



CAWRI

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

Feral pedagogies: exploring how queer performance builds queer community, resilience and wellbeing

Final report

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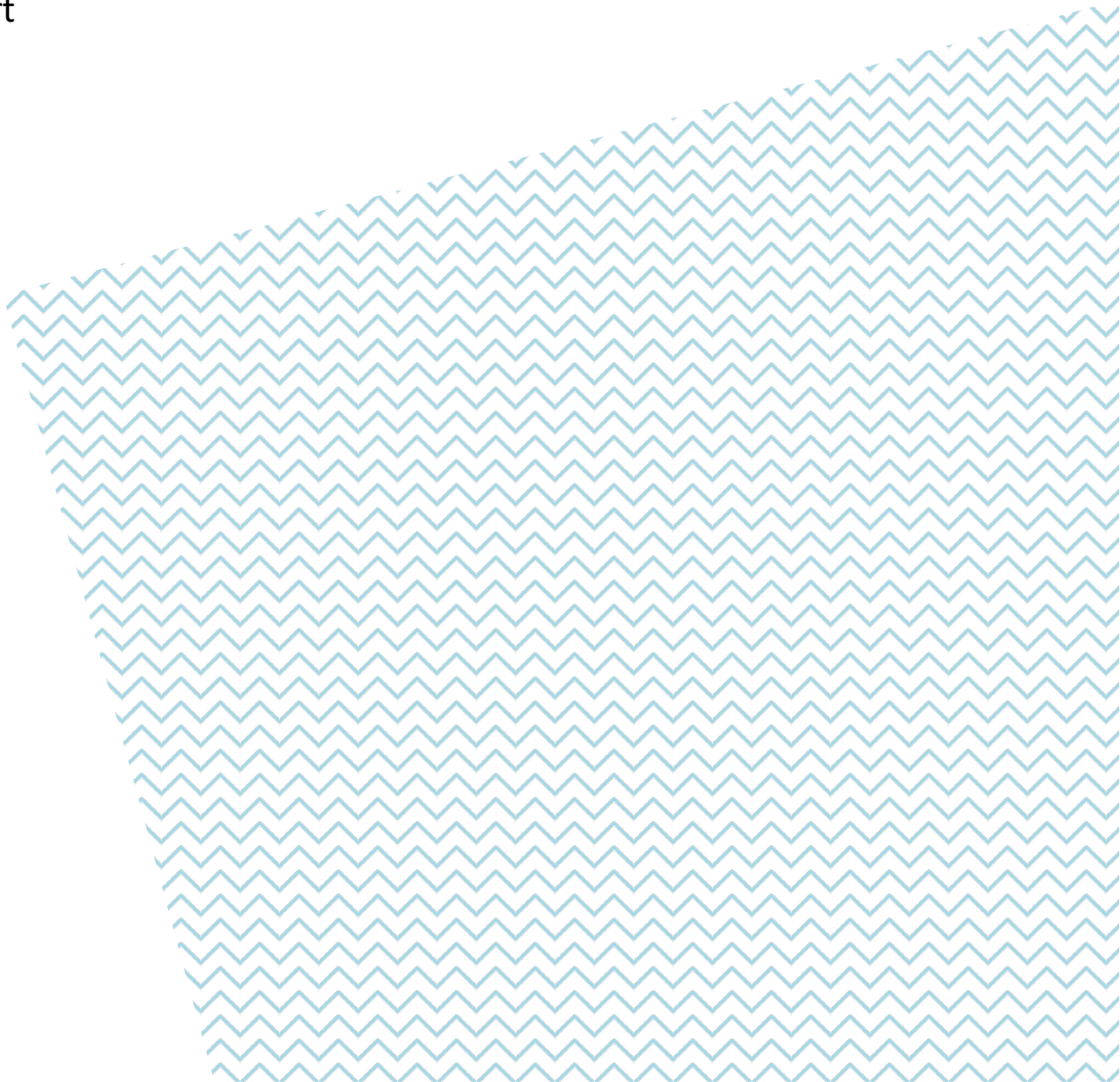


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Project summary

In the academy, queer performance is often dismissed as a minority interest, but this position underestimates what can be learnt from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and other (LGBTQI+) communities. The project utilized an innovative conceptual approach: 'feral pedagogies' to harness this knowledge. Feral is defined as 'the domesticated gone wild'; using 'feral pedagogies' as a methodology means de-domesticating queer knowledges and re-wilding the nexus of academic and queer community practice.

This is achieved by taking knowledge about queer performance and its impact on the wellbeing of queer communities out of the elite environment of the university and directly into community environments to facilitate new, peer-to-peer ways to think about queer experience. Piloted in Belfast in 2018, the Melbourne-based CAWRI-funded iteration of this project drew its data from observations of Feral Queer Camps (FQCs) convened by the researchers during Melbourne's 22-day 2020 Midsumma Festival in which queer people interested in queer theatre/ performance came together to watch and then discuss festival performances.

This project ran from September 2019 to December 2020.

Research team

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Background

Research context

In the face of persistent and sometimes rising levels of homophobic and transphobic discrimination and violence across the globe (Brown & Carnie, 2018; Calderwood 2021; Chao-Fong, 2021; Kassimeris, 2021; Stanley, 2021) queer performance work endures at a local level and sustains LGBTQI+ communities. Queer creativity in arts festivals, venues and events is a vital element in the ecology of queer sociality, and a key contributor to the wellbeing of LGBTQI lives (Kelaher et al, 2013; Wernick 2014). As marginalized communities whose creative work often sits outside the mainstream, queer arts and artists are chronically under-documented and analysed.

Project aims

The aim of this project was to investigate the past and present of queer performance in Australia to identify the impact of queer performance on the 'physical wellbeing, memory, social connectivity, identity affirmation and development, and personal and social resilience' ("Creativity and Wellbeing," 2019) of queer communities in Melbourne.

Specific aims were

1. To create a series of events and occasions to facilitate bringing into contact queer artists, audiences, organisations, festivals, academics, venues, funders and curators to identify, articulate and share how live performance plays a part in creating queer communities and how queer-identified people are sustained by them.
2. To build and test an innovative conceptual framework that combines queerness, ideas of the 'feral' (see Campbell 2019) and queer/feminist pedagogies.
3. To excavate and analyse the histories of grass roots queer performance, and how this work has had an impact on the wellbeing of both artists and audiences.
4. Through opening up spaces where diverse sets of LGBTQI+ people come together, to generate and share knowledge for the benefit of makers and audiences, and of the academic fields of performance and theatre, amongst others.

Methodology

The project's work is very closely interwoven with ground-breaking methods that emerged from the AIDS crisis, in grass-roots activism and self-education, for instance ACT UP's 'teach-ins' (see <https://actupny.org/documents/TI.html>). The teach-ins investigated the capacity of engaging in creative activities to enhance the physical and mental health of People Living with HIV across generations and demographics in Australia.

Feral Queer Camp's innovative conceptual approach was 'feral pedagogies' as a method of learning about queer creativity: how we make performance, how we watch it, how we talk about it - and why it matters for our wellbeing. The conceptual approach of 'feral pedagogies' is particularly significant and innovative within the queer community because so many queer-identifying people have felt excluded or alienated from mainstream education and yet are full of embodied knowledge that we can all learn from. This is peer-to-peer, queer-to-queer, learning.

Key findings

In the Melbourne collective of researchers and study participants, we did not seem to have a strong, shared history of queer performance but we had each experienced performance that made a difference to us and wanted to experience more. It became clear that campers had not been sure whether to join the Camp because they had an overwhelming sense that Midsumma Festival was 'not for them' – too male, cis, white, middle-class. Although we know Midsumma to be actively trying to redress this balance, a quick glance at the festival guide can easily appear to endorse this impression; it is clear who can (materially) and, more importantly who *believes* they can do put up an event. This reality possibly constitutes an argument against the current open registration system

which by its very nature precludes the strategic affirmation of policies of inclusion that a more selective system could support.

One area that came up repeatedly in the queer camps is an anxiety about being ‘queer enough’. This plays out in deeply personal ways and can be a barrier to people joining the camp. When we talked about people’s first memories of coming across the term ‘queer’, it wasn’t always as a positive thing. Throughout the event this anxiety and question was displaced onto the theatre shows themselves to ask, rather, if these *performances* were ‘queer enough’.

A key focus of the study is peer learning from one another’s insights, reflections and experiences. At times, our concern that participants may see us – the planners and organisers - as *the* source of knowledge were realised; but overarchingly, the camps provided a reminder that the relationship between theory and queer lived experiences extends beyond “ivory tower” views. At their best, FQCs comprise theory in conversation with “real life.” Theory can scaffold discussions, but the queer on the street is the expert when it comes to negotiating their life complexities.

The project confirmed that queer people in the community are intimidated and alienated by queer theory. ‘Theory’ seems a daunting prospect for many, and there is a reticence to think of ‘queer’ identity and ‘queer’ theory as related. There was a marked trajectory from start to finish in terms of getting to grips with some of those barriers and finding if and where theory could help, and what theory could offer to thinking through lived experience as a queer-identifying person.

Accessing some of the languages and spaces of the university has a strong impact on opening up debate around queer performance and what it can do. By the end of the project, the participants were developing their own ideas for festival programs in confident, creative and novel ways. The project also advanced network building opportunities for the participants – both in Melbourne and from other parts of the world.

Project outcomes

Major Creative Work – curated event

Feral Queer Camp. Curated event merging theory and practice in queer performance. Co-produced by Midsumma Festival and wreckedAllprods (2020/21). Funding: Midsumma Festival, Science Gallery Melbourne, CAWRI, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music research grant, and attracting national funding and international partnerships over 4+ yrs. See also <https://feralqueercamp.com/>

Academic Publications

Campbell, A., Cohen, M. Farrier, S. and McCann, H. 2022. “Embracing Feral Pedagogies: Queer Feminist Education Through Queer Performance.” In *Gender in an Era of Post-Truth Populism: Pedagogies, Challenges and Strategies*, edited by Penny Jane Burke, Julia Coffey, Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai. London: Bloomsbury. <https://www.doi.org/10.5040/9781350194625.ch-010>

Campbell, A. 2020. “Queering Pedagogies. Running interference and going feral: twin strategies that work two ways – in to and out from the academy.” *Theatre Topics*, Special Issue on Queer Pedagogies, 30 (2): 117-124.

Campbell, A. and Farrier, S. 2022 (in press). “How to Cook up a Feral Queer Camp: A recipe guide.” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Special Issue ‘What’s Queer about Queer Performance Now’, edited by A. Campbell, S. Farrier and M. Kumarswamy.

Other Publications

Kiernan, F., Campbell, and Farrier, S. 2021. "In conversation: Finding community and wellbeing through the creative practice of the 'Feral Queer Camp.'" NiTRO 35.

Further funding

Science Gallery Melbourne (\$5000) towards a Feral Queer Camp tied in with the Science Gallery's Breaking the Binary exhibition (2023).

Further and ongoing partnerships with Midsumma and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

Discussion, implications and future directions

The findings of the project raise some implications for LGBTQI+ festival curation and design; pedagogical practice; capacity-raising around community discussions of queer performance and how as queer people we discuss, review and analyse performances in ways that lead to deeper reflective processes around the work we make as practitioners.

Festival design/curation

In discussion with the participants, we found that they had a position about the content of Midsumma festival and the way it represented LGBTQI+ lives. The cohort were attracted to works and performers whose experience of gender and/or sexuality were beyond the homonormative – and participants talked about how the festival focused little on non-homonormative positionalities. *This may be something that could be usefully understood by programmers and funders for performance work.*

Pedagogical practice

We were also struck (though not wholly surprised) by the intellectual engagement of the FQC cohort who were not accessing higher education. *There is something to be reflected on about the way in which the reputation, languages and recruitment processes of the University disincline queer people to attend– even when there is much rhetoric around inclusion and diversity in the institution.* The elitism on which many institutions trade actively prevents some queer people from engaging – which deprives the university of people with something powerful to say about the cultures in which we live.

Capacity-raising:

We urgently need to build capacity in the queer community for how we, as artists and audiences, talk and write about queer performance, because, as we know all too painfully, there is a gap in knowledge in the mainstream system for reviewing independent queer work, which damages queer artists either by exclusion or misunderstanding. We argue that *it is vital to try to find new ways, such as Feral Queer Camp, for queer and trans folk to access ideas and theories that can open up liberating avenues for each of us to understand our lives and make queer sense of our embodied experiences.*

For the future:

We note that many participants were living in very difficult economic contexts while trying to engage with performances and make work. We understand that LGBTQI+ people are often disadvantaged economically and in terms of health outcomes ("Beyond the Myth," 2015) and we

felt this in the project we did. *Offering food as part of the meetings alongside free entry to theatre and performance work* was appreciated and, in some cases, vital to the project. *This is something we will stitch into the planning of all our future FQC alongside seeking funding to support travel to events.*

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More information

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