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Asking Questions About Mature Artistry and Adaptive Practices in Canadian Dance

Levantando Questões Sobre a Prática Artística na Maturidade e Práticas Adaptativas na Dança Canadense

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Abstract: Aging in professional dance deserves reframing; rather than tropes of decline, the (re)generative modes of artistic inquiry that mature dancers develop can inform perceptions of aging. We examined over a hundred publications spanning dance studies, dance science, and dance education, and learned that mature dancers embody adaptive intelligence through strategies of improvisation and redistribution and practices centred on mindfulness, expression, and spirituality. Yet, the strengths and expertise of mature dancers remain under-recognized due to pervasive ageism within Western dance cultures. Our cross-disciplinary literature review reveals a lack of integrated insight into mature dancers' artistry and health-related knowledge, including challenges, strengths, and potential forms of support. We propose a participatory, transdisciplinary framework for studying aging in dance that transcends boundaries between artistic and scientific knowledge, positioning mature dancers as co-producers of questions, methods, interpretation of evidence, and application of discoveries to practice. Our proposal is arrived at in two steps: First, we integrate existing findings on mature artistry and health across disciplines, which leads us to advocate for a transdisciplinary epistemology that enables clinical metrics to be considered alongside artistic analysis and positions mature artistry as a system of adaptive intelligence. Second, we connect insights from studies of community-based dance for older adults as inspiration to develop a participatory, transdisciplinary research framework. This framework centres mature dancers' embodied knowledge and modes of inquiry in the design, interpretation, and dissemination of research. By treating aging as a choreography of adaptation, the proposed framework transforms how expertise is recognized and how movement itself becomes a site of knowledge production.

Keywords: Adaptation. Aging. Dance. Health. Mature artistry.

Resumo: O envelhecimento na dança profissional merece uma reestruturação: em vez de tropos de declínio, os modos (re)generativos de investigação artística que os dançarinos maduros desenvolvem podem influenciar as percepções sobre o envelhecimento. Examinamos mais de cem publicações que incluem estudos nas áreas da dança, ciência da dança e educação em dança, e verificamos que dançarinos maduros incorporam inteligência adaptativa por meio de estratégias de improvisação e redistribuição, além de práticas focadas em *mindfulness*, expressão e espiritualidade. Ainda assim, as forças e o conhecimento especializado de dançarinos maduros não recebem o reconhecimento merecido devido ao etarismo difundido nas culturas de dança ocidentais. Nossa revisão de literatura interdisciplinar revela ausência de informações integradas sobre a prática artística e o conhecimento relacionado à saúde de dançarinos maduros, o que inclui desafios, forças e formas potenciais de apoio. Propomos uma estrutura participativa e transdisciplinar para o estudo do envelhecimento na dança que transcende as fronteiras entre o conhecimento artístico e científico, posicionando os dançarinos maduros como coprodutores de perguntas, métodos, interpretação de evidências e aplicação de descobertas à prática. Nossa proposta foi elaborada em duas etapas: em primeiro lugar, integramos descobertas existentes sobre prática artística e saúde entre dançarinos maduros em diversas disciplinas, o que nos leva a defender uma epistemologia transdisciplinar que permita que métricas clínicas sejam consideradas juntamente com a análise artística e que posicione a prática artística entre idosos como um sistema de inteligência adaptativa. Em segundo lugar, conectamos as ideias obtidas em estudos sobre dança comunitária para idosos como inspiração para desenvolver uma estrutura de pesquisa participativa e transdisciplinar. Essa estrutura concentra-se no conhecimento corporificado e nos modos de investigação de dançarinos maduros na concepção, interpretação e divulgação da pesquisa. Ao tratar o envelhecimento como uma coreografia de adaptação, a estrutura proposta transforma a forma como o conhecimento especializado é reconhecido e como o próprio movimento se torna um espaço de produção de conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: Adaptação. Dança. Envelhecimento. Prática artística na maturidade. Saúde.

Introduction

Dance in Western cultures, including Canada, is youth-centric, celebrating young, controlled, and able bodies. Performance culture that requires high athletic and technical demands or is incompatible with family care-taking roles often leads professional dancers in Canada to transition into non-performing roles (e.g., teaching) or retire from dance in their 30s (Flower, 2019; Hill, 2005; Keefe, 2010; Lee, 1988; Roncaglia, 2006).

As Hilde Rustad and Gunn Helene Engelsrud (2022) note, a growing body of dance literature critiques ageism within Western (including Eurocentric settler) dance culture and calls for greater attention to the work of mature dancers. Liz Schwaiger (2005) and Bryan S. Turner and Steven P. Wainwright (2003) observe the mature dancer's professional life is often framed within a narrative of decline, where maturity signals limitation rather than expertise or refinement. This ageist discourse persists at the heart of dance cultures, where the skills that allow the body to think, adapt, and express are dismissed once natural aging processes become apparent (Martin, 2017; Nakajima; Brandstetter, 2017; Rainer, 2017; Rustad; Engelsrud, 2022).

These cultural narratives of decline are mirrored and reinforced within institutional and scientific approaches to dance, particularly in how professional longevity is conceptualized and supported. Many studies in dance science and dance medicine have addressed problems related to the truncation of professional longevity (Baumol; Jeffri; Throsby, 2004; Greben, 2002), with few institutional structures designed to sustain artists beyond midlife. Studies of Canadian contemporary dance reveal how mature dancers must negotiate physical and mental demands without systemic support (Hansen; Kenny, 2019).

These examples illustrate how the current dance literature tends to separate forms of knowledge into either aesthetic or psycho-physical domains. The former belongs to the realm of artistry, the latter to fields of health and professional transitioning. Research lacks holistic integration of artistic and health insights on the topic of age and dance; at present, each tends to be discussed separately, leaving little space for an integrated understanding of how mature dancers both adapt to physiological and psychological changes and transform their artistic practices. This division points to a deeper epistemic gap. Dance studies and dance science have both generated rich bodies of knowledge, yet they rarely intersect in ways that illuminate how artistic intelligence and bodily adaptation co-constitute one another over time. Research on injury, pain, or career transition (Greben, 2002; Harrison; Ruddock-Hudson, 2017) offers insight into physical strain, but seldom reveals how dancers reimagine and adapt their artistry through those experiences. Conversely, aesthetic and critical research on aging in dance (Rustad; Engelsrud, 2022; Weinstock, 2010) exposes stereotypes but tends to remain distant from the embodied data that could substantiate and transform those critiques.

The question, then, is not simply how to represent mature dancers more positively, but how to produce knowledge of mature artistry within a framework that values health, embodiment, and adaptation as integral to creativity itself. How might participatory and transdisciplinary approaches that bridge the analytic traditions of dance studies with the empirical insight of dance science help render more porous the field's resistant ageism?

Through a narrative review of over a hundred publications across dance studies, dance sciences, and dance education, this article offers an interpretive synthesis of existing research on dance, aging, and health, with the aim of tracing how these different disciplines conceptualize mature artistry and the mature dancer's body. We analyze how knowledge is produced and how disciplinary divisions shape what can and cannot be known about mature dancers' practices. Our focus is on identifying epistemic patterns that reinforce ageism

and on locating conceptual and methodological openings for inquiry that may affect positive change. We identify potential solutions in participatory, transdisciplinary frameworks from a collective standpoint emerging within Canadian research ecologies, where artists, scholars, and scientists are beginning to co-produce knowledge rather than exchange it across disciplinary lines.

Method

We chose the form of a narrative review to engage with literature that does not consistently intersect methodologically or disciplinarily. As Javeed Sukhera (2022) notes, narrative reviews are well suited to synthesize diverse bodies of work by prioritizing interpretation and critique over narrowly focused comparisons. The aim of this review is to examine knowledge across fields, rather than attributing arguments to individual authors or assessing evidence hierarchies. Our synthesis offers a conceptual map of how knowledge about aging in dance is distributed across disciplines and how we may bridge disciplinary divides, enabling meaningful dialogue and future research.

The literature reviewed derives from research spheres which can be broadly understood as: (1) critical and artistic research on aging in professional dance, (2) empirical health research on aging in professional dance, and (3) community-based dance interventions for aging populations. The first category mainly includes publications in dance studies, performance studies, and age-related studies, which offer both critical analyses of selected mature dancers' professional practice and emerging conceptualization of mature artistry. In the second category, we include studies on mature dancers' health, occupational challenges, career transition and retirement, and social wellbeing—often deriving from dance medicine and science, kinesiology, and dance education. Under the third category, we consider studies on dance for older adults in community settings, often situated within health-oriented and aging-focused research on community dance. Although these studies are rarely discussed in relation to professional artistry, they are included as examples of adaptive dance practices that promote well-being among older adults. An early stage of review of these three bodies of literature revealed a disciplinary divide between dance studies and dance science and a potential solution in a participatory, transdisciplinary framework. We therefore traced where disciplines have remained isolated from one another, and where participatory approaches already suggest more porous boundaries between health and artistry.

To deepen the interpretation, we engaged in discussions among collaborators working in dance practice, dance studies, dance science, gerontology, participatory research with aging populations, spatial analysis, and behavioral research. In this early cross-disciplinary exchange each collaborator contributed from their discipline-specific area of expertise, articulating the issue through distinct analytical lenses and epistemic priorities. Our exchanges served as reflective analysis, allowing us to examine how different forms of evidence (e.g., artistic contribution, accounts of embodied experience, empirical data, and theoretical frameworks) intersect or conflict when describing mature dancers. Through this dialogic process, we identified recurring assumptions that sustain ageism and recognized new conceptual openings for research that value artistic and bodily knowledge.

With these methodological foundations, we turn to the discursive and structural conditions that have historically framed the mature dancer. Before we can imagine transdisciplinary participation, we must first understand how professional and scholarly narratives have defined aging in professional dance. Here we present the findings of our review in the form of a review-based argument that proceeds in four stages. First, we trace how ageism is reproduced discursively. Second, we share the finding that mature dancers generate adaptive practices that remain under-recognized. Third, we read community-based dance studies with older adults as offering an outline of participatory practices that foregrounds adaptation, relational engagement, and cultural familiarity, yet remains largely confined within predeter-

mined research logics and falls short of epistemic inclusion. Finally, we advance a participatory, transdisciplinary framework that treats mature dancers as co-producers of knowledge.

Systemic and internalized ageism in professional dance

Aging as liability rather than asset

Across literature exploring professional Western dance practice, aging is repeatedly framed as a paradox: bodies once celebrated for control and expressivity are recast as fragile or obsolete. Liz Schwaiger (2005), Irina Roncaglia (2006, 2010), and Marybeth Weinstock (2010) document how professional infrastructures equate artistic legitimacy with youth, technical virtuosity, and an image of effortless lightness in genres such as ballet. Within this aesthetic economy that predominates in the Western professional dance sector, a dancer's aging becomes a liability rather than an asset. For female dancers especially, midlife brings heightened scrutiny around weight, energy, and skill, which makes cultural biases more pronounced and intimate (Weinstock, 2010). Stanley E. Greben (2002) and Carly Harrison and Mandy Ruddock-Hudson (2017) note that many dancers internalize this standard, experiencing physical change as professional failure rather than natural evolution. Along with physical changes, dancers were also faced with prejudice in dance while parenting (Musil; Schupp; Risner, 2022).

As a result of this structural and internalized ageism, one of the prevailing subjects in studies of aging and dance is career transition and retirement. In our review, fifteen studies have addressed what Matthew Keefe called "the short-career syndrome" (2010, p. 1). Studies of ballet dancers dominantly focus on this topic. They address psychological challenges such as loss of dance identity and how ballet dancers cope (or not) with the transition (Greben, 2002; Harrison; Ruddock-Hudson, 2017; Lee, 1988; Roncaglia, 2010; Weinstock, 2010). Dancers who transition from performing to teaching or choreographing roles remain in the dance community, sustaining part of their identity. However, studies point to a lack of support systems around both the transition and aging in such roles (Harrison; Ruddock-Hudson, 2017).

Furthermore, clinical frames of research tend to code the mature dancer's body as a site of risk rather than intelligence and adaptation (Lee, 1988; Mayers; Judelson; Bronner, 2003; Turner; Wainwright, 2003). Quantitative and cross-sectional studies such as Jasmin Lampe and colleagues (2019), Eileen M. Wanke and collaborators (2020), and Mike Schmidt and colleagues (2023) consistently document musculoskeletal strain, chronic pain, cardiovascular load, and mental stress among mature dance teachers. Younger dancers self-report limited access to health providers who understand dance technique, which likely is a barrier that undermines trust and adherence later in life too (Haikal et al., 2021). Without robust institutional safety nets, mature dance teachers and performers navigate injury and fatigue as private burdens rather than shared responsibilities. When Harrison and Ruddock-Hudson (2017) highlight pain and retirement as inevitable, while Greben (2002) identifies a psychiatric model for "transition distress," a clinical focus on anticipated, individual challenges is reinforced instead of valuing dancers' agency or asking how dance communities might support aging dancers.

The Narrative of Exceptional Survivors

Studies focusing on mature dancers in Asian and African cultures have pointed out how such dancers are respected for their expertise and regarded as custodians of culture (Samuel, 2023), which comments further on culturally constructed ageism in Western dance forms. When dancers continue their performing career in Western dance cultures, as Hilde Rustad and Gunn H. Engelsrud (2022) observe, they are often cast as exceptional survi-

vors, which prioritizes individual perseverance over systemic adaptability. This framing can reproduce ageist assumptions by positioning the aging professional in decline and normalizing youthful bodily commitment until withdrawal becomes inevitable.

Efforts to counter ageism often replace narratives of decline with narratives of productivity. Studies by Pirkko Markula and colleagues (2022) and Jane Southcott and Dawn Joseph (2020) critically examine how active aging discourse reframes later-life participation not merely as a choice, but as a moral obligation, emphasizing self-management, vitality, and gratitude as expected traits of the aging dancer. This mirrors the broader neoliberal wellness culture analyzed by Debbie Rudman (2015), where responsible aging becomes a form of self-surveillance, and wellbeing is seen as obligation. In both professional and community dance, health becomes an aesthetic of discipline, where activity signals legitimacy, and bodily maintenance becomes a sign of worth. Yet as Pil Hansen and Sarah J. Kenny (2019) argue in Canadian contexts, the ideal of wellness often conceals the dancer's precarious working conditions and the lack of institutional longevity planning. Even when ageism is being challenged, the underlying logic of self-optimization persists. The rhetoric of empowerment thus re-inscribes hierarchy, where the aging dancer remains responsible for overcoming systemic shortcomings and barriers through individual resilience.

Absence of Adaptive Programming and Support

Several authors have highlighted the need for adaptive programming and career support for experienced mature dancers to maintain their practices. Research by William Baumol and colleagues (2004), Fabíola De Castro (2023), and Weinstock (2010) validate the need for early guidance and development of career transition support programs that can help mitigate challenges associated with a dancer's transition from an active performer role to a dance-related or other career. Julie A. Brodie and Eline E. Lobel (2016) point out that, even after performing careers end, it is healthy both physically and emotionally for dancers and dance teachers to continue to take technique classes; however, there is a lack of dance classes and activities designed for mature, skilled dancers. They suggest principles for how such movement classes can be adapted to support age-related changes and prevent injuries and pain for mature bodies. While adaptive programming and support are urgently needed, these publications' focus on career transition and physical challenges unintentionally reiterates some of the devaluing notions previously discussed.

Adaptive Knowledge Between Artistry and Health

Adaptive Expertise and Mature Artistry

In their critical analyses, Mita Banerjee and collaborators (2017), Susanne Martin (2017), Nanako Nakajima and Gabriele Brandstetter (2017), and Nancy Westman (2019) urge a transformation of the discourse on mature dancers, arguing that age is an asset and not a stumbling block for dancers. Authors of related, critical studies describe how individual or small groups of artists have incorporated the aging process of their bodies into their art, expanding their artistry and skills. The aging dancer appears as an adaptive expert whose artistry depends on continuous negotiation with physical limits and possibilities. Lily Kelting (2019) and Martin (2017) argue that two mature artists from the 70s American Avant Garde utilize(d) the aging process as a part of their creative and critical inquiry, raising questions about age(ing) and ephemerality while deepening their artistic practices of improvisation and performance making. Jessica Berson (2010) and Robin Prichard (2022) similarly offer case analyses of individual artists' practice as counternarratives to the discourse that understand aging as tragic and unavoidable loss and decline. Critiquing how even counternarratives of

aging often come from a stance of deficiency and compensation, Pichard (2022) highlights the significance of staging mature dancers in their power to subvert normative tropes.

Qualitative and practice-based studies of professional dance document adaptive knowledge and strategies among more mature dancers. Drawing on interviews, surveys, and reflective accounts, Harrison and Ruddock-Hudson (2017, 2018), Weinstock (2010), and Ali Duffy (2022) show that experienced performers adjust tempo, redistribute effort, and redefine virtuosity to accommodate fatigue, injury, and shifting creative priorities. Strategies like micro-resting during rehearsals, redistributing load across joints, re-timing effort, altering spatial pathways, revising phrasing, and negotiating choreographic demands toward artistry rather than athletic display, constitute systems of embodied decision-making. They mirror adaptive processes described in motor-control and cognitive-flexibility science yet remain largely anecdotal because they emerge from artistic reasoning rather than clinical protocol. Interviews with mature artists and/or educators (Burridge; Nielsen, 2023; Lansley, 2011) and reflections across different practice modalities (Amin, 2019; Kelting, 2019) reveal mature expressivity as: layered timing, attention, and meaning. The literature thus points to a sophisticated intelligence embedded in mature bodily practice that often is overlooked because research paradigms continue to divide the aesthetic from the clinical.

Mature Dancers as Health Data Sources

The discourses of decline and productivity that marginalize mature dancers on stage are often reproduced by research practices. Health science investigations deepen our understanding of adaptive intelligence, while also exposing the limits of how it is typically studied. In studies in dance education and dance science, such as Baumol and colleagues (2004) and Schmidt and coauthors (2023), dancers are positioned primarily as data sources rather than collaborators, with practice knowledge rarely translated into methods, as dancers' embodied expertise is more often measured or observed than mobilized to shape how research questions are posed or investigated. Even within community-based dance programs that emphasize engagement, participation typically ends at consultation or feedback rather than co-design, shared analysis, or authorship. The result is an accumulation of knowledge *about* mature dancers, but a striking absence of knowledge *from* them. This epistemic gap not only overlooks many of the diverse experiential, adaptive, and creative strategies dancers develop through their practice, but also risks sustaining a view of mature artistry as a tapering phase to be endured.

Aging and Health as Creative Condition of Mature Dancers

Dance Studies and Practice-based research projects by Mary Fitzgerald and Eileen Standley (2022), Efy Lilja (2017), and Jennifer Nikolai (2022) have showcased examples where mature dancers become the knowledge producers and authors, integrating their aging process as a part of the creative inquiry, thinking through the positionality of mature dancers, and offering counternarratives to ageist discourses. While these studies emphasize the ways individual dancers embrace maturity and innovate dance practices as they age, the studies seldom engage with the psychological and physical factors covered by aging and health literature, nor do they address broader systemic problems. As a result, the findings and arguments from such practice-based and critical studies on aging in dance have limited potential for impact beyond the immediate participants.

In simplified terms, the problematic gap our literature review revealed between scholarship on the artistry and health of mature dancers is produced by the following tendency: dance science predominantly gathers data about dancers without integrating knowledge about artistry, whereas dance studies typically examine artistic characteristics without addressing health. Emerging Canadian and international scholarship has begun to blur the-

se boundaries between artistic practice and health research focusing on mature dancers. Markula and colleagues (2022), a practice-based research study led by a group of retired contemporary dancers in Canada, employ memory-work to surface both the histories of injury and joy in collaborative practice. Similarly, Regan Thompson (2024) explores embodiment and body image among Canadian ballet dancers across their careers, bringing reflective methods into dialogue with kinesiology. Heejin Kim and collaborators. (2022) attend to personal wisdom in career perseverance among retired ballet dancers in Canada, bridging critical inquiries related to artistic and pedagogic lives. Hansen and Kenny (2019) likewise demonstrate how mature performers choreograph longevity through somatic training routines, mental imaging, and modes of collaboration, reframing sustainability as mature training practice and creative skill. These studies collectively underscore the importance of repositioning health not as external maintenance but as a creative condition of mature artistry and ways of working. However, as small-scale, exploratory studies, largely focused on contemporary and ballet dancers, they also reveal the need for more robust transdisciplinary frameworks to deepen the understanding of how health-related experiences inform the creative directions and adaptation of mature dancers in more dance forms—expanding and supporting their artistry.

Towards a Participatory, Transdisciplinary Framework

Mature Dancers as Co-Researchers

To develop validating discourse of dancers' mature artistry and to generate dancer health knowledge of relevance for mature performance, we argue for a shift towards a participatory, transdisciplinary approach in which artistic and critical inquiry, health science research, and participatory approaches can meet. A central limitation within the existing literature is the lack of opportunities for mature dancers to assume some co-leadership and co-ownership over how key questions in their areas of expertise are asked and answered. Our review indicates that if the identified gap is bridged, later-life dance can be understood as a form of adaptive expertise with significant implications for training regimen design, choreography, pedagogy, and health. In other words, mature dancers hold large parts of the embodied knowledge needed to both understand such expertise and further develop adaptive practices through integrated, transdisciplinary dance studies and scientific inquiry. Dancers need to see themselves in the work to apply its findings. This requires mature artists to be positioned as co-researchers and interpretive agents at defining stages within both artistic and scientific inquiry. Claire Farmer and colleagues (2022) explored the relationship between somatically informed dance practice, health, and aesthetic performance with mature dancers in a co-designed mixed-methods study. They noted the importance of being noticed and respected during practice designed for aging dancers (17). Such a participatory framework challenges ageist narratives from within and contributes to developing adaptive and supportive systems that address mature dancers' lived realities.

While participation shifts who are considered knowledge holders, transdisciplinarity reconfigures how knowledge is structured. Following Harvey J. Graff (2015), transdisciplinary work reconfigures how knowledge is organized, allowing concepts, methods, and evidentiary standards to interact in response to problems shared with community partners, rather than merely combining the disciplinary logics of separate research communities. As outlined by Hansen (2017, 2024) quantitative health research offers transferable constructs and metrics for dance in general (e.g., balance, endurance, and proprioception), while dance studies provides interpretive frames for complex human experiences in specific dance forms (e.g., creativity and embodied meaning), and artistic research brings practice-based approaches that embed inquiry in the individual dancer's embodied knowledge and apply insights to their practice. As evidenced in our literature review, these disciplines risk rein-

forcing different ageist assumptions when remaining siloed, much like how health clinics code aging in dance as risk, while dance studios frame adaptation as a personal artistic statement.

Canadian precedents such as Hansen and Kenny (2019) illustrate what becomes possible when these paradigms meet. Dancers' adaptive micro-strategies become legible as both biomechanical intelligence and aesthetic choice. In this sense, transdisciplinarity is not fusion but translation. It produces a shared vocabulary in which biological, social, and artistic evidence can coexist. Through such alignment, metrics gain ecological validity—measuring what matters in practice—while artistic insight gains methodological traction, becoming communicable, analyzable, and transferable across contexts. Therefore, embodied strategies, like load redistribution and cognitive layering, emerge not as incidental adjustment but as central components of mature artistry. A dancer's use of marking, imagery, and imagined situations to support memorization and recall can be read simultaneously as dramaturgical texture and as cognitive scaffolding (Hansen; Kenny, 2019). Likewise, choreographic adjustments function both as an artistic choice and as strategies for preventing pain and injury through listening to the body (Hansen; Kenny, 2019). Transdisciplinary methods render these strategies visible as systems—measurable, describable, and shareable—without reducing them to individualized or compensatory choices.

This reframing of adaptative expertise allows aging to be understood as a choreography of care, attention, and mutual calibration between disciplines. Mature artistry, in this view, is not the afterglow of a youthful career but a mode of adaptive intelligence that demands and rewards epistemic collaboration.

Insights from Dance in Community Settings: From Individual Adaptation to Relational Intelligence

We found insights from studies of dance for older adults in community settings that may be of relevance when developing a participatory and transdisciplinary framework for the study of mature artistry in professional dance. Programs introducing dance interventions to older adults (Coelho et al., 2022; Eyigor et al., 2009; Noopud et al., 2019; Nur et al., 2022; Paglione et al., 2024) consistently demonstrate positive physical, mental, and social health outcomes, such as improved balance, endurance, confidence, and social connection. These benefits are closely associated with cultural familiarity and shared meaning, which help sustain motivation and long-term engagement (Buransri; Phanpheng, 2021; Douka et al., 2019; Leelapattana et al., 2018; Mishra; Shukla, 2022).

While research on dance and aging acknowledges adaptation and expressivity in later life, studies rarely share participatory research agency beyond community members giving feedback to adjust aspects of their dance experience, such as music or tempo. Therapeutic and neurological programs similarly emphasize participants' adaptation and interaction, while privileging professional or clinical expertise (Charras et al., 2020; De Natale et al., 2017; Guzmán-García; Mukaetova-Ladinska; James, 2013; Hackney et al., 2013, 2015). Participants are consulted but are not typically involved as co-researchers. The strongest outcomes cluster where cultural familiarity meets social reciprocity: where folk idioms sustain adherence, collaborative tasks build confidence, and shared music scaffolds memory (Coelho et al., 2022; Douka et al., 2019; Eyigor et al., 2009; Mishra; Shukla, 2022). This slippage between the language of participatory dance, epistemic practices, and participatory research exposes a key methodological gap. Dance nonetheless offers a glimpse of relational ethics in motion, where instruction becomes negotiation and health is co-created through interaction during practice. Yet most studies lack ways to document these negotiations as shared inquiry.

An important distinction within this body of work concerns whether community dance programs introduce dance as a structured intervention for older adults who are new to the

form, or engage older adults who share prior cultural, social, or experiential knowledge of a specific dance practice. Many health- and community-oriented interventions are structured for participants with little or no previous dance experience, emphasizing accessibility and individual adaptation. In contrast, programs grounded in shared cultural dance forms draw on the community dancers' shared familiarity with movement idioms, music, and collective social practices, supporting relational engagement and sustained participation (Coelho et al., 2022; Douka et al., 2019; Mishra; Shukla, 2022). Despite these differences in participants' experiential and cultural knowledge, participatory structures are not consistently designed to extend beyond movement-level adaptation. In culturally grounded community dance settings, participants' familiarity with shared forms may support relational engagement and sustained participation, yet it rarely translates into influence over research framing, analytic interpretation, or the evolution of study protocols.

Across the studies reviewed, participation most often took the form of community dancers providing feedback and adjusting their movement within predefined structures, while the overall programs were designed and led by researchers or, in some cases, by mature professional dancers. Participation therefore remains confined within predetermined research logics, echoing professional dance literature where aging artists are studied but seldom engaged as co-researchers at any stage of the inquiry. Community dance offers a visible outline of participatory knowledge, but realizing its potential requires research frameworks that recognize embodied decision-making and shared authorship.

Studies such as Bennett and Hackney (2018), Coelho et al. (2022), Hansen et al. (2021), and Merom et al. (2016) show that when mature community dancers are involved in participatory adaptation of the practice, and reflection on their experience, dance programs become more engaging and effective in supporting sustained participation, responsiveness to individual capacities, and meaningful social interaction than when dancers are observed performing predetermined routines. Abby Haynes and colleagues (2023) also argue that sustained engagement in dance is supported by affective, relational, and motivational mechanisms such as camaraderie, enjoyment, and feeling valued. In projects such as (Coelho et al., 2022; Merom et al., 2016; Vella-Burrows et al., 2021), meaningful change stems from negotiated processes in which older participants reinterpret and adapt movement in relation to their own bodies. Participation, then, is not an ethical supplement; it is a redistribution of epistemic authority within the practice.

This also matters in the context of artistry and wellbeing among mature professional dancers, where listening to the body and kinesthetic awareness function as generative forms of knowledge. Mature dancers draw on sensory memory, biomechanical awareness, and choreographic adaptation to navigate shifting capacities (Hansen and Kenny, 2019). When this bodily reasoning of mature dancers informs research design, methodological framing, and data interpretation, dancers' participation may help translate lived intelligence into reproducible, transferable knowledge. In practical terms, participatory design should involve co-framing key research questions in collaboration with mature dancers, ensuring that inquiry begins in dialogue between lived experience and bodies of research, rather than being externally imposed. Participatory methods that can access and are responsive to embodied knowledge and adaptation, as it unfolds during practice, can usefully be co-developed. Mature participating dancers may, for example, annotate recordings of their rehearsal and adaptation processes, articulating their own strategies and adjustments shortly after engaging with their bodies in the studio. Co-authored narrative accounts or "mature dancer stories" can be treated not as illustrative anecdotes but as analytic units that reveal embodied reasoning; interpretive, improvisational, or partnered decision-making; and layers of corporeal and psycho-social meaning making. Crucially, this participatory design should also build in feedback loops in which dancers' insights and choices actively shape research protocols as they unfold. To avoid participation becoming limited to the subjective self-image or working practices of a small group of dancers, these feedback processes should be

situated within transdisciplinary research structures that provide methodological guidance, ethical oversight, and commitments to inclusion. Such solutions would move beyond consultation by integrating elements of co-design and co-interpretation while involving mature dancers in validating and disseminating research findings.

Qualitative evidence from Paglione et al. (2024), Rachyl Pines and Howard Giles (2020), and Vivien Xi Wu and coauthors (2023) furthermore reveal that participants describe success through connection, creativity, and mutual recognition. Participatory dance in community settings thus expands the concept of health, where artistic engagement and self-expression in a group become measurable forms of wellbeing. In community settings, adaptive intelligence becomes collective, not just a matter of individual adjustment, but of attunement with others. Through shared movement, music, and instruction, participants adjust to each other's rhythms, creating a distributed system of balance and care through embodied group synchrony (Toohey; Hutchinson; Moloney, 2024).

In this reframed analysis, the body is no longer the singular unit of performance or measurement; relation itself becomes the site of adaptation. The effects of dance emerge not only from movement, but from the social fabric of the studio and its rhythms of reciprocity, shared attention, and mutual support, merging cultural continuity, social inclusion, and embodied learning. Here, mature artistry and community health reveal themselves as mutually reinforcing modes of living knowledge. Because these practices center interdependence over individual virtuosity, they challenge the ageist logics that equate value with youth, speed, or autonomy. Reciprocity, feedback, and imagination are not just aesthetic or therapeutic tools; they are the very capacities that make ageism porous across the wider dance ecology.

Conclusion: Rendering ageism porous

Professional dance, particularly in Western forms, continues to revere disciplined, optimized, youthful, able bodies while rendering aging ones invisible. Our review shows that this tendency persists not because mature dancers lack capacity, but because the systems surrounding them lack frameworks to recognize their knowledge and expertise. Across professional, clinical, and community contexts, we have illustrated how mature dancers continually devise adaptive strategies as forms of embodied intelligence. In extension, we have argued that expertise can be recognized and celebrated when aging is understood as a choreography of adaptation and an ongoing reorganization of attention, timing, relation, and care.

Furthermore, we suggested that a participatory, transdisciplinary framework can overcome existing disciplinary divides between dance studies and science and between research and dance communities, allowing artistry, health, and social connection to become mutually sustaining dimensions of mature dancers' expertise and the discourse of aging in dance.

Canada offers fertile ground for advancing participatory, transdisciplinary research on mature artistry. Public health infrastructures capable of supporting collaborative studies already exist, alongside an expanding network of creative aging and community initiatives. National organizations such as the Dancer Transition Resource Centre (DTRC), the Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists (CADA), and Healthy Dancer Canada (HDC), already convene conversations on professional standards, transition, and training – albeit within disciplinary silos. These organizations could become key partners in research and research-based initiatives in the dance community that can reduce ageism and support longevity in dance.

We identify several initiatives that could help shift ageist discourse and advance healthy adaptive practices that support mature artistry. For health support and as research tools, strengths-based capacity tools for mature dancers could be adapted from existing measures—such as balance, cognitive screening, body appreciation, and quality of life—to

foreground adaptive strategies and strengths mapping rather than deficits. Participatory ethics and co-authorship guidelines, developed with mature dancers, could further support meaningful collaboration. Applying findings to the dance community, research-based age-inclusive work standards could be developed with industry partners, including contracting and rehearsal practices that are responsive to the needs and strengths of mature dancers.

What sustains ageism is not only how aging is represented but how it is methodologically and institutionally contained. To render ageism porous means dissolving these boundaries and rethinking aging as a dynamic form of inquiry that unfolds across time, relationships, and social environments. In a participatory, transdisciplinary framework, aging is no longer a boundary to be overcome but a way of knowing that keeps both science and art responsive to life as it evolves.

This framework also reshapes where we look for knowledge. Rather than focusing solely on the individual, porous inquiry examines how surrounding systems shape experiences of aging in dance. It attends the design of the studio, the culture of rehearsal and performance, and the accessibility of health care. It asks how environments support or limit adaptation. In porous systems, mature artistry is what emerges through shared and supported adaptation. It is a choreography of resilience that teaches dance itself how to last.

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