

Transgressively tWERQing:
Using Dance Fitness as a Tool for Empowerment
[performative essay]

Terra Rasmussen Lenox
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Megan Orcholski
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee



This is the tale of a female feminist fitness instructor helping participants to feel empowered by reclaiming their right to pop, twerk and shake away from the patriarchal gaze of society. Through this paper I share my story and experience of finding and creating a space of empowerment through a dance fitness format called WERQ. This auto-ethnographic performance invites the audience in to experience the ways WERQ space can function to push through normative barriers for instructors and students by weaving my story with music, participant testimony, photos and theory. My overarching purpose is to give a compelling account of how theory can become action, where dance fitness becomes a means for enacting accessible feminism and self-empowerment.

Keywords: Feminism, Performance, Autoethnography, Translational Scholarship, Dance Fitness



Reader Instruction: Find the song Solo Dance by Martin Jensen and play during the next section.

The minutes leading up to the beginning of a class are typically riddled with anxiety:

will my music work?

speaker
malfunction
is a true
struggle in
my field

what if only one person shows up?

As much as I always boldly state that I'll
WERQ-it just fine with one other person...
I'll admit to you that teaching a dance
fitness class with one participant is awk-
ward no matter how hard you work to amp
up the energy.

Thankfully,

people begin to

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into the studio.

I switch my attention toward the faces looking at me in anticipation.

Some are familiar and give me an excited smile
(they know what they're in for)

other new faces make quick eye-contact and look away nervously
(they have no clue what they're in for,
which seems to terrify most people)

As the hands on the clock wind around
and the room fills up,
I encourage small talk, get names from new faces, and offer
words of encouragement

It's time. We're off!

“Hello and welcome!

My name is Terra and I'll be your WERQ instructor for the evening. For those trying this for the first time, WERQ is a fiercely fun dance fitness class where we'll pop, rock, and hip-hop our way through a sweaty sixty minutes. As we go I will build in intensity, but please know that everything I'm doing is a suggestion. Everyone look around the room. You many notice that every person in here is unique, meaning your bodies are unique, which means your moves will be unique! You do you and WERQ *your* way. Modify the moves to fit your body, but most of all, have FUN! Are you ready to WERQ?!”

I start every class this way, especially when I see new faces in the room, because I know how intimidating it can be to come into a new space no matter what the context. The teacher in me knows the best way to engage a class is to be immediate with them, so I do my best to radiate energy and positivity to melt away their nerves and trepidation of being in this new space. The feminist scholar in me knows the importance of celebrating our unique abilities, so asking everyone to recognize the diversity in the room and embrace it is the very foundation of my ideology. They may never give a second thought to this concept, but as an academic scholar who is acutely aware of the daily oppressive forces of patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, etc, I use this knowledge to create a space in which we can push back against the limitations of societal oppression. Outside this room I often feel helpless against oppressive forces, but in this space I have the ability to lift those burdens for myself and others.

By now everyone is smiling

I get a satisfactory
“Whoop!”
and
we warm up



Escaping the Shadow Dancers

Reader Instructions: Find the song Me and My Girls by Selena Gomez and play during the next section.

As the music starts, it fills the space
The outside feels more and more distant
This space feels more and more real

Within the confines of this school gym or fitness studio, we begin to feel safe
Separated from the forces inflicted on our bodies
The systems which dictate what category we are placed in
What worth we hold



Within this space, we start to feel our freedom
Freedom to explore our bodies,
playing with rhythm and movement
Safe from judgment
Safe from others
Away from Shadow Dancers
Determining our own worth

The shadow dancer is a term used to describe the phenomenon brought to light in an auto ethnography by Josie Duke (2004) that gives insight into the experience of dancing in public and having an unwanted stranger feel entitled to take the role of your dance partner without your consent. Often these dance partners attack from behind like a silent ninja with such force that the unsuspecting victim is left with confusion as to why her or his dance movements have altered. At least half the reporting women in a study done in 2014 have had this experience and report feeling dehumanized and unsafe (Graham, et al). For those who truly just want to dance and not engage in animalistic yet fully clothed procreative mimicry with strangers in public, this is a safe and sacred place. So much so that a popular occurrence is an 'afterWERQ' class when we dim the lights (or have lighting) and typically beverages and snacks to model a club...without the unwanted intrusions of a club.

Kicking Through the Glass

Reader Instructions: Find the song Just Like Fire by Pink and play during the next section.

The music picks up intensity
my energy elevates to push participants
to challenge themselves

With the music boomin'
I rely almost entirely on nonverbal communication
(with occasional 'whoops' and 'yelps'
to add to the overall excitement)

I love incorporating songs with messages that reinforce the positive capabilities of
my female body

This transfers to every feminine body I see in the room

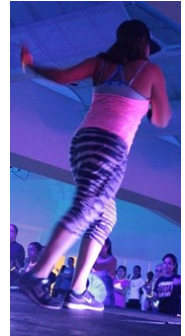
The songs come to us pre-choreographed. We get about 2-4 new songs a week. But I, as the instructor get to choose which songs I do. It is another way I get to craft the experience for the bodies in my room

I am continually amazed at how the theories I study present themselves here in this very real part of my life

as Pink croons "kick that ceilin', whatcha gonna say"
we all deliver a strong front kick!

I picture smashing my own personal glass ceiling

The smiles light the space
as every woman in the room
embodies a level of connection: body, mind, soul.
The move allows us to enact and feel our strength.
The strength we have to use every day
to perform in a culture
not made with us in mind.



At this moment, I feel our fear and frustrations with the constant attacks against womanhood which rage outside our sacred room dissolve as we radiate our own strength through our movement.

Moments like these give me chills because of the visibility of strength I can see in others.

Class this week almost brought me to tears after the barrage of madness stemming from Trump's comments that have brought social media to the brink of war, his forceful dismissal of my right to reject physical advances from men reinforces my internalized belief that society does not value my body as mine, but rather an object for others. I see the bodies of women of all ages physically releasing the tension and reclaiming inner strength in such drastic moments that words cannot possibly describe.

My Own Shadow Dancers

Reader Instructions: Find the song Ain't Your Mama by Jennifer Lopez and play during the next section.

My first WERQ class in 2011 gave me such a sense of elation
I was not the confident instructor in front of the room
I was one of the nervous new faces

As a young mother of two,
who had gained far more pounds than recommended
(I almost doubled my weight)
I lost my waist line and my self-esteem

I had just dropped out of graduate school after my first semester
which was riddled with emotional abuse,
(from myself and others)

I was in dire need of a reset

“I can think of no woman in my large circle of friends and family who was at peace as a new mother. I was shocked by how much I didn’t really understand about post-partum. Beyond all of the physical turmoil, I was even more unprepared for what mothering would do to me mentally. Although full-fledged post partum depression was kept at bay, I was melancholy, lonely and even somewhat bitter. I was blind-sided by what being needed by another human being 24/7 would do to my spirit” (White, 2011, p. 432).

I joined a gym that offered free daycare
so I could have just an hour to myself

I went to a Zumba class

After 20-ish years of dance training,
I tend to stick out in classes like this
even though I hid in the back to avoid attracting attention
to my sadly neglected body.

The instructor approached me after class to encourage me to try out another dance
fitness class called WERQ

I took her advice and WOW, something about the atmosphere just clicked with my
body and mind.

In just an hour, I felt stronger than I had in years.



We moved away from that town a month later
but WERQ had such a large impact on me
when I failed to find a WERQ class where we moved
I got certified to teach it myself.

I was terrified to teach!

I was overweight,
(by normative standards)
had panic attacks thinking about being in front of other people

Self-narrative:
“How could I be a fitness instructor if I wasn’t perfectly fit?”
horrible self-judgement
I almost quit before I started

Any time we enact our minority bodies in a way which questions or pushes against the normative powers working to silence and marginalize, we risk someone or something showing up uninvited.

Self-doubt, societal shame, familial disapproval.

These Shadow Dancers work as police, always there to join and change the purpose of the dance if it doesn’t adhere to the scripts we are supposed to follow

But my Shadow Dancers were not prepared for the WERQ Community

The instructors lift each other up in ways I’ve never experienced before

In the dance world,
I had only experienced
competition
friends at a distance

but here:
we genuinely care about each other.

Local instructors brought me in to “team teach”
gave me so much positive feedback

I started to believe them

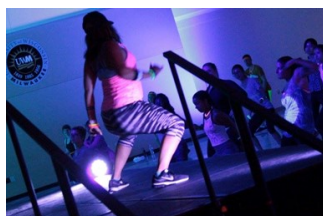
Finding Intersectionality

Reader Instructions: Find the video of Formation by Beyoncé and watch the entire thing.

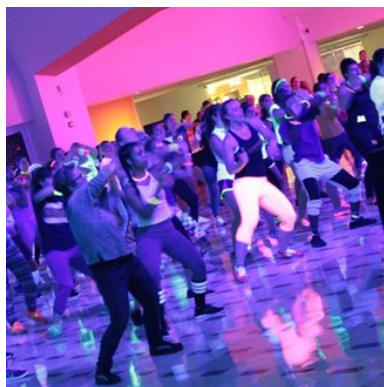
Then hit replay to have it playing while you read the next section.

When I started adding songs from Beyoncé's *Lemonade* to the class structure,
I struggled

Not with the physical moves
(#thickthighssavelives)
But with the worry I was taking something
That wasn't mine
That I was appropriating movement
Which did not belong to me



I kept asking myself if
my whiteness
negated the message of strength and cohesiveness
or worse,
could be viewed as mimicry or mocking.



I did not want
the celebration of my strength
to devalue another

Yet, as I look around
the many diverse bodies in my class
remind me
It is necessary to recognize the difference
between cultural appropriation
and
cultural appreciation

This class needs to be a diverse safe space
Where multiple types of people
Are welcome and represented

I am a vessel
The movement comes through me
for each participant to do

what they need
what feels right

The first time we began dancing to *Freedom* in class
I could barely make it through without crying
The passion of the lyrics
with movements inspired by Beyoncé's live performance
create an artistry
and intensity
I've never experienced before

As Beyoncé chants, "I break chains all by myself"
we punch our arms upward
as if shedding whatever shackles us
which changes based on our
Gender, Race, Class, Ability

In the safety of this space class,
we challenge the norms placed on our bodies
and recognize the intersectional difference
that make us distinct
yet united

Thou Shall Love Thyself

Reader Instructions: Find the song Love Myself by Hailee Steinfeld and play during the next section

Every WERQ class I teach
I purposely include a song
promoting self-love

I purposely put these songs in the middle or near the end of class
when the mind is fatigued
and
the body is drenched in sweat
When everyone needs a reminder of *why* they
push through and persevere
when quitting is so appealing.

Some days
I try to get participants to sing along with me
as I belt out "I love me!"



One day,
I was curious if others felt about this class
The way I did
I handed out notecards and asked for their feedback
This is what I received:

“WERQ makes me think that I can achieve and do things that I didn’t think I could, and have fun doing it!”

Caleb

“Everybody dancing together makes me feel excited. In addition, the music is really good to dance with”

Mia

“WERQ empowers me because it consists of moves I couldn’t ordinarily do. It stretches my body and my mind. Coming to class provides a different workout than my usual treadmill routine. It helps me to accomplish my weight loss and fitness goals. I have lost 24lbs since January! “She who overcomes others has force. She who overcomes herself is strong.” I enjoy the positive atmosphere and peppy music.”

Kayla

“It can be so hard to carve out time for myself as a mother—especially to exercise, but coming to WERQ is such a fun escape that it’s a treat. It’s my favorite night of the week!”

Cindy

“I can dance hip hop, and rock it even though “I’m a white girl”. I can also use my creativity to change some of the moves when I might not be able to have the freedom to use this creativity elsewhere”

Emmy

“Coming to WERQ lets me escape whatever has been going on with my day or week and have fun and “let loose”. I smile the entire time and feel rejuvenated and a new woman when I leave!”

Jan

“Coming to WERQ has made such a difference in my life. This class has made me feel so much stronger, mentally and physically. Even if I’m having a really rough week, just an hour of WERQ makes me feel like I can tackle anything”

Maddie

When it feels like the dominant voices in the world are spewing hate and exclusion, one of the most revolutionary act we can respond with is loving ourselves and others for exactly who they are.

Inner Strength is Unstoppable

Reader Instructions: Find the song Unstoppable by Sia and play during the next section.

Near the end of class,
Exhaustion highlights both
The flush of positivity and empowerment
As well as the feelings of struggle, fight, endurance

Sia's "Unstoppable" offers challenging moves
focusing on cardio endurance
which somewhat resembles a heart-attack in three minutes
One day, I look to my right
a woman who normally does the modified version for less intensity
is ramping it up
jumping off the ground
I make eye-contact
demonstrate the low-intensity version
(just in case she needs it)

but she grins
and
goes for it

Killing it with pride beaming on her face,
I become witness to her moment
when she realizes
her body is stronger than expected
she can do things
she thought were impossible

Lost in this moment with her
so in awe
I miss my cue
As we all struggle to pick back up, everyone giggles at me

As natural habit, I start to feel embarrassed
But the smiles remind me where I am
I am reassured

they know I'm human
and they think that's okay.
I need to be okay with it as well



Transgressing

Reader Instructions: Find the song True Colors by Zedd, Ke\$ha and play during the next section.

The choreography for Ke\$ha's "True Colors"
came the week after
the Orlando massacre

The movement captured the essence of what my body needed

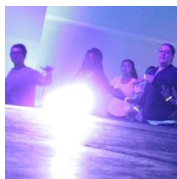
In a society where we are consistently told
a body's value is defined
by the government's interest in defending it
it is easy to fall into despair
feeling dismissed

To be overwhelmed
by
the Omar Mateens
the Brock Turners
the Dr. Lukes

But the physicality of the choreography:
covering our mouths
then breaking free
combined with the music
created a visceral experience
that resonates at a level deeper than words alone reach

For the first time,
I saw tears in the eyes of several participants
as they recognized the significance of the movement
of our bodies
symbolically transgressing these limitations
reclaiming our voices

The power of these movements
doesn't end with the class
these corporal movements
stay in our bodies
kept with memory
shifting slightly how we
encounter the world



Changed

Reader Instructions: Find the song Never Forget You by Zara Larsson, MNEK and play during the next section.

As the last song starts
we begin our cool down,
a collective sigh is felt throughout the room
both of relief in the anticipation of rest,
but also with the sad knowledge that our time together is ending

We all bow to let our torsos hang
over the strong (and often shaky) pillars of our legs
take a few moments to just breathe
Just be
Here
In this space

As we gently roll up, one vertebrae at a time
I see smiles on every face

“Thank you all so much for WERQin’ with me!
You’re all amazing!
Have a great night!”

Many participants linger, as if unsure how to leave this temporary community
where we share so much, yet so little
I rarely ever learn more about the people in my classes
than their name
maybe a brief story
Yet, we share so much more
in just an hour

