what people would be comfortable wearing […] Like there's a difference between baggy unprofessional clothing that is like just overall bad for the class where you need to see lines and stuff, as opposed to - I mean, there could be like a grey area all around. like everybody has to wear like this certain amount of - like this certain type of dress code [regardless of gender]" In this way, dance spaces could maintain their standards in regard to dress code, without creating unnecessary barriers for T/N/GNC members.

Many of these gender-defying practices do exist somewhere, and indeed some participants spoke from experience. However, nearly all of them existed within certain marginal spaces, or in queer-specific dance spaces. As J (57, US) put it, "why does it have to be some sort of specialty ballet company where you see anybody dancing on pointe or any…you know, regardless of gender, why are there these specific ways we're dressed or specific movements that we do that are so gender based?" In general, participants hoped to see these changes entering more mainstream dance spaces, so that T/N/GNC dancers could more comfortably and safely participate in the wider dance world.

Finally, participants had mixed feelings about the use of gendered language in dance spaces. For some, inclusive language was important for the creation of an inclusive space. Others, however, felt that what mattered were the attitudes within the space, and binary gendered language was acceptable so long as the attitudes of participants were inclusive. Arguments over language change in concert dance tend to be strongly in favor of change and focus on "women's" and "men's" technique, as well as increased care about pronoun usage. In regard to pronouns G (18, US) said, "I feel like more teachers should ask dancers what their pronouns are, because I have had a few of my teachers actually this past semester ask […] what our pronouns are and what they would want us to be referred to as. And I thought that was incredible like that made me so happy because I was like, thank you for actually putting that forethought in you know." H (21, US) agreed, saying "you know I still get 'she' a lot even though like I, you know tell people my pronouns and it's it is fatiguing to have to correct people all the time." Although some participants found them more noteworthy than others, conversations around pronoun usage and concert dance were not very controversial. Social dancing, however, had a stronger debate around gendered dance terms like contra's "ladies and gents" vs. swing's "lead and follow." B (29, US) outlined the issue and gave their opinion:

> "Contra dancing has this very strong internal discussion about like, okay, you know, how do we be more gender free? […] I think that's very indicative of the like the internal community is very much trying, you know. Whereas like swing and blues, for example […] the language that has been with the with those communities for years and years and years might not be as gendered as contra language but at the same time, the like the attitudes are very much […] lead equals man follow equals woman.

Thus, in contra the language is gendered, but the attitudes are more inclusive already, whereas blues and swing already use genderless language, but the communities that participate are generally less inclusive. For B, the answer is clear, and they went on to say, "I would much rather see people change their attitudes than change the language they use." Incidentally, E (32, US) agreed, saying "it - for me is a lot less about terminology and more about philosophy, and you can't, you know, I think you can't ask a teacher to use words that accommodate you if they don't philosophically agree that you deserve to be accommodated." Nevertheless, the debate is

ongoing in the wider world of dance. While it remained undisputed that dance spaces should be more open about pronoun usage, the language used for gendered roles was more controversial.

In all of their suggestion and dreams, participants expressed hope that the dance world is, in fact, moving towards a more inclusive and welcoming future for T/N/GNC dancers. E (32, US) expressed the general sentiment in saying "I think that folks who love to dance will do that, and a lot of us happen to be queer in all the different ways, and so you know I'd just like to see all of us having spaces that are safe for us to be ourselves and to push boundaries and to have fun." Despite the barriers these dancers have faced, they are ready to continue striving for these ideal futures.

Discussion:

This study explored the experiences of trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming dancers based on interviews with 10 participants. The responses suggest that while dance can be a valuable space for gender exploration, T/N/GNC dancers face a variety of barriers, including structural and systematic barriers in dance spaces as well as poor media representation. T/N/GNC dancers are, however, generally hopeful for the future, and envision a more inclusive dance world with fewer rigid gender roles. The recorded interviews provided enough information to observe several patterns in the responses, although the small sample size (10 participants) is not large enough to make generalizations. It should be noted in analyzing responses that all participants were transmasculine, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming – no trans women or explicitly transfemme dancers participated. It is not clear whether this imbalance is due to a lack of trans women and transfemme people in dance, or whether it can be accounted for by something else. Further, although the study was open to participants from any country, 9 out of 10 participants lived in the US. US college students were particularly over-represented (at least 5) likely due to the advertising method. Although not a limitation, some participants discussed how their gender identity intersected with other marginalized identities in dance spaces, and these observations were not differentiated from those responses that discussed primarily gender identity. Future research is needed to explore the intersection of these identities, to explore the experiences of trans women and transfemme dancers, and hopefully to conduct similar interviews with a much larger sample. Although this research cannot provide generalizations to the experiences of the entire T/N/GNC community, it does provide valuable insight into a subsection of a population that has been the subject of little to no research to date.

The first objective of this study was to build on existing knowledge about the experiences of T/N/GNC dancers. Participants found that dance played a role in their gender exploration, and for some provided a mind-body connection that they felt was lacking in their experience as T/N/GNC individuals. Participants also discussed a variety of barriers they faced in the dance world. These included heavily gendered technique, costuming and dress code, and dance roles – dance instructors, peers, and administrators who were ignorant or transphobic – and a lack of T/N/GNC peers and mentors in their dance spaces. In some cases, these barriers had driven participants away from certain dance spaces, which suggests that a lack of T/N/GNC dancers in mainstream dance spaces may be a self-perpetuating issue: as long as there are no T/N/GNC dancers in the space, others in the space are not forced to challenge the transphobic structures they perpetuate. As long as cisgender dancers and administrators do not take real action to deconstruct those transphobic and exclusionary structures, T/N/GNC dancers will be forced out of dance spaces.

The second objective of this study was to gauge participants' feelings about T/N/GNC dancers in media, both as they are and as the participants feel they should be. For the most part, participants felt they were deeply under-represented in the media, and some could not think of any representation at all. The general sentiment was that when T/N/GNC dancers were represented, they were not always represented well. Specifically, media presentation of T/N/GNC dancers should focus less on the negative experiences and more on the positive, avoid discussing medical transition and other personal details that are not relevant or respectful, and prioritize the dancer's art over their gender identity.

The final section of the study was dedicated to participants' ideal dance spaces and dreams for the future of dance. Generally, participants agreed that the ideal dance space would be significantly less rigidly gendered than present ones. Further, it would be intentionally inclusive and intersectional, and would be a community that makes space for varied identities and experiences. While for some these were dreams of the future, for others they were descriptions of spaces they had already been in. Indeed, some of these suggestions are already implemented in existing queer dance spaces, notably queer social dances such as the contra dances attended by some participants and the queer tango spaces studied by McMains (2018); the Queer Dance Project and programs like it, which offer trans-led and trans-inclusive dance classes (Michaels 2020); and Katy Pyle's Ballez company, which runs queer dance classes and stages gender-inclusive retellings of classic ballets (Burke 2018).

What steps, then, can existing dance spaces take to put these findings into action, and should they? Of course, these responses do not express what every T/N/GNC dancer wants or needs – the trans experience is not a monolith, as established previously – but participants' discussions of existing barriers and hopes for the future can serve as a starting place towards a better understanding of the community's experience and needs. Other writings on the subject can also provide direction, including Greenhood's paper on hiring discrimination in ballet (Greenhood 2016), Nyugen's article on proposed changes to gendered language in audition notices (Nyugen 2018), and Dorsey's discussion of barriers for trans men in dance and gendered language in the theater (Burbank 2019). But should dance spaces work towards these changes? The participants responses suggest an overwhelming "yes." Making dance spaces more welcoming to T/N/GNC certainly benefits the dancers themselves by providing more opportunities for participation and performance, as well as greater safety and security in dance spaces, but it also provides benefits to the dance space or institution. When dance spaces are truly welcoming to T/N/GNC dancers they appeal to a wider audience. Participants suggested that they were more likely to gravitate towards queer-friendly classes and events, and that T/N/GNC audiences might be more likely to attend performances where they see themselves represented. Further, when spaces stop rigidly gendering their roles and techniques, they are free to hire the best dancers and instructors available, rather than just those that check the right gendered boxes. While these transitions may not be easy for traditional spaces, the world is changing, and dance spaces would do well to keep up.

Appendix: Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What country do you live in?
3. What kinds of dance do you do, and how long have you been dancing?
    a. How would you describe the role of dance in your life?
4. What terms do you use to describe your gender identity (or lack thereof?)
    a. What pronouns can I use to refer to you?
5. How would you describe your experience as a (trans/nonbinary/GNC) dancer?
    a. Can you think of a specific time or event that really illustrates your experience as a trans/nonbinary/GNC dancer?
6. Have you had trans peers/mentors in your dance spaces?
    a. Can you tell me what that was like or how it impacted your experience?
7. Do you think your experience is significantly different from that of the cis dancers around you?
    a. Have you ever experienced advantages in dance as a T/N/GNC person?
    b. Have you ever been disadvantaged or discriminated against because of this?
8. Has being T/N/GNC impacted your opportunities or future plans in dance, and if so in what ways?
9. Has being a dancer impacted your exploration of your gender?
10. Are there ways that your areas of dance, or the dance world in general, could be more welcoming to T/N/GNC dancers?

11. How do you feel about the way trans dancers are represented in media? (News articles, movies, TV)
    a. If someone were writing a news story about you as a T/N/GNC dancer, how would you want to be represented? What should they emphasize or avoid?
12. What does the future of dance look like to you? (as a trans dancer but also as a dancer in general)
13. What are some features of your ideal studio/company environment?
14. What are some features of your ideal role or performance piece?
15. Is there anything you would like to share that I haven't asked about?
16. Do you have any questions for me?

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[i] Cisgender – a person who is not transgender, who's gender identity matches their gender assigned at birth.
[ii] Nonbinary – a gender identity that does not align with the western male-female binary. Nonbinary is not a "third gender" but rather a multitude of alternative gender experiences.

[iii] Gender-nonconforming – someone who does not identify entirely as cis male or female, but also does not necessarily identify as transgender or nonbinary. Often used as a catch-all term.
[iv] Gender euphoria – the opposite of gender dysphoria, a feeling of comfort, satisfaction, relief, or euphoria upon being perceived (by oneself or others) in a way that fits one's gender identity.
[v] Stealth or Stealthing – when a trans person is perceived in a way that matches their gender identity and does not disclose publicly that they are not cisgender.
[vi] Ze/Zir – a set of pronouns that do not denote any particular gender.