

Queer Tango Politics:

Or Why I Think as I Do



Ray Batchelor

A Queer Tango Project Publication

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What about the Workers?

I dedicate this book to all those around the world who, over the years, work hard in organisational, artistic, teaching, and other capacities, giving of the time, energy, imagination, specialist skills and passion needed to make queer tango happen at all. Together with the dancers themselves, they are critical in realising the particular social and political benefits that the dancing of queer tango brings, not to mention the joy, which still takes my breath away.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Birthe Havmøller who runs the Queer Tango Project for agreeing to this volume becoming the latest in our series of Queer Tango Project Publications, and the first to be launched simultaneously as a paperback and as a PDF. My husband, Jerome Farrell, has been a rigorous copy editor and an invaluable loving support – which is an attractive combination, if you can get it.

Introduction

As the subtitle of this book indicates, this volume is not an analysis of *all* queer tango politics, but an anthology of my personal reflections on them from 2015 to 2022. The reader will find here all the weaknesses and strengths of such an approach. For example, I cannot speak with real authority about what it is like to dance queer tango as anything other than – and in the body of – an ageing, gay, white English man. I live in London. I dance in the UK and in Europe, with much-valued excursions to Argentina, Uruguay and occasionally to the United States. Mine is a mainly Anglophone dance world, enriched by a reasonable grasp of German, but deficient in terms of my Spanish. With that come shortcomings in my knowledge and understanding of the cultural roots and present operations of the queer tango of Argentina and Uruguay. Yet, as Birthe Havmøller and I argue in chapter one “The Origins of Queer Tango as Practices and Conceptions: Competing or Complementary Narratives?” queer tango emerged from the activities of several people in several places around the world. These were by no means confined to or even dominated by Argentina and Uruguay, but included major contributions from Europe and from the USA. And as it began, so it continues. Queer tango is simultaneously danced, developed, valued and modified by many different people in different locations and cultural contexts around the world. Plainly, there is plenty of room for others, with other perspectives to comment, because subjectivity, particularities, and biases can also be strengths. My views need to be considered alongside the works of

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others equally interested, but similarly if differently enriched and constrained by context. These include Paula-Irene Villa Braslavsky, Arno Plass, Juliet McMains, Mariana Docampo, and Mercedes Liska, among others.

As the papers gathered here demonstrate, in these seven short years, tango, queer tango, the politics of gender and sexual identities and the global social and political contexts have all changed, sometimes radically. Queer tango's place in relation to the wider, older tango context in 2015 were vividly illustrated in the seminal studies of tango published that year by Kathy Davis and by Melissa Fitch. As my reviews of those two books note, both authors included as a matter of course chapters devoted to queer tango. By then, it was recognised as a part of the wider picture. And yet, each author gave somewhat different accounts of it, suggesting that beyond generalities, there was not then a settled view as to what exactly it was, nor what it was for. I would argue that, though much has been written and discussed and much has been danced, that remains the case today. It is largely a healthy diversity.

I have always argued that queer tango, which emerged out of the feminist and gay liberation movements of the late twentieth century, is marked out from the rest of tango by having overt, rather than tacit social and political agendas. Historically, these have been rooted in issues of gender and sexuality but – thanks to a considerable degree to the pioneering work of Edgardo Fernández Sesma in Buenos Aires – are no longer confined to those issues.

Fitch gave a persuasive account of what might be termed, “applied tango”, that is tango used for

therapeutic rather than purely social purposes in *Global Tangos*. As with tango, so with queer tango. I have had the privilege of using queer tango to explore gender in the power relationships between managers; and in the D/deaf CAN Dance! project with my profoundly deaf colleague, Melanie Parris, to help open up the tango dancefloor to deaf people. In “Tango is Like Homelessness” I review some of the “applied” queer tango activities of the Queer Tango Football Project which I run jointly with football coach and football social activist, Jack Badu. We use queer tango and tango-based football exercises (“drills”) to explore gender and sexuality in the game, explorations which delivered to us some surprising results. I am pleased to be able to report that in 2023, after some years of dormancy owing to, among other things, the Covid pandemic, he and I will be running another Queer Tango Football workshop with Actonian Ladies’ Football Club (LFC), a London-based women’s football team. In women’s football, as in the wider world, the rights of trans people and what constraints there might be on those rights are very much live issues. We look forward to examining them both on the dancefloor and the football pitch – places where we are freed of the straightjackets of labels and language – and then only afterwards through discussions.

If queer tango is distinguished by its overt social and political agendas, how effective is it as political action? In the two interconnected conference papers in chapters five and six, I draw on my personal experiences of dancing queer tango, and of contributing to and drawing on the discourses running alongside the dancing, directly to address that question. I also wanted to set queer tango’s developing political activities into the wider context of the social and political changes unfolding in 2017 and 2018, not

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least the outbreaks of right-wing, populist nationalism around the world, with its vile admixture of racism, misogyny, and homophobia. At the close of chapter six, I looked forward to Queer Tango London's "Jewish Tango Meets Queer Tango" a joint initiative with JW3, a Jewish cultural centre in London, but it did not turn out as planned.

In 2020, the world was – unexpectedly, to most of us – turned upside down. Birthe Havmøller and I decided that, as the Covid pandemic meant actual dancing was severely proscribed, the Queer Tango Project would provide a platform for dancers to contribute to the discourse. We put out a call to the queer tango community around the world to send us writings and artworks addressing the question: how might queer tango be different once we have the opportunity to dance it again? We gathered the diverse and imaginative responses together and published them in the anthology *Queer Tango Futures: Dancing for Change in a Post-Covid World* (2021). Chapter seven was my own contribution and takes the form of queer tango diary entries in January 2021, in the depths of "Lockdown". That month saw the deeply disturbing, anti-democratic post-election riots on Capitol Hill, Washington and, a few days later, the sober, orderly inaugurations of President Biden and Vice-President Kamala Harris on the same spot. Looking towards how queer tango might change when it re-emerged, Post-Covid, I made the case ('I Danced Tango with a Trump Supporter') for developing "radical inclusivity".

In chapter eight, "The Political Pleasures of Queer Tango: Transcendence and the Erotic as Legitimate Agents of Change", I returned to the fundamentals of tango (transcendence and the erotic) assessing their value in the context of advancing queer tango's social

and political agendas. In contrast, the final paper looks resolutely outward towards the wider social and political context: “Queer Tango and the War in Ukraine: Actions and Re-actions in an Imperfect World”. At the heart of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine which had been simmering since 2014, and which spilled massively into global consciousness with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022, is a clash of cultures. High on the list of incendiary issues being fought over and for are attitudes towards LGBTQ rights. Arguably, the future of the European model of a liberal society is at stake here. Consequently, those who value that model must ask themselves what can I do to support those being persecuted, to defend that model of society and – by inevitable implication – to support Ukraine? We in queer tango are no exception.

There are several things this book is not. For all that I am sometimes borrowing from the architecture, rigour, and conventions of academic writing, this is not strictly an academic book. I used to be an academic. I used to write about queer tango and still do, but I was primarily an academic in the history and theory of design and never, fully, professionally, a dance academic. The works assembled here are the writings of a queer tango dancer and activist. My primary purpose has invariably been, and remains, to support the dancing of queer tango and to make immediate contributions to the debates which surround it, so that we all think more about what we are doing – and why. This is not to dismiss dance academia. I have been fortunate that it is a broadly welcoming worldwide community. I have enjoyed giving papers, some of which are included here, at academic conferences organised by what is now known as the Dance Studies Association, based in North America. Similarly, I have

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relished presenting yet more papers at the lively events organised by POP Moves, the international research group expressly addressing popular dance and performance. In both contexts, I have invariably benefited from the critical reception “proper” dance academics have given my work.

I believe some of the papers here are “academic” in good ways, that is, I intended them to be rigorous, logical, with evidence-based arguments, and not afraid of theory, where theory is useful. Yet included here too are papers which have arisen primarily from a sense of urgency, where I have written because I felt I had to. Academic papers can sometimes take a quite a while to reach the printed page – years, sometimes. I am indebted to Birthe Havmøller and the Queer Tango Project for providing, through its website and publications, a prompt means of publishing ideas. What these platforms may lack in prestige, is mostly offset by their usefulness as tools to share new materials for immediate discussion within the queer tango community.

I commend this modest collection of papers to you for what it is: several best first attempts at critiquing queer tango, as it was happening over a period of years, by one as well-placed as any other to do so, and better placed than some. Each analysis was new when written. Each, including the latest, is fast becoming queer tango history as events move on with startling, sometimes disturbing rapidity. Yet how is one to understand what is happening now without some grasp of the past and where we have come from?

On re-reading all these papers together in preparation for publishing this book I was struck, and a little encouraged, to see that, for all the dramatic changes

that have occurred in these years, some themes have persisted, been revisited and developed. So for example, queer tango may have started life as reactions to or even against attitudes found in society and embodied in conventional tango dancing. But that wider society has changed, and the effects of those changes, plus the presence of queer tango dancers on mainstream tango dancefloors, have altered what tango's "conventions" now are. In considering the political dimensions of queer tango there is a fascinating relationship between the effects of dancing queer tango and of representing it by language, imagery, or other means. Similarly, the somewhat separate histories of men dancing queer tango and of women dancing it continue, as has the inescapable persistence of women, mostly, dancing with other women and men with other men. But these generalities have become creatively disrupted and enriched by the emergence of more and more trans and non-binary dancers. Who can say what the long-term effects of this development may be, but no one can pretend that nothing has changed. There are new things to discuss.

All of us who are free to dance queer tango do so in an unstable world, whose instability can only be accentuated by the global climate crisis. Will *that* affect how and why we dance? It will, I think, though right now it is hard to predict in what ways. In the meantime, we should fully inhabit our more familiar territory, addressing both established and emerging issues arising from ideas of gender and sexuality. We should work hard towards forging alliances with the older people, those with disabilities or facing racist, religious or other forms of discrimination. Only then will we who dance queer tango evolve into what these fast-changing circumstances may demand of us.

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Oh, and for all our sakes, I urge everyone to be single-minded in continuing to use queer tango to bring more joy into the world, because the need for such joy in the world has rarely been greater.

1. The Origins of Queer Tango as Practices and Conceptions: Competing or Complementary Narratives?

© Ray Batchelor and Birthe Havmøller

A version of this paper was presented at “The Queer Tango Salon” held in London in 2017. This revised version was published in *Queer Tango Salon London 2017 – Proceedings* in 2018.

Introduction

When was queer tango first danced? And where? And by whom? To which we might add: who wants to know? And why? This has often seemed to some to be a simple matter, easily recited: queer tango originated in Germany, in Hamburg, in 2001. Neat. Memorable. But possibly wrong, or if not wrong, exactly, then at best, incomplete. When the queer tango activist Federico Imperial asked about queer tango's origins

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*Queer Tango Salonistas 2017 unwind on the London “Tube”
Photo: Peggy La Baronne*

on Facebook, he was inundated with candidates, all earlier than the first queer tango festival in 2001. So, what are we to do? Indeed, how can we say what the origins of queer tango are, if there is little agreement as to what queer tango is? In this preliminary paper, we describe some of the issues we think need addressing and then offer a catalogue of historical responses to them. The “origins” question may be unanswerable, but setting out more clearly the many roots of queer tango must be to everyone’s advantage.

As Mariana Docampo has noted with understandable irritation, this has often seemed to some to be a simple

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matter.¹ For example, one contributor to *The Queer Tango Book* wrote with airy confidence in 2015:

The first Queer Tango event was organised by Marga Nagel, Ute Walter and Felix Feyerabend in Hamburg in 2000. Thereafter, countless manifestations of Queer Tango sprang up around the world, not least in Buenos Aires shortly afterwards and now in London too. (Batchelor, 2014)

He was, or rather, I was, after all only parroting more or less what I had read elsewhere, not least on Wikipedia where [in 2023] you can still read:

The Queer tango movement...is very recent. It was founded in Germany, in Hamburg, where in **2001** the first gay-lesbian milonga was organized. In the same year the First International Queer Tango Argentina Festival was brought there to life. Since 2001 it takes place every year in order to bring together same sex couples in tango from all over the world. **Born in Germany**, the Queer Tango movement inspired other countries to create local queer tango scenes. Meanwhile, Queer Tango festivals are celebrated for example in Argentina, in Denmark, Sweden and in the United States. (Emphasis added, Wikipedia 2023)

...to which the anonymous authors graciously add:

¹ Docampo made this observation in her guest presentation at *The Queer Tango Salon, London, 2017*. It is unpublished. For further light on this matter, readers are directed to the English translation of her book *Buenos Aires Tango Queer* published in English in 2020

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In the bastion of traditional heteronormative tango, Augusto Balizano opened the first queer milonga, La Marshall, in Buenos Aires in 2002. A few years later, in 2005 Mariana Docampo started a weekly milonga in San Telmo called Tango Queer. (Wikipedia 2023)

So, there we have it. In Germany, in Hamburg, in 2001. Neat, memorable and routinely repeated, but as noted, possibly wrong, or if not wrong, then at best incomplete. 2015 was a bumper year for books in English on tango: Kathy Davis, *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World* (Davis, 2015), and Melissa Fitch, *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary* (Fitch 2015). Fitch in particular cites historical antecedents which pre-date this 2001 episode in Hamburg. When, in 2017, the queer tango activist Federico Imperial posted the equivalent of these questions about origins (plus one question about Russia) on *The Queer Tango Conversation* (a Facebook group set up by the Queer Tango Project) asking about queer tango's origins for an interview he was about to have, he was inundated with candidates – all earlier than 2001 (Imperial 2017). It was that which prompted this paper.

Birthe and I abandoned our original idea of setting out a catalogue of competing claims to be “the origin of queer tango”. In part, this was because we realised we cannot say what the origins of queer tango are if there is still little agreement as to what queer tango is. Birthe and I (who with Olaya Aramo are each a third of the Queer Tango Project and therefore ought to know), do not agree. Birthe has set out her own ideas very clearly in both the *Queer Tango Book* (Havmøller 2015) and, more recently, in her “10 Dogme Rules for The Dance Style of ‘Queer Tango’” presented at the *Queer Tango Salon* in London in 2017 (Havmøller 2018). As her title

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and presentation make plain, for Birthe the queerness of queer tango is expressed by the manner in which – or style in which – the roles are danced, and this argument may have merit. I have set my ideas out in a piece called “What is Queer Tango?” (Batchelor 2015b), originally published in 2014, where I argue that, in the absence of agreement, it is best defined by dancing it; elsewhere, my emphasis is not on practices – apart, perhaps from role changing within the dance, that is intercambio – but on the awareness of those dancing of the social and political dimension of what they are doing (and not WHILE they are doing it, obviously, but more generally). Of course, this tidy little model breaks down, if the queer social and political sensibility resides, not in the dancers themselves, but in the observers, who can see these queer dimensions, even if the dancers themselves are unaware of them. Nowhere is this conundrum more pertinent than when the observer is looking back at historical data. Who, then, is to claim they know what dancers think, especially if the dancers are long dead and lived in a culture long vanished?

We can...tentatively.

The Queer Tango Project runs *The Queer Tango Image Archive*, a digital archive of pre-digital tango imagery which refers to that agenda outlined above. So, with history, it is perfectly possible for something – some image, or piece of knowledge - may be relevant to queer tango, but not BE queer tango. (Batchelor 2016)

So:

When was queer tango first danced?

And where?

And by whom?

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Birthe and I set out this provisional catalogue, not of competitive claims, but of complementary narratives, with some nervousness. The subject arouses passions. Our account will be incomplete, and will contain errors, for which we apologise in advance. This is not a definitive catalogue of the many roots of queer tango, but rather a provisional one which we present, as much as anything, as a call for still more reliable details to become more widely known. So, to those named, and still more to those not, we say sorry; and please contact us.

Casting caution to the wind, we begin with:

The European Candidates

From the evidence which came to light in response to Fede's [aka Federico Imperial] 2017 Facebook post, and from other sources, the 2000/2001 Hamburg candidates, (once a few more names have been added), may be rivals to themselves.

According to Fitch:

The Tango Queer scene in Hamburg, Germany had its origins in a small gay café in Altona: in the "Tuc Tuc," where the first tango dancers met in the mideighties. Marga Nagel and Ute Walter were the driving force behind the world's **first Queer Tango Festival that took place in 2000**. (Emphasis added. Fitch 2015, p. 98)²

² 2000 or 2001? While preparing this book, I danced at the Oldenburg Marathon (spring 2023). Timm Christensen and I have discussed this issue over several years and had agreed that first Festival in Hamburg was in 2000 and that at some point afterwards, a year

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This is confirmed by Walter herself, who, in response to Fede's Facebook post wrote: "Marga [Nagel] and I started with teaching LGBT and woman only classes in 1985".

Yet it seems they were not alone. On the same thread, Sabine Rohde answered the question:

Hamburg! In Our studio Tango Exil start 1985, Ute Walter, Marga, Andrea, I tuctuc, the late Effi Effinghausen, the late Isabel Cortes, Mari Paul Renault and I with Maestro Antonio Todaro a.o [= and others] we all Dance/d open role/ switch before (awesome) Ute and [I?] co coined "Queer Tango" (Rohde 2017)

And then, equally significantly, Rohde says:

We were political aware. We all had long, after-Milonga late night discussions about what we are doing with this "macho dance". Why us? Now we know a bit more 😊😄 about the "why us"

Meanwhile, at about the same time, there were others experimenting in Germany. Rohde continues:

Munich: Don[']t remember the name of the gorgeous both roles-dancing ginger haired tall

was skipped, which is why in 2011 – confusingly – there was the “10. International Queer Tango Festival” in Hamburg. On reflection, Timm told me no, it must have been 2001. Using his fingers to illustrate, he counted backwards from 2011 - including the extra rogue year of no festival - and indeed, it came to 2001. Opinions and recollections may differ, but without evidence for 2000 such as printed ephemera, I am persuaded it was 2001.

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woman with a slim gorgeous dancing
man/following... (Rohde 2017)

And something interesting was happening in Berlin. Brigitta Winkler's website asserts that "1986 [saw the] opening of Tanzart school in Berlin with Angelika Fischer.³ Critically for our purposes, Winkler and Fischer worked as a "Frauentanzpaar" that is, women dancing together. (Winkler no date)

And Rohde adds:

Berlin 1986/or 87? : tango meetings at D.
Langes Tango from Rio de la Plata. Nicole Nau
(damals aus Düsseldorf) danced both roles
excellent before going to Argentina for good ...
(Rohde 2017)

We have not had time to pursue this lead.

We might make mention of Tony Damen and Andreas Jans, owners of Tango Brujo in Hasselt, Belgium. Their Tango Brujo website reads: "the founders, tony and andreas [sic], dance tango since 1993 and give lessons since 1999." The many, much later videos on their website imply that they have always danced together, despite that ambiguous phrasing. (Damen & Jans no date)

But returning to Germany, Winkler's involvement as a founder member of the group TangoMujer takes us to North, rather than South America.

According to TangoMujer's website:

In the early 1990s, four female tango dancers
began practicing together in NYC: Fabienne

³ The date is sometimes given as 1987, but Winkler herself in conversation with the authors in Berlin confirmed that it was in fact 1986.

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Bongard, Rebecca Shulman, Valeria Solomonoff, and Brigitta Winkler. In 1996, they ... became TangoMujer, the first all-female tango company in the world.(...) ...in 1998, [they added] Berlin-based Angelika Fischer to the group (...) (Winkler no date b.)

The claims made here relate to performance, rather than the social dance, yet Rebecca Shulman's name stands out as a link to that social practice.

According to Shulman's website:

She started to study tango in NYC in 1991 from Daniel Trenner, with whom she began to perform and to visit Buenos Aires. Daniel emphasized improvisation and lead-and-follow skills that are the foundation of social tango.⁴

Fitch, writing about one of Trenner's many instructional videos, in this case one which includes role exchange – intercambio – quotes him as saying:

The conversational aspect of improvisation is widening to include the follower's asking for time from the leader, the leader giving time of the follower, and, sometimes, an exchange of lead and follow taking place within a dance. (Fitch 2015, p. 99)

See if you agree with what he says next: "This a gender-free mirror of what Argentine men did, in only segregated company, before."

Fitch asserts – rightly, I suspect:

Trenner does not make any associations between the role exchange and any critical, much less theoretical, rationales for engaging

⁴ By 2023, Shulman's website had vanished.

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in it. It is strictly seen as a way to enhance one's range as a dancer, but it is still significant in that it demonstrates that this new attitude of openness was becoming apparent almost twenty years ago.

... in other words, at a time when wider, gender politics was on the move.

And Argentina? What of Argentina?

Yesterday [which was 15th November 2017 when this paper was given] Augusto Balizano closed the doors of La Marshall, which he credibly asserts is, or now was, the oldest gay milonga in Buenos Aires.

Edgardo Fernández Sesma writes on Facebook:

this year we are celebrating in Buenos Aires, the 20 years of the first classes of free, diverse, or internationally queer tango. That classes took place in "Gasol Pub" of Recoleta neighborhood in 1997 (teacher: Augusto Balizano), and continued in 1998 until today, in the space "Lugar Gay de Buenos Aires", San Telmo. There is print advertising since 1998 of these classes.

That classes were not only the first in which all couples learned the two roles and did "intercambios", but they were also the beginning of the paradigm shift in teaching, learning and language that was used until then. We think this is important, so for some time, I have spoken at tango festivals, classes, milongas, interviews, etc. About this date. (Fernández Sesma 2017)

Mariana Docampo has given us an authoritative account of her own role in importing the term "queer

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tango” (which becomes “tango queer” following Spanish grammatical logic) from Europe, but setting out a distinctively different, more Argentinian and more theoretically grounded practice of her own. Moreover, she reminded us that tango thrives on contact with “the other:” that is, European and North American practices. (Docampo 2020)

Conclusion:

When was queer tango first danced?

And where?

And by whom?

We have galloped through a brief catalogue of, now, historical, 20th century tango occurrences. These embodied some of the dance practices which queer tango includes, or some of the social or political concepts on which queer tango today is founded, or both.

We have omitted some other, similar, late 20th century examples: the countless shows and theatrical performances; the photographic and graphic imagery; the cinema films in which tango is represented, not to mention the richly documented tradition of men dancing with each other; and the less well documented examples of women dancing with each other.

Perhaps we should not have omitted them?

The questions as we posed them may be unanswerable in the absence of a precise definition of what queer tango is. However, taking the looser model of the themes and generic queer tango practices which include, but are not confined to:

- Same sex couples
- Women leading
- Men following

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- Women leading men
- Men leading women in a queer tango context
- Role change within the dance
- A systematic challenge to norms of sex, gender and sexuality
- Some awareness of the social and political dimensions of the significance of their dancing

... we believe we have begun to set out some credible origin narratives – and that the plural is important.

So, in this way, rather in the manner of detecting the evolutionary ancestor species of humankind, we are able to begin to set out the antecedents of queer tango. Few of them “are” queer tango, according to most people’s definitions, but they are relevant in understanding how we got here.

Historians are fortunate that the writing of history, or indeed of histories, is a perpetually provisional art. Histories are written the better to understand where our present has come from, but as our queer tango present is dynamic, not static, the histories it requires are likely to be equally changeable in character.

And in drawing careful distinctions between the European and Argentinian contributions to the origins of queer tango, that same maxim applies.

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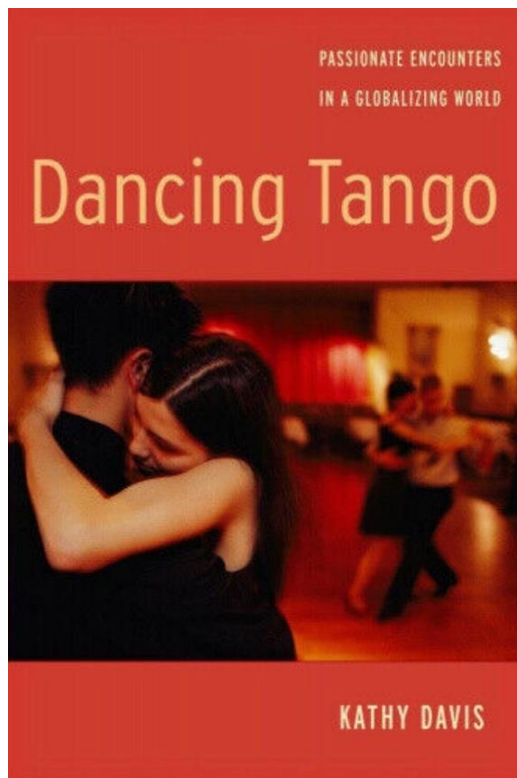
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2. Dancing Tango by Kathy Davis – A New Book!



Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World by Kathy Davis, New York University Press, 2015

Queer Tango Politics: or Why I think as I Do

This review was originally published on 10th February 2015 on The Queer Tango Project website.

Queer Tango is at the heart of Kathy Davis's timely, and impressive study. Like many who write about tango, Davis dances. This enables her to offer personal perspectives both from Buenos Aires, to which she has been a frequent visitor, as well from as her home city of Amsterdam. Unlike many critics focused more exclusively on Buenos Aires, in this welcome respect, her experiences correspond more closely to those of millions of other 21st century tango dancers around the 'globalizing' world, including my own. Her study is based on responses from informants – women, men, queer, straight – from both of these contexts. Davis is well-versed in the literature, so Marta Savigliano's pronouncements on tango as a post-colonial phenomenon and Eduardo Archetti's on tango masculinities rub shoulders with Judith Butler's Gender Trouble in looking more widely at gender as construct and performance. In reviewing existing critiques, Davis tactfully praises where she agrees, takes issue where she does not, or poses the questions which, in her view others have not yet asked. If Davis's approach is scholarly, it is also wonderfully fresh. Here is learning as it should be: worn lightly and used with intelligence to illuminate.

If your main interest is in Queer Tango, though, I urge you not to skip straight to 'Queering Tango' her penultimate chapter. Queer Tango is routinely cast as a riposte or alternative to the shortcomings of the mainstream. Davis's nuanced account of that mainstream in 'late modernity' is an essential precursor to her analysis of its recently arrived queer counterpart. Besides, it is well worth reading in its own right. So, for example, she compares and contrasts the

salons of Amsterdam and Buenos Aires carefully untangling myths and beliefs which shape practices in both. In the best exposition of tango and authenticity I have yet read, she compares the convictions of 'authentic' dancers – close hold, 'milonguero style' – and those with nuevo tendencies: 'both traditionalists and modernists employ notions of authenticity which have little real connection with tango's actual history'. She sets out the dance's essential characteristics of 'dialogue' of the 'passion' of the title and above all, 'connection' with precision and insight. Tango dancers, queer and straight alike will wince in recognition at her descriptions of moving from absolute beginner, to the drug like later stages of the tango addiction. I was surprised none of her correspondents directly referred to close personal relationships foundering as a consequence of tango.

Davis argues that the erotic undercurrents of mainstream tango arise, in part because of the promise of deep intimacy, of 'passion' without the 'penalties' that commonly come with it: commitment, a relationship, children, perhaps. And further that tango offers an opportunity in a more rational, egalitarian world in which most (especially in the Netherlands) genuinely prize gender equality, for the surreptitious, irrational, backward-looking enjoyment of the older gender inequalities. And she draws a limited parallel with sadomasochistic play, in which activities otherwise forbidden and undesirable are performed by mutual consent for the satisfaction of the participants. This is convincing, even if it is only a part of the explanation of how it 'works'.

Where does that leave Queer Tango? One might imagine that in queer communities, where historically at least, political struggles have focused on the right to

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practice this or that sexual act, eroticism might be to the fore. Echoing some of Savigliano's reservations, Davis argues that, on the contrary, Queer Tango, compared with the mainstream risks being less highly-charged, not more, that 'political correctness' tango may come at a heavy price. Having been deeply moved in 2002 or 2003 seeing Augusto Balizano and Miguel Moyano perform exquisitely at a mainstream milonga in Buenos Aires and noting how accepting those present were, it was only years later that Davis went to La Marshall, Balizano's gay milonga. It was she notes, informal, enjoyable, but with many tourists and a much wider range of abilities than might be seen elsewhere. She notes too the gender asymmetry confirmed by her women respondents. Mariana Docampo originally set out through women-only classes to encourage more women to lead. Yet the classes did not prosper, leading Docampo, a professor of literature, to set up 'Tango Queer', a milonga in San Telmo, which built on the more inclusive tenets of queer theory.

Davis's experiences of Queer Tango – and she allows that as a heterosexual woman, she may have been missing things – was that it was less erotically charged, more 'safe. Having correctly identified the reversal of roles between and within dances as Queer Tango's most distinctive feature, she asks if this undermines the very differences which in her view are at the heart of tango and account for its attraction? Is she correct to suggest that in Queer Tango, role reversal has supplanted connection (and with it, passion) as the dance's chief objective? A disgruntled lesbian who, with her partner, was quite clear that one wanted to lead and the other follow, exasperated at the requirement to swap role in Queer Tango classes, choose instead to dance in the mainstream. Queer

Tango, so the argument goes, by losing the gender differences has become less highly charged, paradoxically less erotic, less passionate and – by implication – less interesting.

Davis's understanding of Queer Tango does not correspond to my own. Firstly, some of the characteristics she identifies may be transient, not inherent. It is true, at some Queer Tango events the standard of dancing is lower than at their mainstream counterparts, but this may partly be a function of the relative newness of the phenomenon, especially as she is reporting on circumstances a few years ago. The prevalence of open hold, which she attributes to the demands of intercambio might instead be taken as a side-effect of those many beginners for whom close hold seems more difficult. The standard of dancing at – say – The Berlin International Queer Tango Festivals compares more or less favourably with the best. Davis would have it that Queer Tango is more commonly aligned to nuevo tendencies, drawn by this further 'transgression' against tradition – but in this I think she may be mistaken, or perhaps becoming mistaken. Nuevo is no longer new and seems to be fading, while Queer Tango – danced in more or less 'traditional' styles – is booming. If some Queer Tango teachers oblige people to learn both roles, others, beyond a few exercises only invite dancers to choose. At Queer Tango London run by Tim Flynn, we have dancers who have assiduously stuck to one role only for many years.

My main issue is with the suggestion that Queer Tango, in eradicating differences, becomes less passionate and less erotic. My reservation springs, in part from a different understanding I have of how mainstream tango works. Eradicating difference? I am obliged to

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ask myself, having danced both roles for years whether I have been naive in seeing them as NOT hierarchical, but more or less equal, and indeed, conventionally, but not inherently gendered? Have I mistaken conviction for reality? I don't think so. To say that both roles are available to all is to renegotiate, but not eradicate gender. Irrespective of role or gender or orientation, dancing with a man is not like dancing with a woman. Differences – and exciting differences – persist. In both believing and experiencing this, I am not alone.

Finally, three things are missing from Davis' account of Queer Tango – and in fairness, given the demands of publishing and publishers and the dynamic state Queer Tango is in, they may have come to the fore after she closed her laptop: in a viscerally exciting way, teachers such as Mariano Garcés are exploring how tango may be danced without followers or leaders; activists such as Edgardo Fernández Sesma use Queer Tango in trying to achieve social objectives which include but extend beyond the immediate LGBT agenda. And it is this outward-looking characteristic which is gradually becoming inherent and distinctive. Queer Tango dancers around the world, having acquired their Queer Tango skills and sensibilities at Queer Tango prácticas and milongas, go into or go back into the tango mainstream to practice them, dancing with whomsoever, and dancing very well. As Queer Tango passes the mid point of its second decade, it is this tango expression of the wider phenomenon of LGBT people living their lives in the world rather than separated from it, which is most worthy of note.

Davis's closing paragraph of 'Queering Tango' provides some of the caveats to her central arguments: Queer Tango need not be 'lame' as Savigliano has suggested and it goes way beyond simply trying to 'undo gender'.

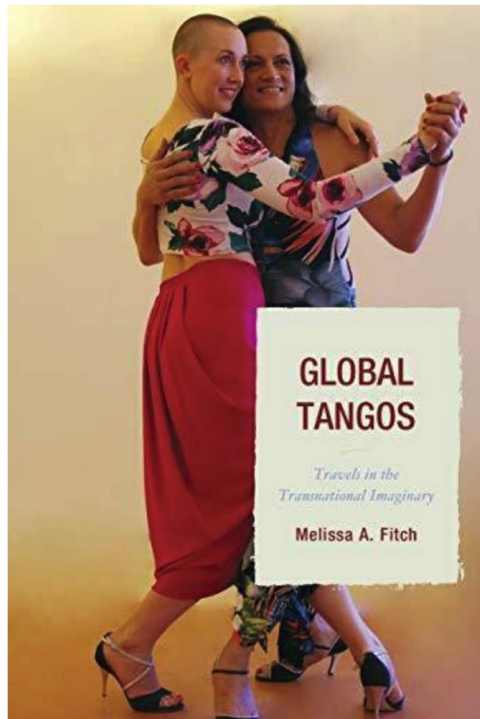
Queer dance partners can 'embrace' dangerous differences, take risks and play with the forbidden. This is what passion in tango is about – whether straight or queer, traditional or modern – and it is this passion that, ultimately, makes tango "always and everywhere just a little queer".

I agree with Shani, one of Davis's respondents who likes to lead "'We [in Queer Tango] don't need to revolutionise tango". In one of her most telling, if under-developed observations, Davis reports that many respondents compared the intimacy which connection makes possible to being rocked like a child, a reference which she notes "evokes a deeply-felt and *gender-transcendent* longing... to reinstate a lost sense of oneness with another" (emphasis added). I sense that it is in the fastidious, even forensic examination of the relationships between the erotic the erotically charged, passion, connection and above all, intimacy that holds the key to understanding the power of all tango, even if writing about it is hard and truths difficult to pin down.

Davis has written a superb, complex, stimulating book. She obliges all of us to think.

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3. “Islam, homosexuality and tango are not incompatible”



Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary
by Melissa A. Fitch, Bucknell University Press, 2015

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This review was originally published on 27th January 2016 on The Queer Tango Project website.

“Islam, homosexuality and tango are not incompatible,” Iz told the reporter doing a story on Gay Pride Day in Istanbul in 2011. Iz, who declined to give her last name, was dancing tango. The inclusion of her voice, that of a Turkish, Muslim lesbian, headscarfed (by choice), a politically aware and politically active tanguera in Fitch’s study is symptomatic of *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary*. As the title suggests, her work explores the global phenomenon that 21st century tango – or more correctly, ‘tangos’ – has become, presenting evidence from around the world. As an academic specialising in Spanish and Portuguese, she is more directly at ease with texts which might be closed to other, more Anglophone authors. She is completely in command of the theoretical dimensions of her subject and writes well, which together help make her book both sophisticated, but approachable. Fitch is alert to the things popular culture can tell us about attitudes towards tango and in her bibliography, Judith Butler (gender) and Marta Savigliano (neo-colonialism) rub shoulders with Jack Kerouac and the “Tango Barbie and Ken Giftset (2002)”, not to mention a separate section for the countless films and TV programmes which inform this study. Fitch loves these and the reader is treated to any number of engaging cinematic passages which bring the (absent) screen to life. Fitch not only explores tango’s geographical and cultural distribution, but its conceptual boundaries as well. She does so in five chapters: having in the first deftly debunked any number of familiar “Foundational Clichés” about tango, in the second she follows with an excellent development of the concept of Savigliano’s “Neocolonial Gaze” and tango tourism. It is, in part, a

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well argued, if merciless critique of some self-publicising tango authorities, each one eager to construct 'authenticities' which chiefly serve to validate their personal, sometimes woefully ignorant, points of view. Then, like Kathy Davis's *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World* which also appeared in 2015 (see previous chapter), this rounded picture includes a chapter on Queer Tango. It is followed by the best account of the practical uses of tango in the context of therapy and healing I have read. Her closing chapter is a fascinating exploration of tango activism. It is here, interestingly, that Iz makes her, to some, startling assertion, rather than in chapter three, "Tango Queer Rebellions".

If you care about something and have opinions, you have to guard against criticising what others write for not being what you might have written yourself. I read *Global Tangos* at 35,000 feet, leaving Mexico City where I had danced, and on my way home to London, where I would dance some more. 'Global Tangos', indeed, and with her regular reminders of the roles of money and with it, class and privilege have in accessing them, I became more keenly aware than normal that my tango good fortune is not universally shared. Having enjoyed the first two chapters, I set to reading "Tango Queer Rebellions" with high hopes. When I had finished it, I felt disappointed and I was surprised that I was disappointed having thought so highly of those opening chapters. Perplexed, I picked up the book again, and read on. The chapters which followed completely restored my faith in Fitch and in the book. Perhaps it was me? Perhaps because I identify closely with Queer Tango, I was being hypercritical? And yet, I admired the chapter on the therapeutic uses of tango which came afterwards and I have a close personal

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identification with that through my work teaching Queer Tango to deaf people and to footballers.

It is salutary to note in this, the therapeutic context, that Fitch and Davis are at odds about the erotic in tango. For Davis the erotic however deeply buried is at the heart of 'real' tango and, echoing Savigliano, Davis asserts that by overturning gender stereotypes, Queer Tango loses some of its erotic charge and is rendered somewhat duller than its mainstream equivalent. Fitch adopts the opposite stance, happy to acknowledge that one of the joys of tango – mainstream tango – is the promise of genuine physical intimacy or "connection," free from the complications of an overt, erotic charge. If she is correct, then Davis's observations about Queer Tango may be partly accurate, yet point to the opposite conclusion: that Queer Tango actually differs little from its mainstream equivalent. Yet another view would acknowledge that no one account can cover all possibilities, that it may be a matter of degree (how much of the dance is erotic) and distribution (how often is it erotic).

Of course, I had to re-read "Tango Queer Rebellions". Twice. One of the perennial problems facing anyone thinking and writing about dance of any kind is that – unlike someone critiquing, say, the queer, romantic novel – the obvious 'text' to be analysed is the dancing itself. Dancing is time-based and inherently fugitive. Arguably, it comes first, with descriptions, the writings of others and representations of the dancing in imagery, moving or still, providing secondary evidence. For work at this level, further texts supply theoretical frameworks, again, arguably, to help set the actual dancing into context and interrogate it for meaning. But if you are to write about dancing with authority, how are you to know it? Obviously, you dance. This

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provides direct, if subjective and personal evidence, evidence which some argue is problematic. In *Dancing Tango*, Davis argues successfully, in my view, for the admission of such evidence. Another closely aligned source of subjective evidence might be being present while others dance or dancing with them. Observations and conversations can all add to the data. The diligent might take notes. Fitch has been dancing tango for twenty years and as her sparing use of autobiographical evidence in the anecdotal vignettes closing each chapter show, she dances, dances with others, watches, listens and takes notes.

Like the rest of her book, the chapter, "Tango Queer Rebellions" is underpinned by good scholarship and includes a handful of apposite films. It sets out to do four things: to give an account of the well-known emergence of queer theory in academia; to revisit the tango tourism explored in the preceding chapter from a queer tango perspective; to establish the dependence of Queer Tango on social media and the internet; and finally, by extension, to set out how Queer Tango operates at the extremes of the transnationalism and globalisation considered elsewhere in the book. If I write that "Tango Queer Rebellions" is the weakest of Fitch's chapters, I want it to be understood that 'weak' in this context, where all else is of such high quality, is still pretty impressive. On second and third readings, I really admired the careful scholarship which sets out much of the 'pre-history' of Queer Tango, so often represented as appearing as if from [almost] nowhere in Hamburg in 2000 [2001: see n. 2, p. 14] emergence of TangoMujer, the gay tango in New York, in Buenos Aires and elsewhere, with its glimmers of an overt political dimension. The pioneering work of Daniel Trenner and Rebecca Shulman in the 1990s is of interest in this context and

deserves to be better known. Going further back in time, the oft celebrated and seldom understood same gender dancing of the late 19th, early and mid-twentieth centuries, so familiar from old photographs in the case of men, and examined by Jorge Salessi and Magali Saikin among others. (Saikin is not in the bibliography, oddly, although an army of other credible authorities on this subject are.) Their dancing was often transgressive, but with no political dimension at all. Readers would be hard pressed to find a better account of the sheer scale of Queer Tango tourism and the passages on gay tango porn – I had no idea! – came as a surprise and show once again that Fitch is fearless in drawing on evidence others might neglect.

A sequence of detailed analyses of TV programs and films is also included, and I think this is where my disappointment begins. The analyses are thoughtful and full of insight and yet they take up nearly two thirds of this chapter. Naively, I had expected it to consider Queer Tango dancing, rather than media representations of it, some of which are quite oblique. I remain genuinely surprised that Astrid Weiske, Berlin and the International Queer Tango Festival in that city do not figure here and I cannot explain why they don't. Perhaps the plural 'Tangos' of Fitch's title alerts us to a dimension which may help. The reach of global tangos is vast. Views on global tangos are formed, partly, according to one's own experiences of them and Fitch's are like those of many – like mine, indeed – wide-ranging, yet, inevitably, incomplete. Hers self-evidently inform with advantage the aspects, people and places she chooses to include. Perhaps these 'gaps' in this account of Queer Tango are in part a function of 'gaps' in her experiences? Perhaps another author, with other gaps, might make other omissions? I can only guess.

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Fitch acknowledges herself that her subject area, global tangos [including Queer Tango, by implication], is fast moving, and that no sooner is the ink dry on today's insights, they risk becoming redundant. This morning, on 26th January 2016, I thought of Iz, the Muslim, Turkish lesbian dancing tango in her headscarf in the streets of Istanbul on Gay Pride Day in 2011. I thought of her thinking what she thought and saying what she said. I did so because I was listening to Orhan Pamuk, Turkey's most famous novelist speaking on the radio as I shaved. Fitch reminds us that in 2010, Turkey's Minister for Women had asserted that homosexuality was "a biological disorder...and should be treated," while in 2008, notoriously, a Turkish father is alleged to have travelled 600 miles to have his own son murdered for being gay, being proud of being gay and so bringing shame on his family. The authorities did little to find out the truth. This morning, Pamuk was lamenting the extent to which Turkey is lurching towards repression with an authoritarian clamp down on free speech. Difference is frowned upon. Tango – including Queer Tango – has a fine, 21st century tradition of protest and political activism. I hope Iz and those like her, or like me, remain safe in Turkey. Like her, I believe the striking double negative: "Islam, homosexuality and tango are not incompatible." Perhaps more than ever, dancing tango might eventually help turn an aspiration into a truth.

Global Tangos is a superb book. I admire it greatly, and I recommend it. It embodies scholarship at a high level, and Fitch exacts truths from her rich, well-chosen body of evidence by the judicious application of theory, insight and intelligence. *Global Tangos* cannot be seen as anything other than a welcome addition to existing tango literature. Its contribution to the understanding

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of Queer Tango is significant and also welcome, even if its value is less clear cut.

4. “Tango is like homelessness”

This paper was originally published on 15th December 2015 on The Queer Tango Project website.

Football coach, Jack Badu and I had worked hard preparing the Football Tango Workshop we ran for Homeless FA at St George's Park, the purpose-built 'Home of English Football.' Yet nothing prepared us for someone saying “Tango is like homelessness.” Really? Of course we both recognised the connections between tango and football: both involve a physical, social activity in a prescribed space in which people behave according to rules and within a culture. These connections are the foundations of our Football Tango Project. Funded by Bucks New University, supported by Stonewall, the LGBT campaigning group and informed by dialogue with the UK Football Association, Jack and I ran a sequence of research workshops with Bucks student footballers which established the viability of combining tango and football. Doing so improves players' physical co-ordination on the field – a kind of second by second, spatial 'social intelligence'. In addition, the unsettling experience of asking players to dance with each other – men with men, women with women, women leading men and occasionally, men leading women – makes people think. We exploit this interruption to 'commonsense' assumptions as an opportunity to open up discussions about sexism and

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about homophobia and its causes. In football, homophobia is worse than in wider society.

Of course, there are well-recognised connections between football and supporting vulnerable people. Football Beyond Borders (FBB), where Jack is Head of Coaching, is a thriving organisation dedicated to using football to help disadvantaged young people. Jack learnt some tango and successfully worked tango principles into a dozen or so football “drills” or exercises which he regularly uses in his work. Homeless FA offers football to people affected by homelessness and in doing so, gives players unique opportunities to meet their football heroes, to travel and to represent England in “Team England” playing internationally against teams of people affected by homelessness from other countries. Players’ self-esteem increases. Even so, working at this level demands commitment, team-work and self-discipline. Developing these personal skills can open up ways out of homelessness and change lives.

Every player at St George’s Park on December 10th, 2015 had competed hard for their place in Team England. These days spent there were intended to celebrate their achievement. If, in the coming months, they show sufficient maturity, self-discipline, and team spirit, some of them can become fully fledged volunteers for Homeless FA – a role with further privileges. Homeless FA seeks to counter racism, sexism, homophobia and all other forms of discrimination. Inviting the Football Tango Project to run a workshop was only the latest in a sustained programme of creative approaches to countering prejudices.

So, tango is connected to football, football is connected to homelessness – but a direct connection between tango and homelessness?

That was the surprising result of this unique event.

In all, the 42 participants were made up mostly of players, with some volunteers and a few members of staff – roughly a 70%/30% split between men and women. Matt Coombes came down from Newcastle to help us. Matt is a designer specialising in the therapeutic dimensions of design and a dedicated, experimental tango dancer who, like me, can lead and follow. None of the players had been told what the workshop consisted of except that it would be “challenging”. Having completed a fitness test, they sat recovering inside seating in the vast Futsal gym. As they caught their breath, I gave a brief explanation of the background to the day, of tango’s historical origins (including how, in a society where men outnumbered women by seven to one, it was ‘normal’ for men to practise dancing with each other), and of the sorts of things we would be asking them to do. Anxieties surfaced immediately: “You mean I’m gonna have to dance with another guy?” “Yep.” A slow, despairing shake of the head confirmed that to this wiry, tattooed, short-haired man – the epitome to some, perhaps, of ‘homeless’ – this was a “challenge” he neither expected, nor welcomed.

We began with simple tango walking exercises. There were episodes of horseplay, wisecracking and general unruliness, a standard defence mechanism for those who fear they may be in danger of being humiliated – but not good behaviour for those wanting to become Homeless FA volunteers. The players were asked to form couples, holding each other in a relaxed, practice

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hold. They did it, even if some did so with palpable unease. And yet, as the exercises in leading and following unfolded – and especially once Jack engaged them in the first of the tango-based football drills – the unease gradually subsided. After the break, more tango exercises, this time adopting a dance hold – more like “real” dancing – and then one of the objectives of the workshop: a whole three and a half minute tango, danced in couples in dance hold, in single file anti-clockwise around the dance floor in “the line of dance”, without breaking off, without talking to each other and with each dancer not only being attentive to the person immediately opposite them, but (in order to ensure the orderly line of dance kept moving), attentive to everyone else in that space. This was “dance as society”.

And this society worked, more or less. Once the music stopped, there was spontaneous applause.

Was this “Queer Tango?” Our approach certainly drew on it. Queer Tango challenges the gender conventions of tango within an overt social and political context, and our work arose, in part, out of my involvement with it – but that is not how we presented the workshops to the players. There was already plenty in the workshops to “challenge”. The specialised language and concepts of Queer Tango would have only erected further barriers to engagement, barriers which, in the time available, might have proved insuperable.

As the applause died down, Matt and I gave a brief tango demonstration of intercambio, smoothly swapping who was leading and who following throughout the dance – prompting yet more applause.



A similar Football Tango Project class run with Jack Badu at the same venue in 2016

Then, finally, the disciplined riotousness of Jack's last and most sophisticated tango-based football drill: players playing in couples as one player (and penalties awarded if they came apart), with two teams on the pitch, one off and around the pitch to give and receive footballs and four sets of goal posts. They threw themselves into it.

By the end of the workshop, it was evident most had become relaxed enough to enjoy it thoroughly – but had it made them think? Thirty minutes later at the debriefing session in the Terry Venables Lecture Theatre, much was said that was to be welcomed and perhaps expected: the weirdness of same-sex couple dancing, with one woman player who self-identified as gay, saying it was dancing with other women which was unsettling, because of the proximity of bodies. Among the men, free acknowledgement of the near universal taboo on physical contact between men except in very proscribed circumstances, because otherwise – well, otherwise what? People will think you are gay – and how bad is that? One of them said: “I

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think that the way people discriminate against people for their sexuality is wrong... People need to be more educated. I saw some of the guys finding it difficult being nose to nose, a bit intimidating. I was embarrassed too... It was good though."

Pretty much everyone recognised the commonalities between football and tango. And most had enjoyed it. "I thought it was a bit weird, but I suppose it teaches you to trust your players, if you can dance with them then you can certainly play football with them. You've got to trust them to lead you and they can trust you to lead them. I thought it was pretty cool." And one player reminded us all that people affected by homelessness may have particular reasons to be jealous of their personal spaces: "I think touching each other, looking at each other and holding each other made people feel uncomfortable. I think it's a mixture of the romantic implications and the fact that [in] the type of group that we are, a lot of people suffer from anxiety and personal space issues. I think people struggle with others touching them and getting in that space."

But: 'Tango is like homelessness?' This unexpected observation came from the players themselves. Most of them had started out with a set of views about what tango is like, about who dances it, how it is danced and why. Most people have a set of beliefs about what homelessness is like and what a homeless person is like – "all about nicking your wallet" – and why. For most of the players, the workshop had dispelled preconceptions about tango: "I liked having the history explained - that was interesting." They made the connection: tango is like homelessness because as each of them addresses the problems facing them, so they change other people's preconceptions about

homelessness and the people it affects. “You don’t look like a homeless person” a journalist had said to one of the players interviewed for a national newspaper. Many people are affected by homelessness. Homeless FA players want to change attitudes towards homelessness, themselves and towards others like them.

They certainly changed mine.

We were thrilled that Emily Whyte at Homeless FA wrote to us afterwards:

Thanks again for the amazing workshop on Thursday – it was fun and informative and definitely allowed players to work outside their comfort zone. It also had an impact on players...in particular those who were not confident or willing to take part initially and managed to change their attitude and engage...I think it will have a lasting effect on them!

The Football Tango Project looks forward to more workshops with Homeless FA players and with others including, perhaps, players from the professional game where, despite much fine language, changes in attitudes towards sexism and homophobia are long overdue.

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5. Dancing to Change the World: Is the Dancing of Queer Tango Good Politics?

This paper was originally delivered at the PoP MOVES Conference, "Memory, Migration & Movement" in Paris on 8th December 2018.

Abstract: How politically effective is queer tango today? The privileged dancers who migrate each year to Paris, Rome, Berlin or Buenos Aires for queer tango festivals and marathons thoroughly enjoy themselves, but does this amiable social dancing actually change anything? In two decades of increasing international movement, has this once radical dance practice forgotten its late twentieth century feminist and gay liberation roots, dwindling into a branch of tourism? I suggest not. Dancing bodies are political bodies. Dana Mills (2017) suggests there are two types of political dance: "weak", where the dancing reiterates political ideas already expressed in words; and "strong", which "assumes that dance has a communicative power independent of other symbolic systems." Queer tango is more than festivals and it includes the weak, the strong and the words. Indeed, all three interact. Historically, queer tango dancing bodies notionally

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expressed ideas taken from the literature of queer theory. Now, they often move among and dance with mainstream tango dancing bodies, changing the mainstream by dancing queer tango's implicit critique of it in the mainstream. Edgardo Fernández Sesma's flash mobs in Buenos Aires tie placards to their backs with words on them – the names of homophobic nations – thus turning friendly social dancing into political performance. Queer tango includes language-based political discourses: informal discussions at the edges of dance floors; international online bantering facilitated by social media; and a growing body of non-academic and academic writings. Yet, as one of Juliet McMains' (2018) interviewees reminds us, it may be joyous simply to dance in a "a room full of queers" as one does at a queer tango festival, but such dancing is also an affirmative, political act, the power of which should never be under-estimated.

Introduction

Memory, migration and movement.

I am a queer tango dancer. I live in London. Each year, I migrate around the world in order to dance queer tango. Last week, I returned from Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Each hosted queer tango festivals. This year I have danced queer tango in London at Queer Tango London, in mainstream London tango venues, and at international queer tango events in Rome, Oldenburg, Paris and Berlin.

I returned from Buenos Aires inspired afresh by the work of queer tango activist Edgardo Fernández Sesma. But for a full life, I might also have made it to Riga, or Munich or Hamburg. At such events I re-



Dancers at the Berlin Queer Tango Festival

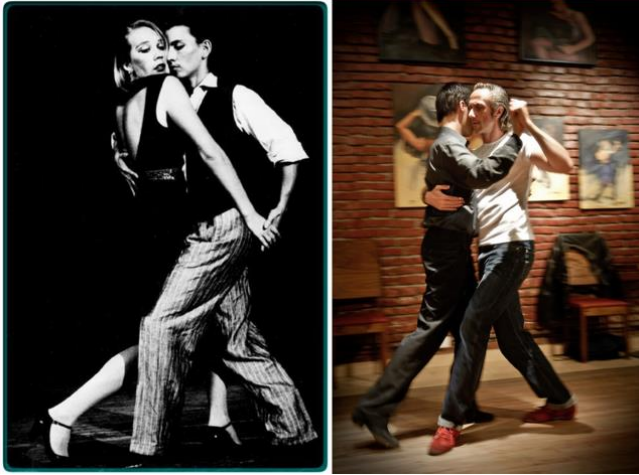
engage with friendly dancing bodies from around the world. And it brings me joy.

Joy has a value, surely, but queer tango emerged out of a suite of late 20th century social and political concerns about gender and about sexuality, explored through feminism, and what was then called “gay liberation”. Queer tango has expanded as ideas of the “queer” have matured, but has it kept up? Today, I am asking: aside from making us happy, is the dancing of queer tango good – that is to say, effective – politics?

The political origins of queer tango

There are two almost, but not quite distinct, histories of queer tango: that of women; and that of men. In general, it has been women who have been more active in thinking through the political and social dimensions, while the men have tended simply to organise and dance with our customary sense of

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Brigitta Winkler with Angelika Fischer in the 1980s; Augusto Balizano and unidentified dancer

entitlement. Recent research (Batchelor and Havmøller 2017) highlights the many different 20th century times and places of queer tango's origins, with no one of them qualifying as "the birthplace". Mariana Docampo may be credited with the formal link to queer theory, but "queer tango" – that is, what is danced, the theoretical foundations, the aspirations and the terminology used – took time to cohere into a single entity, if indeed they ever did. There is still disagreement as to what queer tango is and how it should be defined (Batchelor 2015; Docampo 2015; Havmøller 2017; McMains 2018).

Yet the memories of Ute Walter, Marga Nagel, Sabine Rohde, Brigitta Winkler, Rebecca Shulman, and Mariana Docampo, and of the men, Daniel Trenner, Augusto Balizano and Edgardo Fernández Sesma among others, suggest the joy to which I am drawn has always been there. But queer tango, unlike mainstream tango, has an overt social and political

agenda. This marks it out. Sabine Rohde recalls dancing in the 1980s:

We were political[ly] aware. We all had long, after-Milonga late night discussions about what we are doing with this "macho dance". Why us? (Rohde 2017)

Queer tango's protagonists originally carved out "safe spaces" in a world seen as hostile, in which same sex couples would not be an anachronism, and where who dances which role is not predetermined by gender. Above all, queer tango develops the tango's luxurious, erotic potentiality, such that it welcomes alternatives to the heterosexual, man-woman model hitherto universally identified as the essential foundation of this famously [hetero]sexy dance.

Queer tango opens up – and as it turns out, historically, re-opens – the tango embrace to the homoerotic and legitimises it. And as concepts of the "queer" have developed, the embrace legitimises a rich variety of liberating, alternative, and sometimes non-linguistic models of gender and sexual identity. Now, no-one need be restricted by labels such as "lesbian", or "gay man". And just as these alternatives emerged out of developments in the wider world onto the queer tango dance-floor, so their queer tango embodiments were, and are, thought by those dancing to have social and political value beyond it. Queer tango draws from and feeds back into that wider world.

Queer tango prompts people to feel, think and act differently, and the extent to which it does is, surely, a fair criterion by which the dancing's political impact

may be assessed. Whatever else it is, queer tango is political social dancing – dancing to change the world.

How might dancing queer tango achieve political effects?

Much has been written about the relationships between dance and politics – Clare Croft’s anthology, *Queer Dance*, is but one example which might be thought pertinent – but despite caveats to the contrary here and elsewhere, most critiques consider dance as performance and audience. Erin Manning’s *Politics of Touch* (2006) is a welcome and valuable exception. The author uses the social dancing of tango to develop her concepts. Yet Manning’s is a work of political philosophy where “politics” is a somewhat abstract entity. My own interests are simpler and more immediate: at a dangerous time in the politics of much of the world, a politics disfigured by nationalist, masculine posturing, what evidence is there that queer tango is making any political difference? And I am referring to social dancing and to those who witness it.

Dana Mills (2017) is useful here. In *Dance and Politics* she draws...

...the distinction between the weak reading of political dance – the representation through moving bodies of ideas previously articulated in words – and the strong reading of political dance – the creation of a phenomenologically independent world which includes its own system of inscription and world of reception.

Queer tango includes both. Few examples are purely the one or the other.

At its simplest, politics is “the process of making decisions that apply to members of a group” (Wikipedia 2018). Conventionally, there are a range of mediums by which politics is conducted, ranging from the manner in which lives are lived, the language to which Mills refers, and by implication, imagery – that is, representations of lives lived, real or imagined – or, moving back towards the physical – street protest, violence, terrorism, revolution, or war.

I suggest that to contribute to political processes, dancers’ dancing must – intentionally, or unintentionally – alter how people feel, think, and eventually act. Queer tango dancing – weak or strong – can be judged politically effective to the extent that it furthers the objectives of, or develops the themes touched on by, queer tango. Rather than attempting to consider all of these, I will explore just two a little: queer tango as a contribution to debates about gender, sexuality and identity; and queer tango as a model of inclusivity.

Part of the problem with defining queer tango is that it has many different manifestations. Accordingly, here, I consider three of the main ones: local queer tango groups; international events; and “applied queer tango” – that is, queer tango deliberately used for political purposes.

Local Queer Tango Groups

Local queer tango groups such as Paris-based Collectif Queer Tangolibero is an example of what was, in the early 21st century, the standard unit of queer tango. Activists created them across Europe, in Buenos Aires and in Montevideo, in Istanbul, in North America, east and west coasts, and middle, not forgetting Canada –

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by no means an exhaustive list. The relationship with the local environment is crucial. Some countries are so repressive that queer tango groups would be a practical impossibility. In Putin's socially conservative, homophobic Russia, and in Istanbul in a country lurching towards social and sexual repression, activists sustained such groups, in part, as tangible ripostes.

Queer Tango London is (ironically, given recent events) more typical of the European experience. From 2008 onwards, Tim Flynn followed the late 20th century "safe space" model, a place where LGBTQ+ people and their friends might dance with whomsoever they chose. Hostility beyond the safe space was a given, but untested. Sometimes there are no queer tango groups because the context is SO liberal. Queer tango dancers in southern Sweden, for example, tell me they have no need formally to organise, because they can dance queer tango comfortably at mainstream venues. The same is now true of mainstream milongas in London, where Queer Tango London functions mostly as a safe space launchpad for queer dancers who become proficient, before becoming part of that "normal" landscape. The local model is far from exhausted, as Samantha Schmidt's story, "Queer Tango: A gender-norm-defying dance class where anyone can lead or follow" in *The Washington Post* about a new group earlier this week made plain. (Schmidt 2018)

The political effects of local groups are chiefly affirmative. As Tanya, one of Juliet McMains' respondents, put it: "There is no way to explain what it's like to be in a room full of queer people, for us. Just to not feel different all the time." (McMains 2018). And this dancing is "strong" in the Dana Mills sense for the most part, an affirmation of ideas residing not in words, but in bodies.

International queer tango events

Local groups knew they were part of something international.

Some organised their own international events. Dancers in Hamburg initiated the first of these in 2000 [2001: see n. 2, p. 14]. In 2011, the first International Queer Tango Festival in Berlin under Astrid Weiske was held and immediately became something of a benchmark. Festivals have been joined by “marathons”, where the emphasis is wholly on participants’ dancing, and both have proliferated. Taken together, in 2015 there were 13. In 2018 there were 34.⁵

But what has been their political impact?

Like local groups, one important political function is the affirmation of sexual and gender identities, but with this vital international dimension. If Faysal Tekoğlu embraces me or is embraced by me or others on the dancefloor in Berlin, he returns to an increasingly repressive social environment in Recep Erdoğan’s Turkey knowing that others think and behave as he does – and he knows it as a physical reality.

In 2016 many dancers from socially liberal countries, myself included, came to the Salida Queer Tango Festival in St Petersburg. Each venue address would be released secretly for fear that the heavies would find it and smash the place up. When some straight dancers at a mainstream venue – to which we had been invited

⁵ Figures taken from The Queer Tango Project website <http://queertangobook.org/queer-tango-resources/calendar/> accessed 9th Dec 2018

by the proprietor – first snickered, and then noisily stormed out of the room, we witnessed first-hand the hostility to which our queer tango confederates there were subject. To his credit, the proprietor immediately came over to us, and danced with each of us in turn.

Applied queer tango

In her book, *Global Tangos*, Melissa Fitch (2015) devotes a chapter to the therapeutic value of tango. Queer tango can similarly, if differently, be of value, if danced with specific political or social objectives in mind. I have tried it a few times myself. I used it in workshops with managers to get them to feel, think and behave differently regarding leadership, followership and gender in their day to day work (Burge, Batchelor and Cox, 2013). This is “soft” political dancing in Mills’ terms, in that all these ideas have been expressed in words, though I doubt my participants had read them, but “strong” in the sense that women leading men and not apologising, and men allowing themselves physically to be led and not take over, is experienced and understood in a physical sense and, initially at least, is independent of language. In *D/deaf CAN Dance!* with Melanie Parris, a profoundly deaf work colleague, I ran a research project teaching queer tango to D/deaf people, to find out what benefits might accrue if they danced with hearing dancers, or with each other (Parris, Batchelor, 2016). With the talented football coach Jack Badu and the support of Stonewall, the UK LGBTQ+ campaigning charity, in the Football Tango Project, we get players to dance with each other (that is, to feel) and then think, and then discuss homophobia and the politics of sex, sexuality and gender in football.



Jack Badu, football coach and charity activist (left) practising a tango-based football “drill” (exercise) in the Football Tango Project

But my hero in terms of applied queer tango is the indefatigable, Buenos Aires-based, Edgardo Fernández Sesma, an activist on a queer tango inclusivity mission. I will not attempt to mention all his activities here but confine myself to one or two which, following my latest trip to Buenos Aires, are fresh in my mind. Having taught and danced with them a couple of years ago, I was invited by a group of “adultos mayores” (or “adultes mayores” to use Fernández Sesma’s term devised occasionally to rid himself of the Spanish default masculine) to their five-year birthday celebration. This was no ordinary pensioners’ party. It was a model of queer tango inclusivity. Five years earlier, as a queer tango response to the scandal of pensioners being mistreated or abandoned by their families and by the services intended to support them, Fernández Sesma established this group for adultes

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mayores to meet, to dance (most have danced all their lives), to socialise, and to campaign against the mistreatment and abandoning of pensioners like themselves. With coffee, cakes, and the odd glass of wine, it proved a great success.



Queer [Tango] inclusivity. Activist Edgardo Fernández Sesma with a volunteer and “adultes mayores” [Edgardo’s grammar!].

The socialising is really important, but the group does not confine itself to that alone. Fernández Sesma IS a queer tanguero. The adultes mayores are NOT a “conventional” LGBTQ+ constituency, but they too risk marginalisation and queer inclusivity, rightly, reaches out to them. They have been happy to help with the now famous flash mobs which Fernández Sesma organises in Buenos Aires against homophobia around the world.



Queer Tango Flash Mob in Buenos Aires

Dancers appear [unannounced,] dancing in the streets with banners tied to their backs naming countries where LGBTQ+ people are persecuted, tortured or murdered. As further evidence of inclusivity, this adultes mayores party closed with performances by Lucrecia Pereya Mazzara who has Down's Syndrome and Edgardo, and by Brenda Holtz and Horacio Tolosa. Brenda is in a wheelchair. And Brenda was not just a show stopper, but is a regular at social dancing.

Others may practise "Applied Queer Tango" but they have yet to come to my attention.

Conclusion

Is dancing queer tango political? It is. Is it effective? It can be.

Queer tango is a branch of politics, not a substitute for it (though I much prefer it to masculine, nationalist posturing). No French President will abandon environmental taxes because we dance queer tango. Sometimes we also need to discuss, to vote, to march, or – apparently – pull on hi-visibility yellow jackets. But queer tango makes material contributions to the

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character and strengths of societies, and against a background of the deterioration in political life, this should be valued.



Dancers at a Queer Tango London práctica, 2018

On a small scale, I dance at Queer Tango London and help support any number of people in their identities, just as their dancing supports me in mine. I dance with Gawaine Preston from Queer Tango London at mainstream milongas, which helps maintain a new normality which includes us, and others like us. I go to international festivals and help sustain a trans-national community where our dancing re-affirms sexual and gender identities and re-asserts their value. All these realisations of human relations have value beyond the dance floor.

I began by implying that international queer tango events might have dwindled into a branch of tourism. I leave you with a superb example of political queer tango. La Vie en Rose is the wonderful – and thoughtful – international queer event which happens each year here, in Paris. The City Walk is a progress around Paris where tango music is played and dancers dance. At one level, we dancers see more of Paris.



Dancers in the fountains outside the Louvre as part of a “City Walk” at the La Vie en Rose queer tango event, Paris, 2018. Photo: Camille Collin

But at another, Paris sees more of us. We dance. We are good! Smart phones are whipped out. Photos are taken. Videos are made. And they get taken away and shared, and discussed and shared... Queer tango politics which IS effective, and – of course – a joy!

Brilliant.

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6. Uncommonly queer? As it seems to dissolve into the mainstream, who needs queer tango?

This paper was originally presented at the Dance Studies Association's 2019 Conference, "Dancing in Common" in Evanston, Illinois, August 8th – 11th, 2019.

Times change. Go to any milonga (tango ball) in London, and you will find same-gender couples, women leading men, and men following. These practices, historically chiefly associated with queer tango, now attract little comment beyond approval, as the dance floor adjusts to changes in the wider world. The closing of established queer tango venues in Buenos Aires might seem to point to queer tango's "success" – having so much in common with the mainstream, that the mainstream absorbs it. Is queer tango still needed? Changed times are also dangerous times. Recently, at a milonga in St Petersburg in Russia "the organiser pushed two women dancing together off the dancefloor", claiming to defend "traditions" (Toumanova 2019). In Istanbul, queer tango activist Faysal Tekoğlu (2019) says "verbal attacks are the order of the day: they ask us if we are faggots, inverted, [if] there are men who claim to be lesbians" – examples symptomatic of socially and politically deteriorating contexts. Dancing queer tango is powerful politics. And the "queer" in it has matured. With a developing emphasis on countering trans- and bi-phobias, it now looks towards older people, disabled

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people, the racially abused, or others risking marginalisation, because they have so much in common with those of us who risk being marginalised for reasons of gender and sexuality. Argentinian queer tango activists Liliana Furió, Edgardo Fernández Sesma and Chino Andres Reyes argue we should dance with them. Increasingly, we do.

Keywords: queer tango; politics; inclusivity



A 2012 digital flyer for Queer Tango London on the occasion of a visit by Ute Walter from Hamburg.

Dancing in Common? How we got here...

Twenty or thirty years ago, and echoing rifts in wider society, queer tango emerged because we had so little in common with the mainstream, where men led, women followed, and same gender couples were almost unknown. Following the well-worn twentieth century model of “the safe space”, well away from the dangers of the hostile, wider world, queer tango defined a place where we could behave as we chose. This was “dancing in difference” to the mainstream, rather than dancing in common

– except... “queer”, then, as now, whatever actual language is used, is a heterogenous entity. As the unstable, possibly unsustainable LGBTQ+ acronym and variants remind us – it includes many different constituent groups who, because of their sexuality, share a common risk of oppression.



Left: Brigitte Winkler “and my grande looking girlfriend Angelika” in Germany in the 1980s; Right: Augusto Balizano and partner in Buenos Aires early this century

We danced in common. In the safe space of queer tango, women could lead, men could follow and same gender couples were, to us, one of its recurrent joys, substituting homoerotic charges for redundant heterosexual ones. Dancing might also occur which depended on none of these classifications. Politics had rarely been such fun. For quite a while, simply to dance seemed to be enough to sustain it and justify its existence.

Yet in time, in some places, among some people, and mirroring a wider world where there had been changes, the hostilities of that wider tango community seemed noticeably to have subsided. In my own experience of dancing with men in mainstream London venues, the mild bewilderment of those

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who first saw us – “what ARE they doing?” – gradually gave way not just to acceptance, but to welcome. The unambiguous message was: “we want to dance in a world where you dance as you do”. And often they wanted to dance with us, too. For several years now, the whole of London’s tango scene welcomes queer dancers with – literally – open arms.



Dancers at the Berlin International Queer Tango Festival in 2017

So far, so familiar. This is a story which might, more or less, be replicated in some other, comparable locations.

So what now for queer tango?

If queer tango dancers seem to have so much in common with their mainstream counterparts, is queer tango still needed? This acceptance is a Good Thing? Isn't it? Part of what queer tango fought for? Juliet McMains recently reflected on a parallel situation in Buenos Aires:

As more and more same-sex couples, nurtured and supported by the queer milonga circuit, have felt comfortable dancing together in mainstream milongas, the demand for queer milongas has declined. Although some queer tango advocates would argue that elimination of the need for queer-specific milongas due

to mainstreaming of same-sex tango is a mark of queer tango's ultimate success, I fear the closure of these queer spaces may have come too soon. (McMains 2018, p. 95)

Indeed. Her aspiration is for LGBTQ+ women and their equivalents from the mainstream to form constructive alliances. I hope to show that the needs for queer tango have not vanished, though they may have changed and, indeed, been added to. In particular in what follows, I want to set out one way forwards for the politics of queer tango – only one of many, probably, but to me, by far the most interesting and candidly, the most urgent.



A Práctica at Queer Tango London, 2018

At one level, the original “safe space” motivation would seem to be part of that future. When, in 2016, Tim Flynn who founded Queer Tango London stepped down, I kick-started a conversation on social media saying that Queer Tango London might die now, and that this might be the right thing to happen. In the debate that followed, a clear expression of a need to perpetuate the “safe space” emerged – as did a core of activists who, as The Queer Tango London Team, have run Queer Tango London ever since. Critically, we control that space.

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Those who want to experiment with queer tango – and they may be queer, straight, or none of the above – can do so at our weekly *prácticas*, secure in the knowledge they will be supported.

Queer Tango's Political Future

Queer tango, unlike mainstream tango, is tango with an overt political agenda. In a paper last year, “Dancing to Change the World: Is Queer Tango Good Politics?”, I suggested that organised queer tango operates in three distinct arenas: local groups serving local communities; international festivals and marathons serving an international community; and what I called “applied queer tango”, that is queer tango practised deliberately to deliver some social, political or therapeutic benefit.



Local tango: Queer Tango London, 2016



4 days Workshops for all levels and beginners ++ Milongas ++ Shows ++ Live music
WWW.QUEERTANGOFESTIVAL-BERLIN.DE
International tango: Berlin Queer Tango Festival, 2016

All three, I argued, have some overlap in terms of who is dancing, and all three have political value. Dancing at local and international queer tango venues invariably reinforces senses both of community, and so of individual identity, in ways dancing in the mainstream cannot.



Applied [queer] tango. The “D/deaf CAN Dance!” project sought to use social tango to enable deaf people physically to enjoy music and to access dance spaces otherwise closed to them. Here, Dawn (left) is deaf and learning to follow led by experienced hearing dancer, Margaret (right)

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And the international dimension is not just high class holiday-making. For those who normally dance queer tango in illiberal societies of the kinds found in Russia or Turkey, to dance in a queer tango community at ease with itself, and with dancers for whom doing so is normal, is no small matter.

Some aspects of international queer tango are deliberately political. I have expressed my admiration for the “City Walk” part of the annual La Vie en Rose queer tango festival in Paris before. This year was no exception. I wrote in my Facebook post the next day:

...The model of the City Walk is well-known: yesterday we danced in public spaces in Paris. We were watched, photographed and videoed. Those watching and recording take that material away, and share, and probably talk about images of women dancing together, men dancing together, of women leading men – and so on. (Batchelor 2019)



The “City Walk” as part of the annual La Vie en Rose queer tango programme, 2019

I went on to describe the gradual, multi-sensory, kinaesthetic manner in which people approached the dancing and the dancing bodies. I wrote:

I suspect it is this layered sequence of emerging sensations which eases the watcher to the point of noticing, registering, thinking and reaching for their mobile phones... I would also argue it is an experience far removed from reading the content of a passing banner and, arguably, more powerful.

I should perhaps have said “differently powerful.”

My personal hero, as far as dancing political queer tango is concerned, is the indefatigable, Buenos-Aires based, queer tango activist, Edgardo Fernández Sesma. He found himself challenged on exactly this political point when he mounted a queer tango street demonstration in support of the legalisation of abortion.



Edgardo Fernández Sesma and Soledad Nani dancing in the rain in favour of women's rights to abortion, Buenos Aires, 2019

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He wrote recently on Facebook in *The Queer Tango Conversation*:

Last year I received a message for the following video [of the dancing demonstration]: "Edgardo: why does every political issue, in this case, abortion, have to be a claim from the Tango? Why can not it be a normal protest walking the streets?[" Edgardo writes:] My answer was: "Because we are artists and we decided to use art as a tool to try to change what we consider injustices, and our art is the Queer Tango that locked [in] only serves as a moment of pleasure, but in the streets it serves as a powerful tool, brave and supportive to help many others who need it; Art is not restrictive but it is not art, if the art of Queer Tango has only one moment -the dance floor-, it is not free and we want a Free Tango Queer, because we are free and we dance for freedom " (sic)⁶

Politically, dancing queer tango can do things which words or marching alone cannot.



Dancing at a queer benefit milonga in Berlin just after the Berlin International Queer Tango Festival, 2019

⁶ I have tried, and failed, to locate this post on Facebook.

Is there a future for this kind of work?

The prompts of history

I took a train from Paris to Berlin. I danced there the following week at another wonderful festival, quite different, larger, but deeply moving. During the day, I enjoyed wandering the streets. In part, it was that which prompted me to re-address with renewed vigour this business of how the political dimensions of queer tango might best be developed, because everywhere in Berlin there is evidence of the dark parts of German history:



Stolpersteine or “Stumble stones” – memorials to Holocaust victims set into the pavement near where they used to live in Berlin

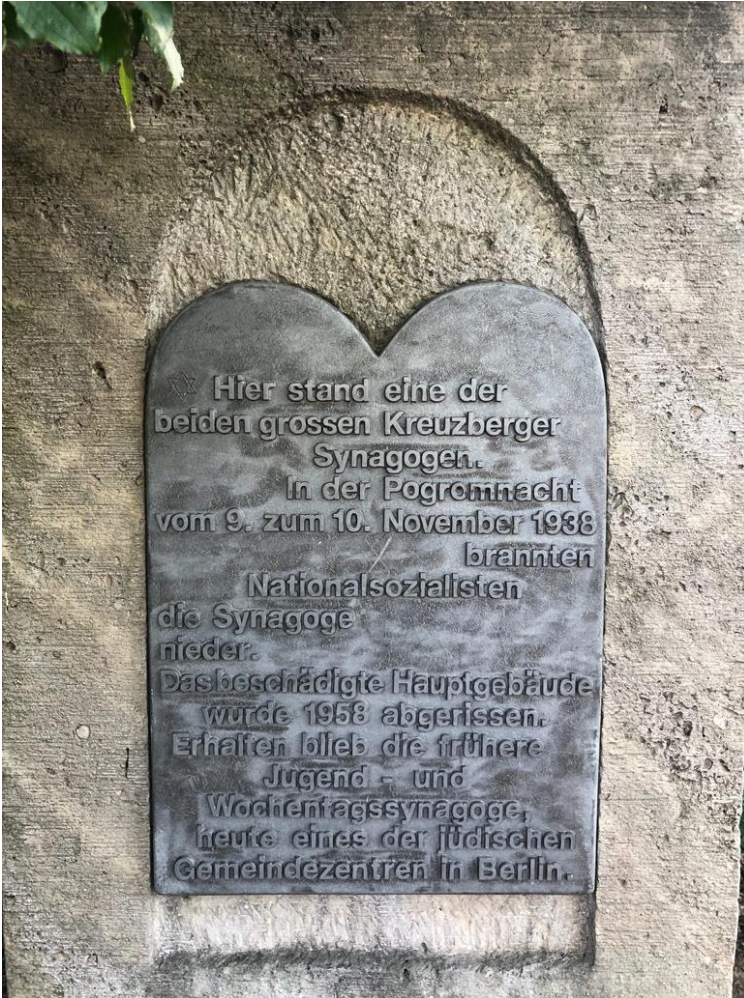
The “Stolpersteine” or “Stumble Stones”, for example: little raised metal memorials set into the pavement near where people had lived, such that they disturb your progress:

Here lived Ida Bundtman-Weinstein Born 1892
Fled to France Interned in Drancy Deported 1942
Murdered in Auschwitz

An inconspicuous upright slab in the Fraenkelufer next to a bit of flat ground telling me that not one, but two Synagogues once

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stood here, burnt to the ground by the Nazis on 10th November 1938 during the notorious November Pogroms when, with the



Plaque commemoration of one of the two synagogues at the Fraenkelufer, Berlin, burnt down by Nazis during the November Pogroms in 1938

tacit approval of the state, Jewish buildings, businesses, and places of worship across Germany were attacked, and hundreds of Jews were murdered.



The Synagogues on the Frankelufer before and after destruction by the Nazis

And, lest we forget, on the wall of Nollendorf U-bahn station opposite the jolly Neues Schauspielhaus, a theatre built in 1905 adorned with a great many very attractive naked men, is the pink triangle memorial to the homosexuals rounded up and sent away from this very station to concentration camps and, in most cases, death.

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The “Pink Triangle” memorial to murdered homosexuals, Nollendorf Platz, Berlin

A simple, plain paper text pasted over a graffitied wall in Adelbertstraße which reads [my translation]:

Unfortunately, there is a shift to the right – in other countries too. “I see many parallels with the past.



An informal political poster, Berlin, 2019

...There were many Nazi groups then who joined up with each other in the Nazi Party. And they grew big. We said nothing. We did nothing. And what was the consequence of that? I lost my family, I lost my parents, all of them murdered by the Nazis. So how do I regard what I see today? I look on with real horror.”

E. B., Survivor of the Auschwitz and Ravensbrück Concentration Camps

Changes in the Social and Political Landscape

And you can see E. B.’s point.

It is not a startlingly original observation to suggest parallels between the deeply disturbing lurch towards populism and the legitimising of prejudices towards others happening right now, and the sorry narrative of the 1930s when the opposition to fascism failed – with catastrophic consequences.

Of course, there are parallels, but there are differences too: perhaps to date, differences of degree and a more

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contemporary menu of human targets, with 21st century social media providing novel, but effective channels for inflaming hatred.

Whatever they might actually have in common, as Cas Mudde [2004] argued, populism divides people into “two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’” – a model found on the right and sometimes even the left of politics. ‘Purity’ is, of course, threatened by “the other”, which today includes refugees, immigrants, or even just women exercising their human rights, while there have been well-reported spikes in violent attacks, both rhetorical and actual, on Muslims, Jews, Roma and LGBTQ+ people – does any of this sound familiar? And is any of this you, or me, or those we love?

London bus attack: fifth arrest after homophobic assault

Couple say they will not be frightened into hiding their sexuality after the attack



▲ Melania Gaymonat (R) and her girlfriend, Chris, who were...
Gaymonat via Facebook

Antisemitic incidents in Britain up 10% on last year, finds charity

Nearly 900 reported in first six months, with a third involving social media, says Jewish trust



▲ The Labour MP Dame Margaret Hodge last autumn at a rally in Manchester highlighting a rise in anti-Jewish incidents. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

The brutal attack on last weekend's equality march in the city of Białystok, in north-eastern Poland, occurred amid a government campaign to whip up homophobic feeling and fear of so-called "LGBT ideology".

Signs that intolerance of "other" communities is rising, 2019

Every day, a new headline. So for example, from The Guardian – a liberal UK newspaper – earlier this month: “Antisemitic incidents in Britain up 10% on last year, finds charity”

“This is the third year in a row that [the charity] has seen an increase in reports of antisemitic incidents,” said David Delew,

the trust's chief executive. "The problem is spreading across the country and online. It reflects deepening divisions in our society and it is causing increasing anxiety in the Jewish community."

He added: "It will take people of all communities and backgrounds standing together to turn this tide of hate around." (Sherwood 2019)

Quite.

A Practical Approach to Queer Tango as Politics

I started this paper by reminding you that queer tango began as the many constituent communities that make up the "queer" in queer tango agreed to dance with each other – to dance in common – because of their shared sense, in a hostile world, of being threatened by persecution on account of their sexuality. It is time for our model to be dusted off and repopulated.

On 11th June 2019, Queer Tango London adopted a proposal to mount a programme of overtly political queer tango milongas [tango balls] under the banner "Dancing to Change the World!". In the coming months – years, probably – we will be reaching out to other communities who, like us, are threatened by this aggressive, anti-rational, illiberal turn in the social and political fabric of life in the UK, or by attitudes in that communities' country of origin, if they have made their homes in the UK among us.

If, after careful and respectful discussions, they would like to, we want to dance with them. In each case, we will seek to organise a milonga jointly with an appropriate partner institution. So for example, we are thinking of some groups which you might expect queer tango to embrace:

- The Trans community, possibly working with TransLondon <http://www.translondon.org.uk/>

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- Feminists – with an embarrassment of opportunities for collusion
- LGBTQ+ Black and Ethnic Minorities, possibly with UK Black Pride <https://www.ukblackpride.org.uk/blog>
- LGBTQ+ Armenians – there is a flourishing Armenian community in London, but homosexuality in Armenia is virtually taboo - possibly working with Pink Armenia

...and so on.

Queer tango IS inclusive. Our list has been developed to include Roma, the homeless and immigrants, with corresponding organisations in each case.

Populists often need to pervert history. By contrast, where there are significant elements of tango history relating to these communities – the rich vein of Armenian tango for example, or the absolutely central contributions of black people to tango - we would suggest that these might inform the choices of dance music. We will dance with one another, punctuating the evening with very short, illustrated presentations (so short, no one has time to sit down) which explain the contexts and histories connected to our dancing. It is a model we have tested for LGBT+ History Month, and it works.

This is very much work in progress, but our first event, with London's Jewish community, is in an advanced state of preparation.

We plan to celebrate, among other things, the wonderful Yiddish tango music composed in what, in the 1920s and 30s, was arguably Europe's Tango Capital: Warsaw.

Most of the composers, singers, dancers and musicians were part of the vibrant, and today, often neglected Jewish community which thrived there then – neglected because of what followed. Yiddish tangos continued to be composed during

JEWISH TANGO MEETS QUEER TANGO*



Flyer for the event "Jewish Tango meets Queer Tango" London 2020

the ghetto years, and even in concentration camps where the distinctive music served to reinforce Jewish identity against impossible odds.

"Jewish Tango meets Queer Tango" has been developed in discussion with our Jewish tango friends – most especially with the help of Erika and Martin Lindsay, Gillian Thomas and Terry Meinrath. In November 2019, Queer Tango London reached an agreement with JW3, a thriving Jewish Cultural Centre in North London, jointly to host this event.⁷

Conclusion

So, is queer tango "dancing in common"?

As times have changed, queer dancers in some places come together to dance in common with mainstream dancers in mainstream venues. This is to be celebrated – a way of

⁷ At the time this was written in late 2019, few would have predicted the Covid Pandemic, nor its consequences – which included the cancellation of "Jewish Tango meets Queer Tango". In 2023, the event was revived, reimagined, and took place at The Bishopsgate Institute in London on 4th March.

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reinforcing a desirable and liberal new “normal”. It does not spell the end of queer tango.

Queer tango is not mainstream tango. It is still marked out by having an overt political agenda rooted in, but not confined to, the politics of gender, sexuality, equality and inclusivity. There is still a role for the “safe space” in queer venues, a space which also welcomes mainstream dancers who wish to experiment. So, more queer tango dancing in common, not less. In a climate where the liberal values which emerged in the last thirty or forty years seem increasingly under threat, queer tango’s “inclusivity” is key in redefining political roles for our dancing. If liberal values are under threat, so too are we, as has been unambiguously demonstrated by the rise in homophobic rhetoric, political discourses and violent physical attacks. How is queer tango to respond?

Critically, we are not alone. Other “others” – immigrants, refugees, Jews, Muslims, black and minority ethnic groups, and so on – are similarly and increasingly being persecuted. Mindful of the disastrous failures of opposition to fascism in the twentieth century, queer tango can and should reach out to those other “others”. Where there is agreement – rather than that slightly dodgy business beloved of militaristic, male politicians of standing “shoulder to shoulder”, which always makes me nervous – and provided other “others” agree, we should embrace each other. And we should dance.

THAT will be queer tango in action and spirit.

THAT will be dancing as effective politics.

THAT will be dancing in common.

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7. Dancing Like it Matters! A [DRAFT] Guide to Queer Tango in a Post- Covid World

This essay was first published as a chapter in *Queer Tango Futures: Dancing for Change in a Post-Covid World* (Batchelor, Havmøller and Plaschinski, eds, The Queer Tango Project 2021)

Tuesday 19th January 2021

1610 people died from Covid today in the UK – the highest figure to date.

A dance partner from Normal Times – remember those? – a very nice, friendly, straight lady, recently sent me a video clip of my Birthday Vals in November 2018. It was at my favourite weekly London tango venue, Tango Terra, run by Alfredo Martín Espindola. To see it again now, in January 2021, in deepest lockdown, felt like peering into a lost world. Look at us! We are all so relaxed, so joyful, so easy with one another in this warm, welcoming, crowded place, with bodies everywhere, at the bar, on the dance floor as dancers, women, men, queer, straight, and others, presented themselves to me as leaders, as followers, or both if we flashed a bit of intercambio in for effect. All that and superb, live music from the Tango Terra Quartet led by Tim Sharp working its customary magic on us, dancing or not. I have been going there for several years (“have”, rather than “had”

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because I want it that this story is not over). Sometimes I am struck by the sheer fragility of “normal” ordinary life, on the streets, say, with traffic moving and people wandering up and down the pavements going about their business... and I think one day, some terrorist activity, or some war, might, as it has in the past, bring all this to a halt. Similarly, sometimes when I was there at Terra, I could just about imagine a future, older version of me at some later date, looking back to this heaven of a place and time when, for whatever reasons, it too had vanished.

I am 66 – old enough to know that Everything Passes.

In the first months of 2020, with all the usual social and political stresses of an insane US President, the grief for many of us in the UK brought on by Brexit plus, and more constructively, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements developing as part of the political landscape, we danced our dances at Terra as normal. In part, a night’s dancing at Terra was a joyous refuge from an unstable and sometimes bewildering world.

There are two, unequal processes by which queer tango effects social and political change: the dancing; and the discourses. Normally, although the dancing is by far the most important, the two are intertwined. They critique, inform and so develop one another as the whole evolves. Those of us at Queer Tango London were working hard on our constructive contributions to queer dancing. These happened both within queer tango, such as at our weekly *prácticas*, or when any of us, as at Terra, took our queer bodies out onto the London tango scene to dance and to be danced with. Or, on other occasions, presented ourselves at events we co-organised such as our hugely successful open-air, summer milonga at the Southbank Centre, run jointly with Tango on the Thames in 2019 attended by some 200 dancers.

Discourses (by which I mean everything which is queer tango, but is not the dancing), include informal, functional matter such as, in Queer Tango London’s case – as with other queer tango

organisations – the words and imagery with which we choose to represent ourselves. More formally, the Queer Tango Project, as in our website, *The Queer Tango Conversation* on Facebook and our publications including this one [*Queer Tango Futures*, 2021], is devoted to supporting queer tango discourses. Queer Tango London had been trying to integrate these two processes – the dancing and the discourses – in single events, not least in our contributions to LGBT+ History month, which happens in February each year. Last year, we were especially pleased with our event, *The Nightlife of Queer Tango*, which we ran at “Colours”, the queer nightclub in Hoxton, east London. Our DJs played exquisite historical tango music from Buenos Aires, Paris, and Berlin for people to dance to, while the evening was punctuated with a few, rapid-fire, 5-minute illustrated historical “Lecturettes” about queer tango in those places at various historical times.

Barely had we savoured the praise elicited at the time and at a few subsequent Queer Tango London prácticas when, over what seemed like only a few days, so rapid was the succession of changes in understanding of what was actually happening, the Covid Pandemic kicked in. All tango dancing, straight and queer, faltered and then stopped. What happened in London was replicated more or less everywhere else around the tango dancing world. The glittering, much anticipated, annual calendar of international queer tango events which has had new “jewels” added each year for decades, melted into thin air.

Taken as a whole, it was a real shock even if – in a world suddenly filled with shocks which were greater and more grave – it may not have seemed that serious to onlookers outside our privileged circle. The practical effect on queer tango was that where there had been two processes of change, there was now effectively only one: the discourses.

Queer Tango Dancing during Covid

I write “effectively”, because, of course, as in mainstream tango, there was still some dancing, though very, very little, and very different. It has yet fully to be documented and written about. My heart goes out to those teachers or managers of venues and other professionals in tango (queer or straight, neither or both) who depended on the dancing for a living. By contrast, a great many of us in the queer tango community are in it for reasons of conviction or pleasure, or both. No one can be but impressed with the professionals’ creative transformations into online offers, as they became the only sort possible. And there was, I think, a little-trumpeted boom in “domestic tango”. Having folded up the dining table – no one was coming to dinner – and furnished that room with easily moved chairs and folding tables, my husband Jerome Farrell and I danced in our wooden-floored garden room to historical tangos on 78s played on our 1911 Parlophon gramophone. I sense, where both parties were dancers, this was a pattern broadly repeated by couples across the tango world.

And there was more. We may love each other, but do not always want only to dance exclusively with the other. My husband, missing his ballroom and latin dancing, which I cannot do, nonetheless found outdoor outlets for one of his (but not my) other preferred dance practices – line dancing. Pandemic regulations kept altering. At one stage, line dancing was permitted by local police on Clapham Common (an area of open ground in south London) provided it was described as a “socially distanced outdoor exercise class with music”. Similarly, as the weeks became months and levels of Covid Lockdown rose and fell and rose again, formal and informal groups of tango dancers, queer and /or straight (as elsewhere, I think) contrived to dance with each other by creative interpretations of, selective adherence to, or the breaking of “The Rules”.



Political Bodies at Home: Domestic Queer Tango. Like countless others whose usual outlets for dancing were closed by Covid, from time to time my husband Jerome Farrell and I dance at home

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Political Bodies Outdoors: by adhering to some Covid Guidelines and subverting others, some of us from Queer Tango London were able to dance queer tango outdoors at various stages of the Pandemic, weather permitting

Keeping track of “The Rules” in the UK became ever more confusing. They shifted constantly. The morals of our dancing, even in retrospect, are up for debate, but we did not dance thoughtlessly. Covid-driven variations in our prácticas included any or all of the following: dancing outdoors (invariably); staying with one partner throughout; dancing with a limited number of couples on the “dancefloor” (wooden, in a bandstand, but also concrete and sometimes just grass); dancing in groups of six; wearing masks; staying in couples who were socially distanced from one another – and so on. Each configuration of Covid tango required a corresponding moral calculation weighing the pitifully scarce, but undisputed joy of dancing tango (and its concomitant benefits to our mental health) against the risks of infection to ourselves, to our dance partners, to our life partners and others we mixed with in our lives, and to wider society. As the pandemic grinds on, I expect these calculations to be revisited.

Discourses during Covid

In queer tango, while the dancefloors cleared, the queer tango discourses continued to be pursued, in part, through a number of successful international online events. Undoubtedly, these were effective, affirmative initiatives which ensured that the queer tango community continued to operate and, indeed, to develop. Debates continued too. I am glad they were there. I could be persuaded that one unlooked-for queer tango dividend of the Covid Pandemic has, paradoxically, been to strengthen rather than weaken this international dimension of our community. I admire these initiatives greatly and have contributed to them from the margins, but I have to confess, I am personally not much drawn to them. Historically, my contributions to the discourse dimensions of queer tango have tended to take the form of a more or less literary output, ranging from informal posts on Facebook with imagery, to various academic papers, presented or published, or contributions to books on contemporary or historical aspects of dance. It was a great privilege to turn my unlooked-for spare

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time to account by working with Birthe Havmøller, leader of the Queer Tango Project, in preparing an anthology of some of my historical queer tango papers: *Queer Tango Histories: Making a Start* – which the Project published in July 2020. (Batchelor, 2020)

Wednesday 20th January 2021

1820 people died from Covid today.

95,981, in total, in the UK – and going up. I still marvel at how we can read or recite such data without the shock such a figure would have provoked in the not too distant past. Statisticians like Dr David Spiegelhalter keep reminding us these daily figures are unreliable guides to overall trends, though whatever metrics are used, we in the UK are among the worst affected in the world.

Biden inaugurated as President.

Thursday 21st January 2021

The Inauguration of President Biden and Queer Tango.

Much loose talk this morning in today's paper of a "New Age".

I have never watched a presidential inauguration before – a little too much transatlantic-style "Pomp & Circumstance", I had always imagined – but we watched this one. How could we not: four years of the progressive licensing and defence of hatreds as political currency, with homophobia, transphobia and sexism thrown in there among the usual mix of racism and other habitual populist tropes; "America First" seeing the international moral power of the country as a force for good being thrown away by the systematic withdrawal from international organisations; the routine trashing of many of America's cultural, social and political institutions culminating in a President who, when legally and legitimately defeated in a free

and fair election by a sane, rational man (and America's first woman, and woman of colour ever to stand for and be elected to the national office of Vice-President), would not admit defeat. A man who, having failed in his legal challenges to the election result because of a lack of evidence, and impeached for a second time – the first President in US history to whom that has happened – and belatedly deserted by some of his staunchest supporters, this child-man who, to the end, seemed to think if he could control the story, could control the country, incited a mob to march on and attack the Capitol Hill in support of his transparently false claims to remain the President of the United States.

We settled down to watch Biden's inauguration with a couple of dry martinis. The journalist, H. L. Menken, described the dry martini as "the only American invention as perfect as a sonnet". The inauguration was impressive and, in part because of the events which led up to it, moving. The whole was played out on the Capitol steps.

Queer tango, the dancing, works through our political dancing bodies – and is at its most powerful when it does. The people who stormed the Capitol on January 6th also had political bodies, and they used them. They are a vivid reminder to us that bodies being political is no guarantee that they will also be responsible, just, moral, humane, rational, or beautiful. Contrast those bodies with the sober, orderly bodies of those in exactly the same space during the inauguration. They actually did very little – some walking, some processing, a great many simply being still, with overt, physical expressiveness reserved for the singers and some speakers – but they moved according to a prior, shared choreography towards a shared objective: the Embodiment of the Orderly Transfer of Power, one of the key symbols of American Democracy and one which normally sustains that nation's sense of its identity. No wonder Trump absented his shabby little self. In this context, a no-body in every sense.

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Political Bodies Run Riot: At President Trump's urging, a mob stormed the Capitol Building in an attempt to thwart the orderly transfer of power to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. 6th January 2021 will haunt American politics, though it is not yet [31st January 2021] clear how (Wikimedia)



Political Bodies Choreographed: In contrast to the rioting by Trump supporters in exactly the same spot earlier in the month, and despite fears it might be disrupted, the Inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris (as President and Vice-President respectively) was orderly, but also charged with high emotion.

Lady Gaga, in what for her was a fairly sober, giant red crinoline, gave a passionate account of the Star-Spangled Banner. She made me listen to the words, which I have never done and – given the outrage of 6th January on the Capitol Steps where she sang – those words acquired a new resonance:

Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last
gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thru the perilous
fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly
streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still
there.
Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

I think I saw a tear in her eye. Jennifer Lopez sang too, speaking Spanish from time to time, the language of the people ex-President Trump (it gives me such pleasure just to type those words) sought to exclude by means of his infamous wall. And no one who saw and heard the first Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman – whose words and physical presence were at once beautiful and dignified, urgent and passionate – will ever forget her:

We lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but
what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know to put our future
first, we must first put our difference aside.
We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to
one another, we seek harm to none and harmony for all.

... an exhortation which might strike tango dancers, especially queer ones, with a particular power.

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While anyone can see the political advantages, for events of its kind, this ceremony was pathologically diverse, inclusive and respectful. These qualities cannot simply be added but require reciprocation from those to whom respect is shown, if they are to be real. Garth Brooks, resplendent in Stetson and cowboy boots – and a Republican – chose to come and sing at the inauguration of this Democrat President, on this occasion. With his own profound sense of its significance, Biden brought to the proceedings a sophistication and mature, moral authority unthinkable in his predecessor. His speech set recent events, as well as his own and the country's futures into a wider historical perspective. To say he would be President for all Americans may sound like something of a start-of-term cliché, but one senses that Biden, who is no fool, has a proper sense of the fragility of his position. He rules in a country where more Americans voted for Trump than had done so for any other Republican presidential candidate in the nation's history. He is right to reach out. Arguably, if he is to deliver on the promises made in the run up to assuming power, he has no choice. He cannot deliver if he remains "pure" and partisan.

Post-Covid Queer Tango – the Case for Renewal

I am writing during a period of deepest Lockdown. I understand that in the UK, the number of Covid cases is falling and that – eventually – this ought to lead to a fall in the numbers of people dying. Vaccinations are now available and will be rolled out in the coming months. By the time you read this, it may be that, though barely discernible now, the Sunlit Uplands of a New Covid-Vaccinated World may have emerged more fully. I hope so, even if I realise it is unwise to torment ourselves with over-optimistic projections of quite when. What will have changed? How should we "do" queer tango in that changed world? "Do" rather than "dance" because, as noted, queer tango is dancing and discourses. It will not, I think, be back to "business as usual" – though I acknowledge there will be space for some legitimate rejoicing if various "Returns to Normality" become possible.

Eventually, I want to go back to Tango Terra. But tango will not return overnight. Tango needs a physical embrace between partners and (not that it makes much difference in Covid terms right now) for me, as for many others, that is the close embrace, the complete opposite of “social distancing”. Consequently, tango dancing is likely to be one of the last pre-Covid practices fully to be resurrected. Before it is, countless degrees of open-air configurations will resurface as lockdown eases. Not immediately “going back to normal” gives us an opportunity to review, to take stock and to renew what it is we do in queer tango and why, the better to achieve its objectives – though perhaps those, too, might be up for an inspection?

“Post-Covid Queer Tango” – Where to Start?

Queer Tango is tango, but with an overt social and political agenda. Perhaps we need to start with what we value in tango itself. We do not need a wholesale reinvention of the dance. We do, I think, need to reacquaint ourselves with some of the “truths” tango embodies. The first and fundamental truth (and this is the only dimension of my life where I will allow that I am a “fundamentalist”) is that the real, physical and corporeal dancing of tango, the embrace, the intimate, respectful touch, the smell of the other’s body [hopefully agreeable], the sense of the whole of another’s body – experienced moment to moment in musical time, through one’s own dancing, in a space shared by others doing the same – is what delivers “real” tango. Those who dance it know (and usually fail to convey to those who don’t) that if we are lucky, from time to time, our dancing delivers an experience at once joyous and transcendent. The borderline absurdity of the language is symptomatic of the difficulty of expressing this quality in words. It is best understood physically, knowing it by sharing it through the experience. As an accomplished dancer near the start of his tango journey once said to me as we drifted off a Paris dance floor after one such tanda, “What was that???”. Critically, no

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one has an absolutely reliable check list of how “that” is to be achieved. If they did, we would all follow it and do nothing else.

From the point of view of proposing changes, this lack of prescription is the most enormous advantage.

How might we have changed?

Perhaps it is easiest to start with the personal. After all, as noted, our primary reason for dancing tango at all is the personal, physical and emotional pleasure it delivers. “Attitudes” is a wonderful word in a dance context, for while it makes most people immediately think of states of mind, it can and does relate to states of the body. Bluntly, as for some others, Covid has changed my dancing body. It is what happens with no dancing, no swimming, no gym, insufficient walking and cycling to offset these losses of exercise and increased opportunities to eat and drink well at home every day, because there are few other pleasures left. And, yes, like everyone else, I am or will be a year or more older. Others may have been more diligent in body maintenance and I wish them well. Personally, I will need a period of “recovery” once my habitual exercise regimes re-emerge. Also, I have not danced anywhere near as much as the two, three or four times a week as was my old custom in Normal Times. My bodily vocabulary of moves deployed or responded to in the conversation of dance may – may – have become somewhat depleted. I look forward to finding out. I am mindful that younger bodies than mine might resume the dancing more easily, but also that – and these are people who are part of our community – older bodies than mine might take even longer, and indeed, that some older dancers will worry they may not be able to re-join us at all. I hope they can be encouraged to try. We must all welcome and dance with them. As we did in Normal Times, so in the Post-Covid Queer Tango World, regardless of our ages and contingent abilities, I propose that each of us be tolerant of the dancing of our partners – possibly more tolerant than we were – and in the fullest, old sense, dance with them.

If our physical states have changed, then so too has our emotional baggage. Individually, all of us to greater and lesser degrees have been touched by what has happened. Loss of tango needs to be set alongside loss of life and all the degrees of grief for lost freedoms in between. The freedoms will slowly be recovered. It would be good to believe that this being “acquainted with grief” will make our re-engagement with tango, when possible, more passionate and heart-felt than before, promising ourselves never to take it for granted again. I hope it does, even if I think that over time, like all the life lessons of mortality, its effects will gradually ebb away and have, at future points, to be relearnt, and relearnt all over again.



As well as wholly new ideas, Post-Covid Queer Tango will include Pre-Covid era practices repurposed. Edgardo Fernández Sesma’s queer tango inclusivity will prove durable. He is seen here in 2018 with Brenda Holtz, his sometime wheelchair-dancing partner, and adultes mayores dancers from his long-established campaign against the abandonment or maltreatment of the elderly. Photo: Stan Holman

Renewing Queer Tango's Inclusivity Mission

As a set of practices and beliefs, queer tango has come a long way from its origins, which almost exclusively addressed issues of gender and sexuality; for while those remain central, aligning itself with other oppressed social groups, such as racial minorities, the elderly and those with disabilities, is a logical and welcome development. I need not re-rehearse the justly-celebrated hard work of Edgardo Fernández Sesma in this regard but applaud his persistence during Covid not only to sustain queer tango through Facebook, but also to continue to support his now isolated *adultes mayores* dancers through regular telephone calls. Queer Tango London's widely anticipated plans for a "Jewish Tango Meets Queer Tango" milonga in London was scheduled for May 2020, but the Covid Pandemic summarily consigned it to the dustbin of Lost Good Ideas. What I will say is that the forces which made such things relevant before Covid have not gone away but have ground on, accelerating in some places, and meeting opposition in others. A climate of fear and exasperation, brought on by the joint threats of death and protracted lockdown restrictions, is ripe for the incubation of "fake news" and populist grievances. When we can, queer tango dancers – as never before – must dance with others at risk of social oppression, and dance often.

The Case for Leaving our Comfort Zones

I admired the willingness of the Biden inauguration to reach out to those conventionally cast as "enemies". Queer politics, of which queer tango is a practical branch, has often defined itself by what it is opposed to as much as, if not more than, what it is in favour of. Historically, in the face of gross injustices, this has been understandable and entirely defensible. Regrettably, in some contexts it remains so, even today. The last four years of American history have vividly illustrated the ease with which the pleasures of a righteous sense of indignation – so much more potent than some limp desire for Good Things – can be manipulated by the unscrupulous for reasons of power, personal

gain and aggrandisement. In striking a note of caution about queer tango as “opposition”, I would draw attention to the attendant risks of such a stance. Usually, this stance has been developed when such attitudes were needed, but they can sometimes linger on as incantations when the “enemy” – say, the tango mainstream being characterised as “heteronormative” – in some places has changed, and those changes need to be acknowledged. That process is well in hand in nice, liberal London and elsewhere, but it is not a universal condition. And if we consider “enemies” more widely than those conventionally found on the dance floor, I wonder how far queer tango can go with reaching out? I honestly don’t know. But I have been thinking about it. Hard.

I Danced Tango with a Trump Supporter

The Alhambra Palace in Chicago is smaller, but a good deal flashier than the one in Spain. A stranger in Chicago for a Dance Studies Association conference in August 2019, this was the second mainstream tango venue I had gone to. The night before, I had greatly enjoyed an expedition to “Los Besos Milonguita” with the dance scholar and excellent dancer, Juliet McMains, and her Argentinian dance partner Cristian Santesteban. On that occasion, I had arrived early and been warmly welcomed by the venue’s Russian proprietor, Lena, who very kindly effected some introductions to women partners. I danced and was pleased that my partners found my dancing agreeable, as I did theirs. Juliet and Cristian arrived, settled around our table and then danced with each other, Cristian leading. Then, in the course of the tanda, Juliet led Cristian. In another tanda, Cristian led me and then I led him. Later, Juliet led me and we, too, reversed the roles. We were careful, as guests in a strange city, not only to dance with each other, but also to dance with strangers. As is so often the case in this textbook example of queer tango dancing in a straight context, there was a little bemusement among the habitués, a little indifference, no hostility (or none discernible) and a number of people, mostly women, who took the trouble

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to come over and compliment us on our dancing. “I just loved seeing you two dance together!” said one of my dance partners, a Ukrainian woman, later in the evening, following a pretty smooth intercambio episode between Cristian and me. All very satisfying. The following night at the Alhambra Palace, I was on my own, so I was pleased to see one of my dance partners from the night before in the crowd. We found each other and we danced. And then chatted following the conventions of social encounters between strangers:

“Is this your first trip to Chicago?”

“My second. I was last in America three years ago, California, around the time you were electing your President.”

“You’re being polite, aren’t you?”

She fixed me with her eye.

“I support him.”

... and so quite a different conversation unfolded, deeply serious, attentive and respectful. It rapidly became apparent we profoundly, irreconcilably and at times passionately disagreed with one another, but that exchange, absolutely candid with nothing held back on either side, helped me, an interested but ignorant foreigner, get to grips with what was happening. Here was not a vague, easily despised, carelessly imagined, stupid “Trump supporter” of the kind I might conjure up to fill out journalistic accounts. My dance partner was a Russian émigré, a businesswoman, about my age, with two sons for whom she had affection and aspirations. The sons worked in Russia. She hinted at the endemic corruption they met there and worked with, but she hated Putin. She hated the European Union, which she saw as dominated by Germany. She condemned America’s shoring up of Russia’s bitter enemy through the Marshall Plan after the Second World War, and approved of Brexit, anything to undermine – despite her having worked in Bavaria – German success. She was politically drawn to a man who articulated her, to me, deeply unattractive racial prejudices, not that she saw her characterisation of Mexicans as lazy in that light. No, that

was just ‘fact’. It warranted actions, including The Wall. She made no connections between their immigrant status and her own. After the conversation, we danced one last tanda. It seemed the obvious and civil thing to do.

The dances were good. Very good.

I have had a long time to think about that odd encounter. We were never going to persuade each other of the rightness of our diametrically opposed positions, but we each gave the other space to articulate them. And then, knowing it would be for once only, we found one very narrow, wordless strip of life, tango, which, between us, briefly, we could inhabit. Successfully. It was very good, rather than transcendent tango, but it worked. And then it was over. And we never spoke again. I cannot say what, if any, the after-effects were for her. For myself, in describing this encounter to friends, eyes have rolled. There are people, they say, you just can’t engage with. Ever. I hesitate to generalise much from this vanishingly slight particular, but as I reconsider it now, in the light of the style and content of Biden’s Inauguration, I will risk this much: I have an as yet, ill-formed aspiration that Post-Covid Queer Tango might routinely move beyond condemning others from the comfort of our “echo chambers”, where all we hear are opinions like our own. Arguably, not listening to the opposition led to Brexit in the UK. Perhaps not listening to the opposition led, in part, to Trump in the States. The peaceful (6th January 2021, very much noted) coexistence of those holding diametrically opposed beliefs is one definition of a functioning, liberal society. A dance floor is society. As queer tango dancers in a renewed, Post-Covid climate working through dancing, rather than discourse towards that desirable state of affairs, perhaps we will need to get out more.

A Queer Tango Event at the next Tory Party Conference, perhaps? Or Republican Convention?

Just ideas...

The Case for “Opportunistic Queer Tango Dancing”

Perhaps less controversially, though heretically to some, I want finally to argue for the setting aside of some of tango dancers’ traditional fastidiousness about how they dance and when, and with whom, and for replacing them in Post-Covid Queer Tango with a more open and creative, cavalier opportunism.

We will be re-emerging into a world which will be in the midst of the deepest economic crisis since (and perhaps greater than) that of The Great Depression of the 1930s. As in all other spheres of activity, some tango operations, including some queer ones, will not have survived the pandemic. In a Post-Covid World, dancers who can dance will need to support those operations that have survived. At a personal level, we should allow our dancing to be informed by our heightened sense of mortality. We none of us, no matter what our ages, are guaranteed infinite time in which to hone our tango skills as we work towards some ideal version of ourselves as dancers. Tango is all journey. Destinations prove illusory.

So, with a renewed sense of that mortality, morality and urgency, if we CAN dance, I think we should. I propose that in Post-Covid Queer Tango we start from a position where we:

Dance, no matter who our partner.

Dance, no matter what the music.

Dance, no matter what the venue.

Dance, no matter how we are.

Rather than rehearse with you all the permutations of each of these injunctions (I invite you to do this for yourself, in your own time), I will leave you with these thoughts: even in queer tango, we dance primarily to make ourselves happy – with all else as side-effects of greater or lesser utility and value, sometimes by

design, sometimes by accident. As noted, no check list will ever unfailingly deliver superb tango – it just happens. Tastes and preferences will always have their places, but a willingness to test them, and to go beyond them, can be invigorating, might be an adventure and may be an improvement. No one who has not put themselves in unfamiliar and sometimes risky circumstances has ever learnt anything worth knowing. Ideals may be aspired to but can become tyrannies which invariably render the present – the only thing we always have – more or less “imperfect”. Yet dancing with any type of person, to any music, on any floor, no matter how tired or otherwise unready we feel ourselves to be might deliver just that kind of thrill. What’s not to like? It also follows that, with the right attitude, the more we dance, the greater the chances such a thing will occur. Similarly, if we come back to the dance floor out of condition, or out of practice, we need more tango, not less. We will be wasting opportunities always to wait for that partner, or this type of venue or that type of music. Moreover, if we use our queer bodies to embrace or be embraced by an ever wider range of partners, beyond those known to us through queer tango alone, over time, more and more people will understand what queer tango is, and what it seeks to do. More than that, our dancing with them may simultaneously develop our own senses of what Post-Covid Queer Tango might become in magnificent and unlooked for ways.

And while I appreciate that my last exhortation is far from new, I think in this strange, Post-Covid World, it will be more important than ever that we all dance *as if it matters*.

Sources

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8. The Political Pleasures of Queer Tango: Transcendence and the Erotic as Legitimate Agents of Change

This paper was originally drafted and submitted in 2021 as a contribution to a queer tango book project initiated by Austrian scholar, Arno Plass. Sadly, the project foundered.

Do queer tango dancers dance to effect political change? I don't think we do. In the moment, as we dance, like all tango dancers, we are probably in pursuit of the thrill, the transcendence which tango – all tango – has the potential to deliver, those ineffable sensations which we know of, acknowledge to one another, but struggle to describe to others. So, I want to ask how the fact of that personal pursuit of the transcendent sits alongside our oft-repeated assertion that, unlike mainstream tango dancers, we in queer tango pursue an overtly political agenda intended to change the wider world. It can be argued that queer tango is political to its very core. After all, didn't it emerge out of the late twentieth century feminist and "gay liberation" movements? Both fought for alternative sexual and gender identities and the right authentically to lead the lives they implied. Lesbians, straight women and gay men (the straight men were not then much in evidence), dancing tango together, eventually coalesced into 21st century "queer tango". Our political agendas

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developed. In the wider world, more nuanced gender or sex related ways of being were emerging – the varieties of trans identities, for example – not to mention those who sought to escape all the constraints of labels. Over time, dancers sympathetic to these concepts made their way onto queer tango dancefloors. Edgardo Fernández Sesma in Buenos Aires widened that political agenda still further, beyond groups primarily discriminated against for reasons of sexual identity or gender, towards the old, those living with disabilities and those facing racism or oppression for other reasons. It was a model which we in London admired, and were starting to use in our own context, just as Covid-19 broke out in early 2020.

With this widening of the queer tango political agenda, what of the dancing bodies? If that transcendent thrill sometimes includes erotic dimensions, how is its pursuit on the dance floor benefiting those discriminated against for reasons which seem to have little or nothing to do with gender and the erotic? To square this circle, two of the more or less “blank spaces” in our queer tango discourses need to be, if not filled, then more deeply reflected on: firstly, what place does the pursuit of that transcendent thrill have in our dancing to effect change? Does it help? If so, how? And secondly, to what extent does that thrill have, or need to have, an erotic dimension? Where it does, is that useful in some contexts and not others? And where it doesn't, one might ask exactly the same question. It is my belief that the real answers to these points are not the ones outsiders might imagine and – because we ourselves speak of them so rarely – they may not even be the ones we might initially identify. We need to give ourselves more time to think carefully about what it is like to dance queer tango and about what our doing so may, perhaps inadvertently, achieve.

Queer Tango Politics in Action – a Recent Example

As Covid abates and restrictions are lifted, so deliberate queer tango politics and accidental mainstream tango politics – that is, politics effected and realised through actual dancing rather than discussions or representations – are happening again. So, for example: London, 25th September 2021. A free, outdoor tango event in the piazza in front of Westminster Catholic Cathedral in London. The organiser, a free tango entrepreneur and DJ, Warren Edwardes, sought and was granted permissions from the Cathedral authorities – and from Westminster City Council, who billed the event as part of “Inside Out...a new brand of festival that brings art, entertainment, and culture outdoors to the streets of Westminster.” (Westminster City Council 2021) ...because, compared with indoors, outdoors is more Covid-safe. Warren had earlier extended a particular invitation to dancers from Queer Tango London. On the day, there were just four of us: Sue Marlow, an excellent dancer and queer tango regular who leads and follows with ease and has done so for years, and three men (including me) who are similarly flexible in our dancing of both roles. As is usual in such circumstances, we all danced with each other, swapping roles and dancing intercambio, as well as with others.

All the dancing, including our queer contribution, was observed by passers-by including some nuns. We were photographed. We were videoed. When I asked her, a press photographer who was present reassured me that she had caught a great many shots of the queer dancing and that these would feature in the collection she would post later that afternoon on a photo agency website. All of them, she said, would eventually come to Warren himself to use on social media. Typical for events of this kind, the range of dancers present in terms of abilities, ages and agilities varied greatly. It included the indefatigable Eric Ruggier, 12 weeks short of 90, dancing away, his arm in a sling (or supposed to be in the sling) after a heart attack (pacemaker fitted) and a fall. I was re-acquainted with a number of women in their 60s, 70s and 80s who, unlike most men, sometimes struggle to get dances. They

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are all accomplished dancers, and we have an understanding that we will dance. It was while dancing with one of these ladies that I spotted two young men on the edge of the dancing area, who I took to be a gay couple, good-naturedly trying to dance tango with each other with no idea at all how it is done. I went over to them and “sold” them the post-Covid reopening milonga and beginners’ class of Queer Tango London on Friday October 15th at the Bishopsgate Institute, a queer-friendly cultural institution. They put the details on their phones and said they would come. A man I have often seen on the London tango scene being led by his wife, came over to me and asked if I would lead him. I agreed at once and said I had hesitated to ask before as I did not want to make assumptions. He asked me to make assumptions from now on. He said he would like the experience of being led by a variety of people. Later, a woman and a man with their two-and-a-half-year-old son stood at the edge, apparently to watch. I recognised them. In the past, I had danced with the little boy’s father at Queer Tango London and at other London tango events and had been honoured to be invited to his wedding. I walked over and was introduced to their son. He fixed me with that unblinking, analytical stare small children have. We shook hands. I asked his father if he would like to dance? He would! So we danced while his wife encouraged the little boy to watch “Daddy and Ray”. Afterwards, as I danced with others, their son made noises which seemed to include my name each time I passed by. His mother told me that he wanted to dance with me. So, when the opportunity arose, I gathered him up into my arms so that his face was level with mine and those of all the other dancers, and gave him a musical tour of the dancefloor, talking to him all the time about what was happening and praising his effortless ‘dancing’. He seemed to enjoy it and afterwards, was keen to ‘dance’ with others.

The hours slipped by agreeably and a thoroughly good time was had by all, including me.

Coincidentally, later that same day in the evening on the UK TV show *Strictly Come Dancing* (the original of *Dancing with the Stars*), the first male couple ever to compete on it danced their first dance, a tango – a ballroom tango, but a tango nonetheless – AND they danced *intercambio* (BBC 2021). Why would they not? One was a complete novice without preconceptions about roles, and the other a professional who could dance both. Perhaps this attractive (and massively overdue) innovation in who dances with whom, combined with a post-Covid desperation for joy and distraction, helped push the programme’s ratings up:

Strictly, which screened its first live Saturday night show last night [on 25th September 2021], enjoyed an audience of 8.7 million, compared to 7.5 million who tuned in for the equivalent show last year (*Her* 2021).

They danced well. I have a theory that danced queer tango politics, if it is to affect observers, really only “works” if the dancing is good.

I set out my own preliminary thoughts on how queer tango achieves political effects in a paper “Dancing to Change the World: is the Dancing of Queer Tango Good Politics?” given in Paris in 2018 (Batchelor 2018). I recognised the value of queer tango’s affirmative effects on those dancing. I noted especially its consequences where the dancing occurred in oppressive environments such as Putin’s Russia, or where those whose identities were affirmed by dancing at international events had come from places of oppression such as Erdoğan’s Turkey. I considered the consequences of “applied queer tango” where the dancing is conceived of as overtly addressing some social issue, such as Edgardo Fernández Sesma’s work with vulnerable elderly people in Buenos Aires, or my own project using queer tango to address homophobia in football. Finally, I considered the political effects of queer tango witnessed by the wider world when, for example, in the “City Walks” in Paris as part of the La

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Vie en Rose queer tango festivals, queer tango takes to the streets. In summary, political effects can arise from how the dancing affects: those who dance; those observing the dancing; and those to whom the dancing is reported or represented.

There are three aspects which I mentioned then and would like to develop now: the joy of dancing queer tango – relevant here, because the transcendence I want to consider is perhaps the extreme form of that joy; connected with that, the political value of the dance's intermittent erotic dimensions; and finally, if the default channels of political debate are language and representation, the advantages of a politics pursued through dance and dancing, both independently of and alongside these.

Problems with Language

I may live long enough to witness the collapse of the now familiar terminology used to label us (or chosen by us to label ourselves) characterised by various accretions of capital letters, each indicating a word, a label: LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTIQ, etc... In the 70s and 80s, we who spoke English fought for terms such as "gay" to replace "queer" (then thought by us to be exclusively abusive), innocently imagining such linguistic reform might simply mark recognition of the social and political progress we thought we were making. It did so, imperfectly in its time, but it did not last. Echoing a convention taught me in all seriousness in the 1960s in English Language classes at school, that in some contexts, everyone knew that the word "he", stood for "he AND she" (???), "gay", it was noticed, tended actually to refer to gay men. A male couple was the default image for "Gay Liberation", rendering women and lesbians invisible (yet again), and ignoring anyone whose sense of themselves did not neatly fit into any of those categories. Usage narrowed accordingly. "Gay man" is now part of a largely unremarkable, if not uncontested mainstream vocabulary.

Though some of my generation flinch at its reintroduction, I LOVE the word “queer” – for all its ambiguities, for the things it implies and leaves unsaid, and I love the idea of taking back a term of abuse, and defusing it by converting it into a weapon for justice. A few years ago, I was explaining to an elderly gay friend, John Dalby (Bishopsgate no date), whose career in British musical theatre had begun in the late 1940s, what “Queer Tango” was. He said: “I am so glad it’s QUEER tango! When I was young, we were ALL queer! We called ourselves queer and there was no shame in it. I HATE GAY!” – and he pulled a face.

A desire to develop language which signals recognition of the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions surrounding gender identities and their expression is laudable. Matthew Solomon gives a calm and persuasive account of some of the issues involved in “Terminology surrounding gender identity and expression” (Solomon 2021). Even so, from the point of view of those engaged in queer politics – which as queer tango dancers and activists, we are – the language and the cultural foundations on which it rests present other difficulties.

Queer tango seeks to be inclusive and international in scope. Queer politics could be thought of as global, in that it is sometimes tacitly assumed to speak of a set of universal human rights and obligations to which all LGBTQ people around the world are entitled. Logically, cultural obstacles to the enjoyment of those rights should be seen as just that, obstacles to be overcome until everyone shares the freedoms enjoyed in liberal (western) societies. The 2021 American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan triggered the startlingly rapid fall of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban, whose violent oppression of both women and LGBTQ people was notorious when last they were in power. As Matthew Lavietes and Rachel Savage reported in a Reuters post on 22nd August 2021:

It was never easy being gay or transgender in Afghanistan. Now it could be deadly, according to LGBT+

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Afghans, whose fear of violence under the Taliban is driving a frantic bid to escape. (Lavietes and Savage 2021)

We at Queer Tango London decided to make our 'return milonga' on 15th October 2021 a fund-raiser for the Rainbow Railroad, a charity actively helping LGBTQ refugees escape from Afghanistan. In this context, surely, politics only works because there is a shared language identifying who is thought to be "like us", and deserving of our support. In the present circumstances of Afghanistan, perhaps; but what about in Pakistan, or India, or Bangladesh? Can the same language be shared there?

South Asia has a plethora of terms for people who identify neither as male nor female. Apart from hijra (which is the best known) and khwaja sara (which is mostly used in Pakistan), they include aravani, kinnar, kothi and shiv-shakthi. Many advocacy groups and NGOs favour "transgender", while governments prefer "third gender". Estimates of the number of non-binary people in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan run from 500,000 to several million. (Economist 2021a)

"Transgender" connects such people to us, their western equivalents, and in doing so, releases western funding intended to support them – what harm could there be in that? More than one might imagine. To take the hijra for example: most are judged male at birth but feel themselves to be female and are attracted to men. Historically, their elevated and privileged social status in 18th century India was gradually eroded by the British, who called them "eunuchs" (a term normally reserved for castrated men) and made it illegal for them to "dance in public, dress in women's clothes or reside with children" (Economist 2021a). The hijras have a history and cultural identity of their own:

...critics find modern gender discourse troublesome.
They object to the idea that "hijra" and "transgender"

are synonymous, and worry that the foreign import risks lowering hijras' status. (Economist 2021a)

As Srabonti Srabon, a Bangladeshi hijra, explains:

Hijra is an identity unto itself: they come from poor families where they are not understood or accepted, she says. Leaving, or being kicked out, is a vital part of this identity. So is being initiated into a tightly knit clan of hijras and learning its traditions and rituals under the tutelage of a guru. "This culture is 2,000 years old. Trans is a fairly recent phenomenon," says Ms Srabon. "They cannot be clubbed together." (Economist 2021a)

So, actions in crisis situations aside, pretences to the universality of the language of western gender discourse probably ought not to be taken for granted, if not replaced by a more tentative and respectful dialogue.

The language used to identify people who have (or assert that they have) different sexual or gender identities will forever be "work in progress". Partly this will inevitably be a function of each generation reviewing the work of the last. "LGBT" and its well-intentioned permutations will one day be reformed out of existence, perhaps for reasons of clumsiness, perhaps because the list of labels is incomplete, or their meanings have become fugitive; or perhaps because terminology dependent on acronyms, once generated, invariably leaches its original, intended precision. No one – or almost no one – when they hear the acronym "BBC" said out loud hears a voice in their heads saying "British Broadcasting Corporation". Why would they? At present, "LGBTIQ+" may signal knowledge of the very latest, newly identified categories and an appreciation of the nuanced sensibilities attendant on them. More broadly, its use may advertise attitudes of inclusivity which we might all welcome; yet as new terms inevitably emerge to meet new needs, I believe these familiar ones will be set alongside others

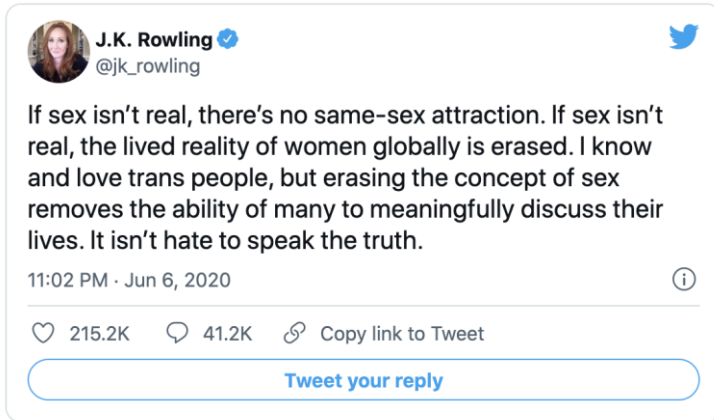
consigned to the Gender and Sexuality Department of the Language Museum.

Problems with Illiberal Debate

Behind this tumult of changes in language lie shifting conceptions of how questions of sexuality and gender should be thought of, and of how the rights of the constituencies that make up the supposed entity of LGBT and its derivatives should be defined and fought for. In particular, the “T” for “Trans” has proved the most explosive. Conventionally defined as Stonewall (the UK campaigning group for LGBTQ rights) puts it: “people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth” (Stonewall 2021), this apparently simple definition conceals problematic complexity.

As a group, “trans” is far from homogenous, as it includes not only those who “transition” from female to male or male to female, with or without surgery, but also transvestites (whose gender identity is expressed through changes in clothing) as well as a whole list of others, a list which seems in practical terms to be open ended. Some branches of radical feminism have expressed hostility towards some of the positions adopted by trans protagonists, giving rise to the so-called TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism) Wars. They have burst out of the academy. In the popular imagination of the UK, they have been dramatised by the storm of protest which greeted veteran feminist Germaine Greer’s assertion in 2015 that “transgender women are not women” (BBC 2015); and later, in a similar vein, the author J. K. Rowling’s 2020 tweets on the same subject. Rowling later posted a short essay defending her views (Rowling 2020).

In trying to account for the tenor of these ill-tempered debates, writer and media critic Lili Loofbourow argues that Twitter itself and the internet are, in part, responsible:



This climate is angry. This climate won't be reasoned with. But what I think is largely responsible for this phenomenon they're observing – without understanding – is Twitter. And the internet at large. And how years of arguing on social platforms, mixed with the incentives that they supply, has distorted not just the way most of us talk about things but also the way we manage ideological dissent. In short: Political discourse has been warped less because of “cancel culture” or “illiberalism” than by the way social media platforms have been poisoned, like wells, that poison us in turn. (Loofbourow 2020)

...a case which is plausible, but hard to prove. One of the effects of the manner in which these debates have been conducted is to disorient those whose navigation of this ideological territory had historically been achieved by referring to the left and the right in politics, as well as the liberal and the authoritarian – as a recent (September 2021) Economist leader article, “The threat from the illiberal left” acknowledged (Economist 2021). In a paper addressing these issues, sociologists Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen and Ben Vincent write:

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Intense debates over trans issues, feminism, anti-trans ideologies, and the very language employed by various agents in these debates are not just terminological disputes or about how sex and gender should be conceptualised. They are also debates about information, and how people relate to it in a time of information overload; they are debates about truth, and how people relate to truth in a 'post-truth era'. The trans/feminist conflicts we refer to as the 'TERF wars' reflect the current conditions of our time in which public discourse is dominated by political polarisation, deepened by the proliferation of misinformation and distrust in 'experts' whose knowledge may not speak to individuals' cultural common sense. (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent 2020)

However sincere the convictions of the protagonists in this debate, the perception that opposing views cannot coexist, and that contrary views will be met with vocal, vituperative violence, impairs the chances that debate will develop durable, sophisticated, well-reasoned positions. Anecdotal evidence points to well-meaning individuals practising any amount of self-censorship on the subject. Fear rules. It is not discussed.

Queer tango and the erotic

Sex has a bad reputation.

I am considering sex before the transcendent on the basis that, of the two, it might be thought a concept more easily grasped and defined. This is not necessarily the case. On the one hand, the almost comic eroticism depicted in show tango, of the kind made famous around the world by TV programmes like *Strictly...* and its ilk, testify to a popular notion that tango is inextricably and probably always about sex. As Marta Savigliano argued in *Tango and the Economy of Passion* in 1995 (Savigliano 1995), sex sells and always has. However, on the social dancefloor there is

disagreement about how it figures and, more to the point, how it ought to figure. Kathy Davis, who has danced extensively in Buenos Aires and Europe remarks:

I would argue that the eroticized displays of tango passion...that are part and parcel of most staged tango performances tend to be more the exception than the rule in tango salons. In fact, they are more likely to occur when dancers are inexperienced and anxious to make a good impression, or when professionals try to impress (and recruit) potential pupils. What can be seen more often is considerably less dramatic and more intimate and, indeed, looks very much like what Cara (2009) calls home tango – that is, tango danced “from the heart”. (Davis 2015)

Davis’s judgement is based on what can be seen. Melissa Fitch, in her chapter “Touch, Healing and Zen” (Fitch 2015), considers the many therapeutic uses for tango beyond the conventional dancefloor which have been developed to support, among others, the visually impaired, those with Parkinson’s disease or those with terminal illnesses and in receipt of palliative care. In noting the role of video clips of dancing on social media in such contexts, she writes:

These new renderings of tango present it in a far different light than that of the neocolonial Hollywood optic of the “exotic” Argentina. In other words: there is no sex, no danger, and no deception. (Fitch 2015)

Meanwhile, by contrast, back on the social dancefloor, Juliet McMains asserts:

Tango is about sex. Not exclusively. Tango is about intimacy, sadness, community, and commerce, among other things. But sexual tension within the dance, even when neither partner intends to act on it, is commonly

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recognized as a defining feature of tango. I am not suggesting that tango dancing necessarily or even frequently leads to sexual activity, but that the potentiality of sexual excitement is a key aspect of tango culture. (McMains 2018)

McMains' concept of "erotic potentiality" is useful here as something which, as she argues, exists and is real, but need not and probably will not be acted on. Are these views mutually incompatible? Possibly not. The presence or absence of an erotic charge in tango when it is danced, rather than represented, is the subjective experience of each tango dancer. Generally less overt and subtler than those which accompany or are preludes to actual sexual encounters, different dancers' classifications and descriptions of broadly similar phenomena will vary, according to the model of the activity they have in mind and the vocabulary they think appropriate. That which some may think legitimately realises an erotic charge, others feel compelled to identify as "intimate", "connected", "sensuous", or by using some other, more neutral term. Where is the erotic charge in Fitch's therapeutic tangos? I expect most might hope it absent. Where is it in my dancing with women, or indeed, women who are by some margin my senior?

In revisiting an unpublished paper I presented at The Queer Tango Salon in Paris in 2016, I was relieved to find that I had said:

The queer tango dancers I have spoken to, like their equivalents on the traditional scene, allow that the only absolute pre-requisite for a deeply satisfying dance is not the erotic, but deep connection with high levels of respectful, but uninhibited, physical intimacy leading to increased social and emotional engagement which they value. The loss of ego helps. (Batchelor 2016)

...which at its most intense, I might now describe as “the transcendent”. However, I added:

The erotic may figure and be welcome. It is to be celebrated, not least for its radical political dimensions. But the erotic is not a pre-requisite for a satisfying dance and so not a reliable guide to value.

Because of a history of the power dimensions of sexual relations being open to abuse – and tango has not been immune to such practices – I believe there is a tendency to deny that it exists in contexts where it might normally not be thought appropriate. One definition of “queer” is that it is “anti-normal”. Once again, language and labels are among the villains. I might dance agreeably with Sybil, a respectable straight woman in her late 70s, and she with me, an equally respectable gay man in his 60s. If a crackle of erotic electricity sparks between us, all this demonstrates is that for the duration of our dancing, we are both fully alive. Socially, the encounter is made possible, in part, because we do not describe it. And, as the Westminster Cathedral Piazza encounters demonstrated, these days there is variety in the possible couplings at increasingly heterogenous mainstream milongas. The inherent inclusivity of queer tango dancing – even if it is not our preserve – increases the variety of linguistically “illogical” couplings still further with, sometimes, unpredictable results. Where anyone can dance with anyone, and the LGBTIQ+ galaxy gets to choose partners, the permutations, and with them, the possibilities, ought to be enormous. They are – yet it is a fact that if one casts an eye round the dancefloor of most queer tango events, most women have chosen to dance with other women, and most men with men. Queer tango’s theoretical, radically inclusive political agenda, when realised on the queer tango dancefloor, is tempered by an inevitable and legitimate pursuit of pleasure, which is as it should be. The presence of the erotic ought to be celebrated – heaven knows, it has been fought for – but as noted, is not, of itself, a marker of the quality of the dance. That

is determined, with or without the erotic by the presence or absence of the transcendent.

Queer tango and the transcendent

Once again, we are in murky linguistic waters. Who is to say if this or that dance was “transcendent”? Only the dancers themselves. There are few external signifiers which observers might register. The main evidence I have that it exists is my subjective experience which I am reporting to you. Add to that, my reports of my dance partners’ reactions to our dancing when it occurs (as often as not, the shared, unspoken enjoyment of the moments immediately following), much anecdotal evidence that many in tango experience this (“one of *those* dances”), and countless textual references. It exists, but the language used varies. Davis devotes a thoughtful, nuanced chapter based firmly on a body of research interviews with dancers to what she calls “Tango Passion”, a nod, perhaps, to Savigliano’s terminology. “Connection” features in much tango discourse, as does another term, which I loathe: “tangasm”. I dislike it because in trying to make an intangible embodied experience intelligible to those who do not dance tango, it trades on worn out tango clichés and takes the orgasm as a model. It shouldn’t. Transcendence in tango is a state of being – with or without the erotic – not a journey to a climax. How crass.

Sometimes, transcendence is developed with one partner over time, such that it is more likely to occur than not each time one dances with them. On that Saturday at Westminster, as usual, my intercambio dances with Sue Marlow delivered great – and I might say, transcendent – joy to us both. We have danced together for some years now and when we do, and our dancing is at its best, we realise the one, single dance between us, and swap roles in some slightly magical way which feels so natural, one could mistake it for shared instinct. We invariably confirm to one another after such dances that “it” has happened AGAIN! One transcendently joyous tanda ought to be quite enough at

such an event, but I was fortunate in having another, this time dancing with a man I also dance with frequently, and know well. Erotic? My lips are sealed.

The advantages of dancing our politics

The language of gender and sexuality is unstable. Many of the conceptualisations on which that language rests remain contested. There is little sign that they will be satisfactorily resolved any time soon. In such circumstances, the practice of queer politics through dance – independent of language, if not of conceptualisations – may provide alternative ways of approaching these issues. I argue that in these circumstances, it has much to recommend it.

Consider the dancer as a political actor. As my brief sketch of the dancing outside Westminster Cathedral reminds us, queer tango is perpetually “in dialogue” with wider tango communities and with the wider world. The practice of queer tango has always been seen, in part, as a reaction to and commentary on both. The dancing of it is making contributions to both and in doing so, altering them.

Whatever the dancing’s political side-effects among those who observe or to whom it is reported, the actual dancer’s political thinking is more likely to be a prelude to the dancing or a way of reflecting on it afterwards. So, for example, I engage in my thoroughly enjoyable dances with older women as a matter of principle, but in the full expectation of realising satisfying dances with them. While we dance, that original, political impulse is quite forgotten. (I note, one does not have to be a queer tango dancer to think this desirable behaviour, but perhaps we are fractionally more alert to thinking of this as a response to a political, feminist issue, rather than just a social one.) Similarly, as the example at Westminster Cathedral bears out, I always dance with straight men who ask to dance with me, and occasionally I extend invitations to them. Once again, whatever

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political principles were involved in these impulses, my Westminster Cathedral dance partner was accomplished, and it was a great pleasure to dance with him. I sometimes dance with men who have been “brave” enough to ask me, where their skill as followers is limited. I am deliberately (politically) encouraging them and with that objective in mind, I settle for a less conventionally satisfying dance; but I enjoy it, nonetheless. Apart from just wanting to dance with me, some men may sometimes be in the business of exhibiting their queer-friendly credentials. And why not? They, too, can be queer tango political actors and we should encourage them. In a different register, I love leading Tim Baggaley, a wonderfully open tango dancer, straight, with a terrific dress sense and only one arm. Our dancing is an inventive delight for both of us. I am not immune from momentary thoughts of how properly “queer tango” our dancing is – inclusivity? Yes! – nor of its effects on those who watch; but our joint, immediate and over-riding undertaking is to have a great dance.

Indeed, Tim is the first witness to my dancing, as I am to his. Our witnessing is physical and intimate, rather than visual. Thereafter the visual multiplies the witnessed experience: fellow dancers or others at the venue may have seen the dancing; others not present may hear of it, or read of it, or see photographs or video clips. If the dance alters how the dancer, the dancer’s partner, or any of the other people referred to here think, feel, or act, or if it changes their conceptions of tango, or they can see that that dancing might offer a model for the organisation of wider society – if any, or some, or all of these pertain, then that dancing has had political consequences.

But note: in social dancing, when they are present, transcendence and the erotic are usually invisible. There is nothing to be seen. If there is nothing to be seen, there is nothing to be witnessed, though there are those to whom such experiences might be reported. Consequently, in considering how these might inform or effect the politics of queer tango, our

focus necessarily narrows exclusively onto the queer tango dancing couple.

The type, power, and long-term political effects of a queer tango dancer dancing will be shaped by the effects of countless contextual factors, fixed or developing, prior to taking the first step. Each of them contributes to meaning: the social and political climate in which the dancing occurs; the choice of venue; how it is organised (a queer space, or not?); the dancer's preparation of the body for presentation as a dance partner by showering, shaving, applying lipstick, perfume or after-shave; the choice of clothing and of course shoes – high heels? flats? bare feet? – and what the dancer thinks such choices say about them; and what others think the choices say about the dancer; sometimes, the music which it is decided to dance to; the dancer's state of mind at that moment and their "attitude" – both physical and mental; and finally the acceptance of, or successful proffering of an invitation to dance, thus securing a dance partner with whom to take that first step.

Only then, do we dance.

Was it a success?

How should one judge? From a queer tango perspective, perversely, I set aside any political aspirations for a moment. I maintain that we rarely take to the tango dancefloor, queer or not, with the prime objective of effecting political change. We usually seek out our partners (like any tango dancers) and dance queer tango in search of those feelings of satisfaction, of pleasure (erotic sometimes, but mostly not) and of joy – including, occasionally, transcendent joy.

As María Rosa Olivera-Williams reminds us:

As Carolyn Merritt puts it, this transcendence into the depths of tango becomes, 'a sort of silent confessional in

movement' (p. 124), a highly desirable experience in a global culture that blurs identities and subjectivities ... (Olivera-Williams 2013)

It is perhaps respect for the sanctity of the "confessional in movement" which usually inhibits dancers from referring to it. I hope my transgression here does not offend.

Conclusion

What are the political consequences of the erotic and the transcendent in queer tango? The presence of them links queer tango directly to the whole of tango. Setting aside the subjectivity of the evidence, if acknowledged, this equivalence is a vindication of its inherent worth.

Historically, queer tango celebrated and embodied erotic relationships forbidden or concealed in the mainstream and has done so with just as much erotic vigour as their heterosexual equivalents. As McMains asserts:

...queer tango is just as passionate and erotic as straight tango. Especially in Buenos Aires where tango and sex tourism are so closely conflated, I witnessed and experienced sexual tension, flirtation, and hookups in both straight and queer tango contexts. (McMains 2018)

Over time, the variety of these relationship combinations might have been thought to increase as a function of an increase in the possible – or even desirable – combinations of newly emergent identities. However, as these identity combinations exist on the dancefloor independently of the terminology of conventional political discourses, a creative blurring occurs. Nor is this confined to queer spaces. As social attitudes change and the conventional politics of gender and sexuality move on, so, too, the effects of some 20 to 25 years of queer tango are felt. More so than at any time in the past, queer dancing increasingly

features at mainstream milongas, where it is both witnessed by and shared with those who traditionally would have been there anyway. Once one has allowed that, mostly, straight women dance with straight men, and that, mostly, in queer tango, women tend to dance with other women, as do men with men, there is, even so, enough creative mingling going on to prompt new ways of thinking about all our identities, queer and straight. Most importantly, dancing queer tango invites us to question the implied precision and exclusivity of this now conventional terminology. If these looser, more creative relationships can be developed on the dancefloor, then perhaps they have a value as models of engagement beyond it. These latest developments in the queer tango politics of the erotic embody the “anti-normal” in its best sense.

The effects of the transcendent are similar, but less easily mapped. To begin with, we struggle with the terminology used to describe it. Almost all tango brings joy, but the point at which joy tips over into some shared ecstatic state, while it can be subjectively experienced, is not easily defined. Yet, I argue, it exists. There is no reason to think it more or less common than in the whole of tango, and anything which adds to the sum total of joy in the world has to be welcomed – but what of its political value? This equivalence with the rest of tango implies equivalence in the value of the dance relationships out of which transcendence emerges and, by implication, in the value of the dancers. That is worth knowing in the most liberal of societies, but it is of paramount importance if those dancing, dance in, or come from, societies where such equivalence is more generally impugned. And while queer tango arose out of some erotic impulses once deemed irregular, despite the misleading implications of terms like “tangasm”, transcendent tango may or may not have an erotic dimension, and the erotic dimension can be detected by dancers at all levels of ability.

Transcendent is the best that can be had. Once experienced, dancers are more likely to return to the dancefloor and be open

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to it re-occurring. This, too, is a political strength. As we emerge from Covid Lockdown, the numbers of those dancing may increase. The inclusivity of queer tango means recognising that the very best can be danced by a wide variety of combinations of dancers, and suggests a world where the differences between us sometimes implied by language will have less power to divide.

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9. Queer Tango and the War in Ukraine: Actions and Re-actions in an Imperfect World

A paper written at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and published on the Queer Tango Project website.



Riot police detain gay rights demonstrators during an LGBT rally in St Petersburg, Russia, in 2013. Photo: Photo/Dimitry Lovetsk

Queer Tango Politics: or Why I think as I Do

London, 4th April 2022

The war in Ukraine affects everything and everyone. How does it affect queer tango? Are we, who dance it, any different from anyone else in how we think, feel, act, and respond? Can we make a difference? And what, if anything, should mark our responses out? To outsiders, the juxtaposition – war and queer tango – might seem in poor taste. The war is lethal, bloody, violent, and relentless, with thousands dead, injured, uprooted, or otherwise threatened. The dancing, even if queer tango has a political edge which chiefly, but not exclusively, addresses issues of gender, sexuality, and identity, is just dancing – isn't it? The outsider might ask: is there any point in connecting the two right now?

There is. While the needs of people suffering the consequences of this carnage are immediate and demand from us urgent, compassionate, practical action, we are a community with particular insights. Also, I think for us, as with everyone else, there is value in our acknowledging a little of how we got here in the first place. I suggest we need a coherent, working view of the war to enable us both to reflect on why we are doing what we do now, and to plan what we might do in future. To date, queer tango responses can probably be divided into three kinds: those which spring from our sense of common humanity which we share with [almost] everyone else; those arising from our queer perspectives and a desire to help “people like us”; and finally, those few actions informed by our particular sensibilities developed on the queer tango dance floor. All three can coexist in one activity. They are not mutually exclusive.

There can never be enough resources to support actions addressing the suffering, yet resources are finite. For everyone's sakes, we should be strategic and well-informed about what we are doing and why; that is, for us to match the efforts of others where the magnitude of the task justifies it, but also to support

particular groups facing persecution, where some people's suffering might otherwise be overlooked.

What follows is a sketch of the background to the war, of the key issues, of initial queer tango responses, and of some speculations for the future. I make no claims to much expertise in this field; indeed, I apologise for this, my exercise in "catch up". I have some knowledge of queer tango, yet even with this, not least in regard to actions taken since the war broke out, others of you will know more. This is not a summative pronouncement, but my open-ended contribution to a conversation already underway.

Who is "queer tango"?

As we are talking about actions and it is people who act, this is a pertinent question. Queer tango as a community of dancers is not a homogenous entity. Some, like us in London, are geographically remote from the war, supporting our local communities with perhaps some individuals among us who have personal links to it, and so insights into the conflict. We may be remote, but we are also part of an international queer tango community. We may be in touch both with those geographically closer to the fighting and its consequences such as those in Germany, Poland and elsewhere, as well as with those still more remote from it all in north America, or Argentina and Uruguay.

How serious is this war?

I write from when and where I am, here in London on 4th April 2022. Whatever I write will be out of date by the time you read this, because events are moving fast. It seemed as if the wall-to-wall media coverage following the outbreak of the war had given way to intermittent reporting. News thrives on change, the more dramatic, the better. Changes in this protracted war seemed less easily identified and less certainly characterised than they were, and other news items returned to compete for

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my attention. But not today. Horrific accounts of the Russian withdrawal from Bucha complete with images of bodies flattened by tanks as if they were rugs, of torture chambers, of rape, become stories in my newspaper filling seven pages. (*Guardian* 2022)

How am I to make sense of this? Born in 1954, I grew up as a child unaware of the Cuban missile crisis in 1961, hearing of it later from those who were older. I heard about the Second World War all the time though not, as children do now, in history classes at school, because in the 1960s it was not quite “history”. I heard about it from the personal experiences of my mum and dad, of my aunts and uncles, and their contemporaries whose lives it was. Mindful that grandfathers and fathers had fought in World Wars 1 and 2 respectively, I think my post-war generation thought that we had escaped that cycle, that for us, the danger of another world war had passed. For the first time in my life, I am now less certain, even if my anxieties are mostly for those younger than myself. I agree with the consensus view that the war in Ukraine is the most serious rupture in world peace since 1945.

Whose side are we on?

We must support Ukraine – but we must also ask questions.

We in the west believe we see a socially liberal, democratic, Europe-facing Ukraine, led by an eloquent, passionate – and let it be said, social media savvy – Volodymyr Zelensky, an attractive David pitched against the Russian Goliath of puffy-faced Putin, the unstable, deranged megalomaniac heading a vast, overtly homophobic, oppressive, autocratic regime, hostile to freedom of speech. Yet this vivid portrayal is based largely on powerful evidence from Ukraine itself and from its supporters, with precious little coming out of Russia. In despising what Putin is doing, we need some knowledge of how things came to be like this, as well as acknowledging that his is not a complete

representation of his country. One day our countries will need to re-engage with Russia and with Russians if still more war is to be avoided. (Kettle 2022) This war is a tragedy for Russians, as well as for Ukrainians.

Those of us coming late to this story must acknowledge some of the ambiguous histories which have led to it. Hands up those who, before the Russian invasion, knew much about the civil war raging since 2014 between Ukrainians and Russians in the Donbas region of the country? Well done if you did. To my shame, like millions of others, I did not. Among countless other serious stories competing for my attention, it had failed to register. Inconveniently for those who want to take a simple view of this conflict, the French journalist and filmmaker, Anne-Laure Bonnel, has documented how Volodymyr Zelensky's predecessor as Ukrainian Premier, Petro Poroshenko, traded in populist, racist, anti-Russian hatred every bit as poisonous as the other brands pushed by his illiberal European counterparts in Hungary, Poland, Germany and France. As a prelude to the present conflict with, according to Bonnel, transgressions on both sides, the war in Donbas has not been a simple or "attractive" fight between good and bad. Put bluntly, historically, Ukraine's liberal credentials are not spotless, even if, in the present context, they remain superior to those of Russia.

Has America helped cause this war, antagonising Russia by trying to turn Ukraine into an American-friendly, liberal democracy? There are those who argue it has. Tariq Ali cites in particular President Biden's miscalculation in November 2021 that starting the process by which Ukraine might join NATO would check Russian expansionist ambitions towards the territory. It had very much the reverse effect. (Ali 2022)

I was shocked to learn from Buenos Aires contacts that many there on the left – including LGBTQ activists and some queer tango dancers – demonise the U.S., seeing Ukraine as no more than an American puppet, supporting instead Russia, America's

historic enemy, as the wronged party. In fairness, while they may be geographically far away from these events, they are closer to the U.S. and, arguably, have themselves been victims in their own country of murky covert American operations. Yet anti-Americanism, a habitual trope of the left, may be of little relevance in the context of this war other than to strike a cautionary note. The extent to which many Ukrainian people might have shared some of America's ambitions for them is unambiguously demonstrated by the ferocious opposition they are now mounting against the Russian invasion. Indeed, whatever its immediate effects, contrary to Putin's aspirations for the country – and Ali acknowledges as much – this war may ultimately accelerate a shift in precisely that direction among its people, including among Ukrainian Russian-speakers, some half of the country's electorate, whose previously benign attitude towards Russia has been all but destroyed by the Russian violence confronting them on a daily basis. (Chotiner 2022)

To what extent is this war about LGBTQ rights?

Bluntly – and surprisingly to some – massively.

According to an article published on 7th March 2022 in the American LGBTQ-interest magazine *The Advocate*, a recent headline in the pro-Kremlin Russian newspaper, *The Moscow Times*, read “Pride Parade Caused Russia-Ukraine War says Russian Church Leader”. (Cooper 2022) The previous Sunday, Patriarch Kirill, Head of Russia's Orthodox Church, gave a sermon:

For eight years there have been attempts to destroy what exists in Donbas. Donbas has fundamentally refused to accept the so-called values that are being offered by those aspiring for worldwide power. There is a specific test of loyalty to these powers, a requirement for being permitted into the happy world of excessive consuming and apparent freedom. This test is very

straightforward and at the same time horrifying – the gay parade. The demand to organize a gay parade is a test of loyalty to this powerful world. And we know that if a people or a country refuses this test, they are not considered part of that world, they are considered as aliens to it... Therefore, what is happening today in international relations [the Russian invasion of Ukraine] does not only have political meaning. It is about something different and much more important than politics. It is about human salvation, about on which side of God the Savior humankind will end up.



Patriarch Kirill, Head of Russia's Orthodox Church, with Vladimir Putin

The Russian Orthodox Church has been a close ally of Putin for several years. According to Emil Edenborg (2022), Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Stockholm University, “In the rhetoric of the Kremlin and state-loyal media, LGBT rights, feminism, multiculturalism, and atheism are identified not only as foreign to Russia’s values, but as existential threats to the nation.” Mapping this value system onto the nation’s geography justifies this war. Edenborg goes further. He not only sets this apparently conventional expression of religious homophobic bigotry into the context of Russian history stretching back into the Soviet era and beyond, but also notes its contemporary alignment with the views of Putin’s far right populist

counterparts elsewhere in the world. He may not direct Viktor Orban in Hungary (re-elected with a whacking majority) or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and others, but Putin is often seen as their global leader. Viewing LGBTQ rights as alien to national identity can not only be used to vindicate external warfare but also justify internal repression of the nation's "enemy within".

Notoriously, Russia's 2013 legislation outlawing "propaganda for promoting non-traditional sexual relationships" epitomised the homophobia normalised in national discourse.

LGBTQ rights are, if not at the centre of this war, then somewhere very close to it. We all have an interest in its outcome – and in the fates of those who are like us, but for whom the war has more direct effects.

How LGBTQ-friendly is Volodymyr Zelensky?

Writing before the war in November 2021, Soso Dzamukashvili argued that the euphoria with which LGBTQ people had greeted Volodymyr Zelensky's election in spring 2019 was not subsequently matched by his pushing forward the LGBTQ reforms initiated by his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko.

Poroshenko sought to align the laws of Ukraine with those of the European Union. (Dzamukashvili 2021) But, to put it mildly, Zelensky has had a lot on his plate. Before the war, to his credit, he famously shut down a homophobic heckler in 2019 in a moment which went viral. (Maurice 2019) And on April 1st 2022, in stark contrast to Putin's pathological hostility – not to mention, on that same day, the pitiful fumbblings of the UK government in failing to launch legal protection for trans people from "Conversion Therapy" – Volodymyr Zelensky, who is in the middle of fighting an existential war, said on Twitter:

On the day of the visibility of transgender people, do not forget that trans*people, trans*women and non-binary people...naturally fight on the front lines, [and]

volunteer, [to] protect Ukraine...Together for Ukraine!
Glory to the nation! (KyivPride 2022)

How LGBTQ-friendly was/is Ukraine?

In September 2021, 7000 people marched in Kyiv in Ukraine's annual March for [LGBTQ} Equality. In a statement, the marchers said:

We've grown tired of waiting for change and enduring systematic intimidation, pressure, disruption of peaceful events, attacks on activists and the LGBT community... We demand changes here and now, as we want to live freely in our own country. (Globalnews 2021)

Plainly, issues to be addressed, but note the freedom to march and the freedom to address them. Moscow courts banned gay pride marches "for 100 years" in 2012. (Maurice 2019; Wikipedia, 2023) But that was before the war. Now, the war may have laid bare some disturbing attitudes affecting Ukrainian trans people. Lenny Emson, an LGBTQ activist in Ukraine, is reported in the New York Times as saying:

...some people who are L.G.B.T.Q. have faced problems unique to their sex or gender identity. Mx. Emson said that she was aware of about 100 transgender women who were in the process of attaining legal gender recognition when the war started. After the invasion, Ukraine banned men between the ages of 18 and 60 from leaving the country to ensure they could be conscripted for military service. The transgender women are effectively trapped "because of the letter 'M' in their passports," Mx. Emson said. (Bigg 2022)

It is perfectly possible – credible, even – that these reports are true. Yet this war has seen a battle between different versions of "the truth", and LGBTQ issues are not immune from acting as

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vehicles for manipulation. Ukraine Pride recently felt compelled to issue a statement asserting that “International media in the wartime are spreading harmful misinformation about transgender rights and gender dysphoria treatment in Ukraine...”. (KyivPride 2022a)

Zelensky praised trans people fighting in the war, but support is coming from the whole of the LGBTQ community. On February 24th – the day the Russians invaded Ukraine – KyivPride posted on Twitter:

Putin will break all his teeth trying to bite us. We have left far behind the past to which he seeks to draw us. We are a country that has chosen the values of human rights, humanity, life and personality. Putin lives in the past, he has a place there. (Kelleher 2022)

According to an article by Jamie Wareham, a journalist on the ground in Ukraine, Vlad Shast, aged 26...

...Once known for a drag act...is now using his contacts as a stylist to help the army find materials and supplies. [Shast says] "If Russia wins, it means darkness. There will be no freedom, no opportunity to be yourself, no rights for diverse communities."

He adds:

It was tough to be LGBTQ in Ukraine, even before the war. The country's religious society has a high level of anti-LGBTQ sentiment. Despite this, Ukraine was a refuge for eastern European LGBTQ people, who had to flee their countries. (Wareham 2022)

As an LGBTQ soldier, Shast is not alone. Wareham's account of his activities is a timely reminder that we would be quite wrong

to think of LGBTQ people in this conflict solely as victims. Thousands of them have chosen to fight. Paula Balov recently reported in Siegesäule (“We are Queer Berlin”), the Berlin-based queer magazine:

The NGO UkrainePride used to host parties and last year [hosted] a queer rave protest against LGBTIQ* hate crimes and campaigned for an anti-discrimination law. Meanwhile, members of UkrainePride have joined the active defense of the country. On their social channels, instead of protest or party pictures, you can now see queer people posing with heavy weapons. They have networked with other groups such as the LGBT Military initiative, which was founded in 2018 and [who] also took part in the Kyiv Pride [KyivPride]. Their symbol is a unicorn, which they wear on their uniform. (Balov 2022. Google translation from German)

Through correspondence, Balov interviewed the Ukraine Pride Team:

What was the motivation for UkrainePride to join the country's military defense? We don't want to live in a Ukraine dominated by the shameful Russian government and its laws. We don't want to flee abroad. Our relatives and our friends live here. Therefore, we cannot just stand aside and wait while our brothers and sisters fight for our freedom. We act too. (Balov 2022. Google translation from German)

Given the historical hostility towards LGBTQ people in the military, the Team was asked if they faced prejudice: “We have a common goal and a common enemy. It's not about categorizations like nationality, skin colour, gender identity or sexual orientation.” (Balov 2022. Google translation from German) Paradoxically, eradicating aspects of the homophobia

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Putin seeks to promote has made his enemy, the Ukrainian army, stronger.



Founded in 2018, the LGBT Military Initiative has been joined by others as they fight the Russian invasion as Ukrainian soldiers. The unicorn is their symbol. Photo: UkrainePride

How queer tango has responded to the war

I apologise for the gaps in this interim account. They are caused by ignorance and not for want of searching.

For those remote from the conflict, fundraising is the default response. It translates a desire to help into money, which is a flexible resource made available to those we trust to channel it towards addressing suffering to maximum effect. And, given that the needs are immediate, it is easy and quick to organise. Queer Tango London (QTL) held a fundraising milonga, “Dancing Queer to Support Ukraine” on 11th March 2022, with all QTLs profits going to the Disaster Emergency Committee’s (DEC) Ukrainian Humanitarian Appeal – which has raised £260 million to date. (Disasters Emergency Committee no date)

The long-established, Berlin-based, Russian-speaking LGBTQ charity, Quarteera – with whom queer tango activist Wanja Kilber is associated – launched a fresh appeal, as explained in



Queer Tango London's fundraising milonga for the Disaster Emergencies Committee Ukraine Humanitarian Appeal

The text accompanying a podcast they recorded:

Wanja is involved in the Quarteera refugee aid. Before the interview he was at Berlin Central Station. "Helping helps," he says several times in the podcast. "The willingness to help is enormous. It helps me to sleep at night." According to Wanja, 175 people and 18 pets have already found a temporary home through Quarteera's commitment alone. At the same time, the Queere Bündnis Nothilfe is sending HIV medication and hormone preparations for trans people, both of which are now in short supply, to Ukraine. (Schulze 2022)

Though not impossible elsewhere, some forms of direct action are more practical for those closest to Ukraine. Quarteera is acting as an agency linking those with accommodation to offer with LGBTQ refugees who need it, as well as offering many other practical forms of help. (Quarteera, no date – form for offering help) In Rome, the popular deGENERE queer tango festival, re-surfacing after Covid and scheduled long before the war for March 2022, held a fundraiser for Quarteera. In Belgium, Tony Damen organised a "Milonga de los Chicos" to raise money for

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From Left to right: Wanja Kilber, Johannes Kram and Inga Pylypchuk from Quarteera, a charity aimed at supporting Russian-speaking queer people

Ukraine. (Damen 2022) Lukas Engelmann, another Berlin-based queer tango activist, personally ferried eight LGBTQ refugees from Ukraine to Germany and safety. Like Wanja Kilber, Lukas also believes helping helps the helper:

Actually, I have to [admit], it helps me to[o].. I need to do something! Otherwise I feel like falling Apart...
(Engelmann 2022)

What next?

Only a fool would claim to be able to predict the future with any certainty. Paula Balov asked the Ukraine Pride Team “What support do LGBTIQ* people need in Ukraine?” and received the answer:

None of us knows exactly when the war in Ukraine will end. Funds raised by NGO UkrainePride will be used to support LGBTIQ* in the military and queer communities affected by the war.

twitter.com/UKRAINE_PRIDE_
[instagram.com/ukraine.pride](https://www.instagram.com/ukraine.pride)

Anyone who would like to support UkrainePride financially can do so in the following ways - the donated money [will] be invested in protective equipment, and the bereaved and families of the injured [will] also be supported:

monobank
4441 1144 5311 1369
IBAN: UA123220010000026205315732562
Sofia Lapina
PayPal: +14152799995
BTC: bc1qst3w3adx2hls7xu6ztkuugyphqhec56yl9sn87
ETH: 0x451Cfd3Fd63CE31b3b97fF7Bcc7f34ff03Cb47DC
#War#Ukraine#LGBTIQ*#Defense#Military (Balov 2022)

I reproduce their answer in full in case anyone reading this is minded to donate, because this much is clear: these needs are going to be with us for the weeks, months – and possibly years – ahead, and with that, our obligation to act, or to contribute will remain. (I have made small donations to all the activities mentioned in this paper. Please use the links if you want to support any of them as well).

QTL, in a move intended to address this sustained demand for funds, has launched the FRACTION for FREEDOM scheme. Under it, from now on, QTL will donate 10% of its profits to charities addressing the sufferings of those affected by the war. (Batchelor 2022) QTL may shift its support from the highly credible, but general humanitarian work of the DEC Ukraine Humanitarian Appeal to a more specifically LGBTQ charity, such as the UK-based, AllOut or (as its name implies) the international charity OutRight International:

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Through [until] the end of April 2022, 100% of donations to OutRight's Ukraine Fund are being disbursed directly to local LGBTIQ partners supporting our community in Ukraine and neighboring countries. **Contributions are providing emergency assistance to LGBTIQ people who need safe shelter, food, competent medical care, transportation for those who are fleeing, and other types of humanitarian support.** [emphasis in the source] (AllOut no date)

QTL invites other tango organisations in London to join FRACTION for FREEDOM and to support charities of their own choosing. That said, we are mindful that, whereas we organise on a voluntary, non-profit basis with the luxury of incomes generated in other ways, our professional London tango colleagues, for whom we have the greatest respect, are struggling, post-Covid, to make their livings out of dance. Now, just as the prices of everything are beginning to rocket, in part because of the war, we understand completely if they elect not to follow suit.

Even so, several have also run fundraisers, including the long-established, widely respected Corrientes:

Corrientes Solidarity with the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. All net proceeds from this Saturday March 26 Corrientes@ChalkFarm will go to support Action Aid UK efforts at Ukraine's borders, providing immediate humanitarian relief, specially to women and children. (Corrientes 2022)

A new, and friendly South London venue, Tango Café @ Fresh Ground also ran a fundraiser, and co-organiser Katerina Stoyanova has signed the group up to FRACTION for FREEDOM. (Stoyanova 2022)

It may work. It may not. I am guessing we will all continue to try to do something and will continue to make it up as we go along, changing what we do as perceived needs alter.

...and the dancing?

Beyond providing a network of links between individuals and organisations minded to help, and holding milongas as fundraisers, just as others with other interests do, it might seem as if there is nothing happening which is peculiarly “queer tango” about our responses, let alone anything directly informed by queer tango dancing.



Queer tango danced in London, but it could be anywhere in the world where people are free to dance it. More than ever – as well as all other forms of action – we should dance! Photo: Margaret Trotter, 2022

And yet, I argue, the dancing matters. At the risk of being found guilty of naivety or wishful thinking, I believe that we can and should dance, because each time we dance queer tango, we are maintaining and strengthening a model of social and political

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relationships, of inclusivity, of peaceful coexistence, and we are celebrating differences. By dancing, we make this model available to the world. In doing so, we embody a living rebuke to the warmongers fostering and exploiting differences to secure power, and offer instead a real, beautiful alternative to the ignorant homophobia traded by craven, power-seeking church leaders and politicians alike. Finally, we are keeping alive a vibrant point of reference, a sign of hope for those who are like us, and who, like us, want to live peaceful, joyous, and fulfilling lives. Perverse as it may seem to some, the worse this war gets, the more it matters that we dance queer tango, that we generate profound joy, and that we keep on doing so again, and again, and again, no matter what.

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