

QUEER TANGO HISTORIES: MAKING A START...



Ray Batchelor

A Queer Tango Project Publication

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The Queer Tango Project invites proposals for publications which explore the themes and issues addressed by queer tango or add to the knowledge, scholarship and research which underpin its practice.

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Dedicated to
EDGARDO FERNÁNDEZ SESMA

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Jon Mulholland for his consistent support not only in bringing the paper we jointly authored included here, “Queer Tango – Bent History? The Late-Modern Uses and Abuses of Historical Imagery Showing Men Dancing Tango with Each Other” into being and of seeing it through the process of peer-review, but also in co-hosting *The Queer Tango Salon* in its 2016 and 2017 iterations in Paris and London respectively. The last of these provided an opportunity for Birthe Havmøller and I jointly to present our paper, “The Origins of Queer Tango as Practices and Conceptions: Competing or Complimentary Narratives?”. Clare Parfitt from PoP MOVES was a key figure in the running of two of that organisation’s events in 2016, at each of which papers included here were first presented: the “Queer Tango – Bent History?” paper and “Tango Teas, Trousers and Autonomy: Images of Women Dancing with Each Other in the Early 20th Century”. In addition, I am grateful to her for acting as invaluable and supportive intermediary – despite all the demands made on her time during lockdown – between myself and Palgrave, the publishers of the *Dancing with Memory* anthology, presently in press and scheduled to appear in 2021

and which will include the paper authored jointly with Jon Mulholland. My thanks to Kevin Barron in Paris, who helped me promptly and effectively with French language researches relating the image of Maurice Rostand in “When Gomez Tangoed with Lurch: a Queer Tango Perspective on “Humorous” Historical Representations of Men Dancing Tango with Each Other”. London-based tango dancer, Andie Lloyd was instrumental in drawing my attention to the invaluable interview with Brigitta Winkler originally published in 2015, and which has lay behind some of the more substantial revisions Birthe Havmøller and I have made to our paper, “The Origins of Queer Tango as Practices and Conceptions: Competing or Complimentary Narratives?”. My husband, Jerome Farrell, has kept my spirits up by dancing tango with me at home during weeks of lockdown. Finally, I am indebted to my Queer Tango Project Colleague, Birthe Havmøller in Aarhus in Denmark, for not only did she agree that the Project ought to publish this volume, she has supported it by means of expert advice, no small measure of encouragement and much hard, practical work. Thank you very much Birthe!

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Introduction

As I remark towards the end of this book:

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, then the histories it requires are likely to be equally changeable in character.

Right now (June 2020) that dynamism has taken the strangest turn. I cannot dance, or not much. We are in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. The consequences of the pandemic have been tragic, fatal in fact, for some, and all life is changed. For many, myself included, it has provided a lesson in how to let go of much that had been familiar and to make a life out of what *is* possible. Since March this year, all tango in London has shut down, not to mention the universal cancellation of international tango festivals, queer or not. A joyous year of privileged, queer tango gallivanting melted away in the space of a few weeks. A much-anticipated Queer Tango London

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campaigning milonga planned for 10th May which had been some two years in the making – *Jewish Tango Meets Queer Tango* – was indefinitely postponed.

Instead, I have been in lockdown with my husband. We are fortunate to have a home, a garden, an income and each other. I also have time. Early on, I moved the dining table out of the garden room (no one is coming to dinner) and moved the 1911 Parlophone gramophone in. Elsewhere in the house, I am cataloguing my 78 rpm records on the redundant dining table. These include a stash of tango records acquired during visits to Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Berlin and elsewhere. We eat at a card table in the garden room. I can fold it up at a moment's notice. We can – and we do – dance a little tango with each other. As my losses are more or less common to the whole of the queer tango community – the milongas, the festivals, the friends and dance partners, the socialising, to which I will add the Dance Studies Association Conference in Vancouver – and are partially offset by my improvisations, I will not dwell on them.

I have always argued that queer tango as political action is at its most effective when it is danced.

This has not prevented me from seeing value in researching into it, thinking about it, writing about it and presenting papers about it. Normally these are complementary activities, with each informing the other, with the non-dancing work a useful branch of queer tango politics. If, for the foreseeable future, I cannot effect change by dancing queer tango, it occurred to me that I might use some of my time to review what I have done to date. I have decided to make this small, digital book out of some of the papers relating to queer tango history which I have presented at various conferences. Most of these papers, bar two, analyse the historical imagery I have digitally curated since 2016 for The Queer Tango Project in *The Queer Tango Image Archive*. I suggested to Birthe Havmøller, who runs The Queer Tango Project, that the Project should publish it. Birthe agreed, and the present volume is the result.

To the best of my knowledge, there has never been a book devoted to the history of queer tango.

The heterogeneity of queer tango practices, concepts and ideologies will demand “histories” rather than a history, singular, and as I implied in my opening remarks, setting these histories out

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will always be work in progress. I am making a start on that process. The papers included here were written and presented between 2014 and 2019. In that time, their author gradually developed his ideas about what he was examining. It was a relief to find, on re-reading them in 2020, that I stand by most of what I had written. The oldest and first, “Uncovering the Histories and Pre-Histories of Queer Tango” (2014) was an attempt to set out a rationale as to how “Queer Tango History” might logically be approached, arguing that contemporary queer tango has its own, direct history in the feminist, and lesbian and gay movements of the late 20th century, but also a “pre-history” stretching back to the 19th century, where historical material addresses the themes and ideas which inform queer tango, even when such an entity did not exist. I reproduce it here to provide some context for the four papers which follow, each of them addressing themes explored through imagery from *The Queer Tango Image Archive*.

In 2014, neither Kathy Davis’s *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World*, nor Melissa Fitch’s *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary* had been published (both

2015) and my reading into the subject was in its early stages. Even so, with this and the papers which follow, bar two, I have elected to reproduce them much as they were presented, with a selection of representative illustrations, and I have resisted the temptation to re-edit them for this volume. Accordingly, for example in this early paper, I would not now take at face value the source identifying *Fig 1.3* as dating from 1926, but that is what the text here still says; and my then habit of writing “Queer Tango” rather than “queer tango” is retained, even if I abandoned it in my own writing shortly after. It mimicked the slightly preposterous way in which, in my own professional field of design history, “Post-Modernism”, which was supposed to signify a certain seriousness and status, eventually relaxed into “postmodernism”. Still, leaving things as they were originally drafted has its downsides. Each of the four papers about the historical imagery was presented to an audience unfamiliar with either the imagery or *The Queer Tango Image Archive*. Accordingly, I introduce the *Archive* in more or less identical terms in each one, which readers of this volume may find repetitive. Similarly, identical images used in one paper appear again in another, or in others. But I defend these decisions as, I reasoned, they

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will enable readers to dive into any paper in any order and enjoy it (I hope) as a freestanding work.

The first of the image-based papers “Queer Tango’s Image Problem” goes straight to the most well-known historical images of men dancing (or posing as if dancing) with each other. They crop up everywhere in the tango world today and are usually accompanied by slightly mangled, near-mythic rationales, whereby the men were “just practising”, the better to dance and so secure the favours of women. I test the limits of this as an explanation and propose alternatives. The next, “Queer Tango – Bent History” was co-written with social sciences academic, Jon Mulholland. It considers these contemporary uses of this imagery of men dancing together and explores how today it supports a whole variety of narratives, some of them mutually antagonistic, depending on the contexts in which they are presented.

There is an imbalance in these papers, in that most of them address issues arising out of representations of men. In part this is because there are far more of these than representations of women. In part it is a reflection of who I am and what interests me. I have a vivid memory in Berlin

of tentatively suggesting to Astrid Weiske, the charismatic organiser of the Berlin International Queer Tango Festival, that the histories of women dancing together and of men dancing together ought normally to be considered separately, as the historical circumstances and experiences of women and of men have been quite different. Astrid emphatically agreed. As, if pressed, I self-identify as a gay man, so, with caveats and cautions, I am drawn to those historical areas where my life experience may be of value.

Of course, there are areas of overlap and there are exceptions. “Tango Teas, Trousers and Autonomy” expressly looks to imagery from early 20th century Europe of women dancing with each other for signs of the emergence – albeit among a narrow, privileged class of women – of a kind of physical, social and sexual emancipation. If I were revising this paper now, I would draw on an excellent source I have since discovered: “Dancing with “le sexe”. Eroticism and exoticism in the Parisian reception of tango (1907-1914)” by Rafel Mandressi (2017) translated into English by Héloïse Finch-Boyer and which I now direct readers to: <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-clio-women-gender-history-2017-2-page-87.htm> The last

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image-based paper looks at how representations of men dancing tango together have been used for humorous purposes – sometimes for gentle celebration, sometimes as vicious attacks. I track these typologies at some speed from the early 20th century, to mid-century American films (*Some Like it Hot*, 1959) and TV (*The Addams Family*, c1965). In the final paper “The Origins of Queer Tango as Practices and Conceptions”, which is illustrated, but not image-based, I tease out with my co-author, Birthe Havmøller that direct, but complex history of contemporary queer tango emerging out of 20th century social and political ideologies – the history, as opposed to “pre-history” identified in the first paper in this collection.

In preparing this work, I have made one or two changes. I have attempted to impose Chicago style name and date annotation for all papers, whether they started life with that or not. If the eagle-eyed spot inconsistencies even so, I plead guilty. This is a slightly “garden shed” publication. Candidly, even though I used to teach the stuff, life is too short to spend too much time on mechanical consistency. If the sources can be identified, the annotation is good enough. Some changes are small corrections. For example, a photograph which I and nine-tenths

of the tango world, including the *Academia Nacional del Tango de la República Argentina* in Buenos Aires, had identified as “Market Traders at Abasto, 1910” or similar, quite definitely – according to a reliable, academic source – shows market traders in tango poses on the occasion of a party to celebrate the demolition of Lorea Market. This almost certainly occurred in 1909 as part of the preparations for the creation of the Plaza del Congreso which was completed in 1910. Having corrected it in the text accompanying the image in *The Queer Tango Image Archive*, I could not allow the misidentification to pass here and compound the error. It does not affect the arguments the image supports in the slightest. Similarly, the sailors calmly dancing with each other in the Pathé newsreel cited in “Queer Tango’s ‘Image Problem’” proved not to be “c1917”, as I had guessed, but as another clip of the same newsreel confirms, sailors from HMS Hood moored off Rio de Janeiro in 1922. This, too, has been corrected.

One paper has been somewhat revised since it was delivered: “Queer Tango – Bent History?” co-authored with Jon Mulholland, was originally presented at a PoP MOVES conference in 2016. It, along with several others taken from the

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conference, is scheduled to figure in an anthology, *Dancing with Memory* which, allowing for the effects of the pandemic, is likely to be published by Palgrave in 2021. With the agreement of my co-author, Jon Mulholland, the Palgrave anthology's editor, Clare Parfitt and Palgrave themselves, we reproduce here the version improved by the anonymous process of academic peer review, the version which will appear in that book, but which is here supported by more images than the economics of its hard copy equivalent will support.

The only paper subject to substantial revision is the last, "The Origins of Queer Tango as Practices and Conceptions". It is different from all the others in that its focus is the immediate history of queer tango, the contemporary phenomenon, where queer tango is acknowledged as a combination both of dance practices and of an awareness of their political, social and cultural significances. Birthe Havmøller, my co-author and I presented the first version of it at the 2017 *Queer Tango Salon* in London which I organised with Jon Mulholland. The paper was prompted by a lively and complex pouring forth of ideas and claims about how and where queer tango had originated. This followed a request by Federico Imperial (Fede) to address precisely that question in *The Queer*

Tango Conversation on Facebook (the discussion group run by the Queer Tango Project). Fede, who was to be interviewed, is the Paris-based queer tango activist and leader of the team which, pandemics permitting, organises each year the *La Vie en Rose* queer tango event in that city. Supplementing, cross-referencing and augmenting that Facebook data with further research, we assembled a presentation setting out the various “roots” which, it seemed to us, ultimately led to the queer tango of that time. Since then, still more research material has come to hand and more issues have been clarified. As we think some account of these origins will be of interest to many of those dancing queer tango (even if we are not dancing it now), it seemed to us this would be an opportunity to set the record, if not straight, then somewhat straighter, and that this revised paper would provide a fitting close to this anthology.

Covid-19 appears to be abating in the UK. Baroque practices are being tested elsewhere in the world of milongas where couples arrive together, masked, dance together throughout the evening, dance open hold, maintaining social distancing between couples in the ronda and leave together. Some have turned to the virtual world to maintain

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their tango presence, or more seriously for those who live by teaching or running milongas, to try to maintain their incomes which have, at a stroke, been severed. In queer tango, Edgardo Fernández Sesma, the Buenos Aires based activist to whom this book is dedicated and whose colossal range of social and political queer tango activities before the pandemic struck was second to none, has persisted in bringing that energy to his online activities to maintain the profiles of campaigns dear to his heart and to the hearts of his supporters.

Even so, no return to tango “normality”, queer or otherwise, is coming any time soon. Instead, we manage the grief of losing a part of our lives we had thought an immovable source of joy, and we make lives in the world as it is. I have enjoyed reviewing these papers and editing this book. Normally, my aspiration would be that it might make you think more about the dancing you do – but these are not normal times. I am struck by one glaring omission. To date, nowhere have I looked at the historical role of trans tango dancers, yet there is evidence in the imagery. I may well turn my attention to that in the not too distant future, though I invite anyone to pick this subject up. It has been suggested to me that I am the only

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historian of queer tango in the world, which, even if it is true (and I am not sure of that), is a distinction I would very happily relinquish.

If my immediate aspiration for readers of this book is to stay safe and enjoy reading it, I cannot wholly stifle a longer term desire that we, all of us, may one day return to the queer tango world, able to embrace whomsoever each of us chooses, hold them or be held closely and take to dance floors crowded with others dancing as we do, and that together we may once more be powerful, physical embodiments of the joyous spirit that is fully realised queer tango.

Ray Batchelor
London
June 2020

1. Uncovering the Histories and Pre-Histories of Queer Tango: contextualizing and documenting an innovative form of social dancing

Presented at the Joint Society of Dance History Scholars + Congress on Research in Dance Conference, *Writing Dancing*, 13th-16th November 2014, at The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA.

Abstract: Attempting to uncover and document the history, or rather histories and pre-histories of Queer Tango is difficult. Superficially, the history ought to be easy. The term 'Queer Tango' barely existed before when it was first used by LGBT dancers in Hamburg, Germany. It was perceived of by them as a riposte to 'hetero-normative' leader-

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follower relationships in mainstream Argentinian tango, proposing instead women as leaders, men as followers, same sex couples and 'active' rather than passive followers. Queer Tango has subsequently been characterized by the emergence around the world of Queer Tango organizations, of international festivals and an international community of dancers, thriving by contact through social media. Yet as the author, who is collaborating with writers and dancers Birthe Havmøller and Olaya Aramo in editing *The Queer Tango Book*, (Havmøller, Batchelor and Oramo 2015) an online anthology of writings about Queer Tango, has found out, there is still no settled agreement as to what, precisely the term means; there is disagreement about the premise that 'hetero-normative' tango was quite as oppressive to women in the ways it was originally made out to be; and there is no agreement – indeed so far, precious little discussion – as to which dance practices in Buenos Aires and beyond from the late 19th century onwards might legitimately be enlisted as forming the pre-history. Were the men-only prácticas which ran for decades, a part of it? Or women teaching each other at home? When so little was written down, how is one to find out?

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The innocent abroad in searching for a definition of Queer Tango and its history, might turn to Wikipedia (Wikipedia 2014) for enlightenment:

The Queer tango movement which revives the origins of tango as a same-sex couple dance is very recent. It was founded in Germany, in Hamburg...in 2001...

...and in doing so, apparently imply both a history – stretching back to 2001 – and perhaps ‘pre-history’ where those ‘origins’ lie, and whose reach is more indeterminate. A further Wikipedia page purporting to represent the ‘History of the Queer Tango movement’ includes the following from Christine Denniston:

Because of a shortage of women in the immigrant population, there were really only two practical ways for a man to get close to a woman under these circumstances. One was to visit a prostitute and the other was to dance. The men practicing together, looking for the best ways to please a woman when they danced with her, preparing for that rare moment when they actually did have a woman in their arms, were the people who

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created the Tango as a dance. (Denniston 2003 in Wikipedia 2014)

...followed by an odd discussion about 20th century European postcards showing women dancing tango together and critiquing the imagery as generated for the male gaze. As this unsatisfactory entry makes plain, before embarking on the task of 'making history' the historian needs first to ask: What is Queer Tango and how 'queer' is it? How far back should one go? What types of data can legitimately be referred to? And – given that until the welcome appearance of *The Queer Tango Book* in 2015, no single work has been devoted to Queer Tango - who among the tango scholars can be of use to us in this undertaking?

What is Queer Tango and how 'queer' is it?

I do not propose settling these questions here. Indeed, I doubt at present [2014] they can be settled. Queer Tango is in a dynamic state and there are informal and formal uses of the word 'queer', which is sometimes taken as simply a more assertive replacement for 'gay' or at others, interchangeable with 'LGBT' while for yet another group it throws out a link to 'queer theory' which

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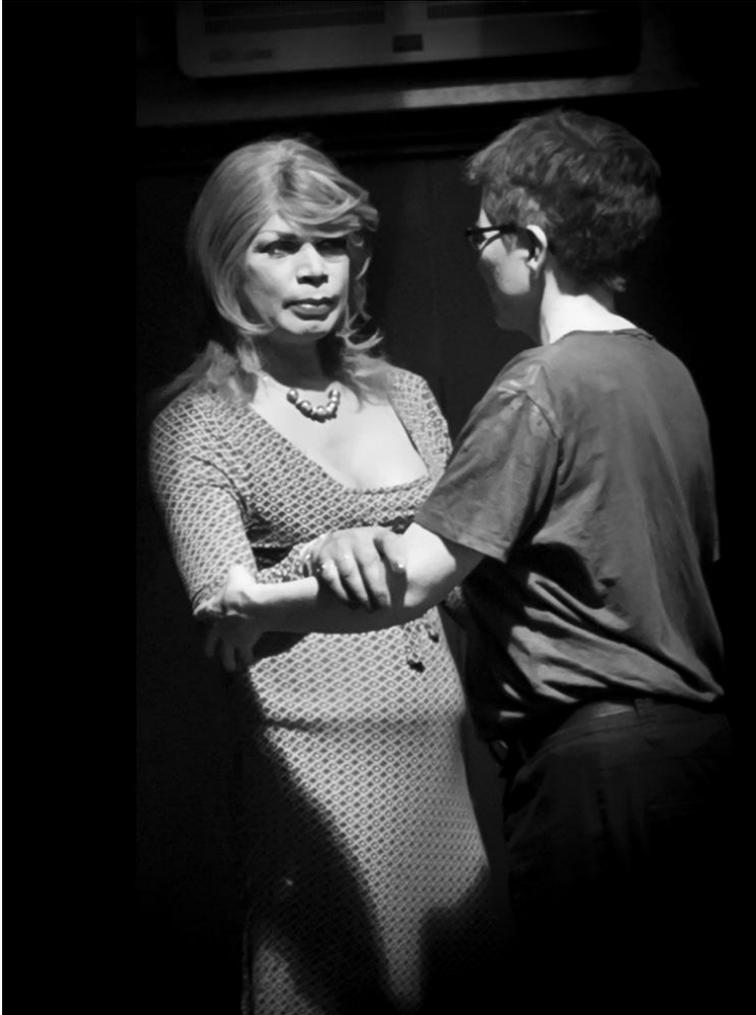


Fig. 1.1. Queer Tango dancers at Queer Tango London, 2014.

challenges normative binaries of ‘woman-man’
‘queer-straight’ and so on. Different people have
different reasons for wanting to arrive at

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definitions and less obviously, 'what it is' might more accurately be defined by 'what people do', or rather dance than by language and representation. Queer Tango is defined by different groups of interested people. Chief among these are those who prescribe by publishing manifestos as to how and why it is to be danced. Perhaps the best known and most substantial comes from Mariana Docampo, dancer, writer and professor of literature (Docampo 2009) here in a translation from Spanish on her blog:

Tango Queer is a tango environment open for everyone. It is a meeting point to socialize, exchange, learn, and practice Tango as a new way of communication.

In Tango Queer nobody takes for granted neither your sexual orientation nor your choice of taking either one role or the other. What is "normal" here is the difference and when you dance you do it with whomever you want to and taking the role you prefer.

While Docampo's definition is sophisticated and locates Queer Tango in a clear relationship with queer theory (it is open to the historian to adopt the tools of queer theory, or not), it cannot

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account for all the ways in which Queer Tango manifests itself. For that and a more vivid sense of what Queer Tango actually is, reference might be made to how those involved in it represent themselves. A growing body of digital ephemera with language and imagery litters the channels of social media. ‘TanGay Milano’ ‘la tua pratica di tango gay lesbico queer’, the first ever Queer Tango event in Milan was publicized by an image of two men dancing together. How should it be represented? Do you show women dancing together? Or a woman leading a man? Or, indeed, a man leading a woman? Or any combinations in any one image? These issues re-emerge in the manner in which Queer Tango is received in and reported on in the wider world, and again – independent of language and imagery – in Queer Tango practice, what people do. Indeed, I have spent years listening to exchanges where issues like these feature, exchanges as likely to be at two o’clock in the morning sat on the wall outside a milonga at the Heilig-Kreuz-Kirche in Berlin during an International Queer Tango Festival as at any more formal debating venue. In reconciling, formal with informal, I offer the following as a subjective account of the tacit set of assumptions which often underlie such discussion at to what is and is not Queer Tango: tango dancing is commonly thought

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more securely classified as Queer Tango dancing to the extent that:

1. The sexual orientations of the dancers correspond to LGBT 'norms'
2. Conventional gender roles are challenged because:
 - a. Both dancers in a couple are of the same gender; or
 - b. Conventional gender roles in a couple are reversed
3. Those dancing believe they are dancing Queer Tango
4. The dancing occurs in an overtly Queer Tango context
5. What they dance corresponds to the observer's precepts of what Queer Tango is

How far back?

The 2001 'cut off point' [actually, 2000 – see final chapter in this volume] for the history of actual Queer Tango, that is, the self-conscious pursuit of tango dancing as a political and social innovation is sensible, but not quite clean. Consistent with wider social and political developments, there was a same sex tango venue in Buenos Aires in the 1990s, *Tango Mujer*, the all-woman tango group performed in New York in 1996 and further

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research might well bring further overtly social and political tango to light. Even so, only criteria three, four and five can be applied in this more modern period. While they skirt around defining Queer Tango, they allow that those dancing are nonetheless referring to conceptions of it. Without the concept, however fluid, there is no Queer Tango. Even so, given the issues and practices which Queer Tango addresses or incorporates, criteria one and two can be usefully applied throughout and most especially into times and places where Queer Tango never was. Quite how this might work becomes clearer once the criteria are applied to candidate data.



Fig. 1.2. A proposal for a Queer Tango historical timeline.

What types of data?

From the late 19th century to date, with perhaps biases towards rioplatinese evidence and more about men, than about women, the historian is

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confronted by many different kinds of data: We have photographs of same sex dancing; the representations of tango dancing on sheet music and elsewhere; tango as represented on stage; there is a rich seam of both historical dance film and video clips and, moving towards the present, interviews with dancers recalling mid-twentieth century dance practices when they were young. And do we admit looking beyond the dancing itself, towards tango lyrics, and the lives of those who wrote them such as the notorious Andrés Cepeda or sang them, such as the canonised Carlos Gardel?

The 'same sex origin' story – by which is meant men dancing with men – is a case in point. It is routinely trotted out in various forms, in stories dancers tell one another garnered from who knows where, to the slightly awkward, hyper-macho dance sketches which figuring in some tango shows (Tobin 1998, 80). The many historical photographs stretching back to the 1890s from Argentina and Uruguay, showing men dancing with one another appear to back this assertion up, but in what ways and to what extent? One photograph in particular (*Fig 1.3*) from 1926 of men dancing in the street apparently late at night with a seated

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bandoneon player in the middle has done the rounds, not least on Queer Tango websites.



Fig. 1.3. Perhaps the best-known historical image of “men dancing with men”.

What is to be made of them? The issues come to the fore: what are these men doing? What do they think they are doing? Who is to say? And to what extent can such an image be claimed for – however informal – the history of Queer Tango? The foolhardy will answer with unwise certainty.

Who can help us?

Who, then has written about tango in ways which the Queer Tango historian might find valuable? For the most part, the writers are also dancers. I note

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here only the works for which they are best known. Christine Denniston (Denniston 2007) dances teaches and writes about tango. The strength of her writing is that it is based on her personal and, now, historical experiences of dancing during the so-called 'tango renaissance' in Buenos Aires in the 1990s. Not only did she dance, she talked to dancers, many much older than herself and she listened carefully to what they had to say. In addition, she is able to report what it was like for a woman to begin dancing as a leader in that time and place as this is what she did. The strength of her pronouncements on – say, the men dancing together aspect touched on in her quoted remarks – is that it is rooted in what her informal informants told her. The weakness, if weakness it is, is that she respects and respected these tango veterans so much that she is, perhaps, inclined invariably to take what they told her at face value. It has been argued that her work, while it is written with admirable clarity and personal authority, lacks the rigor of more conventional scholarship. This is not a criticism which can be levelled at Eduardo Archetti (Archetti 1999). Archetti was born Argentinian, is an academic and worked for decades on *Masculinities: Football, polo and the tango in Argentina*. However, he can't dance, and has to rely on his dancing informants' views on

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tango lyrics to arrive at views of masculinity in tango, rendering them abstract, rather than embodied. Jeffrey Tobin can and does dance and provides credible accounts of competing styles of male dancing in the Buenos Aires of 16 years ago in his essay “Tango and the Scandal of Homosocial Desire” (Tobin 1998, 79) and again in “Models of Machismo: The Troublesome Masculinity of Argentine Male Tango-Dancers” (Tobin 2009, 139). His connection (husband) with perhaps the most famous of the dance scholars, Marta Savigliano noted here should not go unnoticed. Her *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Savigliano, 1995) was based on authoritative scholarship. Like Archetti, Savigliano looks at maleness and national identity, although for our purposes, her central pre-occupation with tango’s post-colonial dimensions are interesting, but tangential. The last author reviewed here, Magali Saikin (Saikin 2004) took issue with Savigliano’s dismissive, negative references to homosocial or homosexual bonds between male dancers and casual inclusion of the judgements of male authors that women dancing together in brothels only did so for the pleasure of men, rather than each other. In my view, Saikin’s work is the most genuinely useful, in that it provides a model of carefully martialled contemporary data, chiefly a rich vein drawn from

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psychology and criminology where the LGBT people figure as subjects. She is especially good at tracking the virtual eradication of the overt homoerotic dimensions of tango as it moved from the 'savage' state among pimps and criminals who didn't really care much about the sexual proclivities of the people they mixed with, into the salons and respectable society (Saikin 2004: 129 author's translation):

It is not only important to prove that, indeed, there were pure same sex dance couples, but also to explore how it could be that the homoerotic component of such situations definitively disappeared. Only in this way can the homosexual contribution the Argentinian tango be recovered

What next...?

Saikin's study was written in her first language, Spanish (she is Argentinian) and was then translated into German for publication in Germany, where she works. As the notional 'home' of tango, existing sources are commonly focussed on tango in Argentina and to lesser extent Uruguay, yet tango – and Queer Tango – is to be found throughout the world in countless cultural contexts and these dimensions beckon. I am

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personally convinced some more systematic and serious study is needed into the relationship of tango, Queer Tango, sex and intimacy – with a particular emphasis on this last. A deeper appreciation of the histories of Queer Tango might inform contemporary practices and stimulate further developments.

In conclusion, the study of the history of Queer Tango is NOT dependent on a stable definition, even if it ought probably to arise out of the common issues, themes and practices which those who dance it and seek to define it habitually address, discuss or dance. Queer theory may have a special value here, in freeing us from the need invariably to seek in history only those who correspond to overly prescriptive, modern LGBT stereotypes. In venturing into the past, we ought perhaps to travel light, leaving such devices at home. The data is undoubtedly rich and highly suggestive – although again, alongside imagination, extreme caution and rigorous scholarship will be indispensable. A better-informed global picture may emerge as a result. Doing so may help rectify an apparent boundless appetite for tango myth-making – quite as strong in Queer Tango as in the mainstream – which obscures and obliterates the homoerotic

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contribution to tango and its history. This, in turn may contribute to our own senses of identity and stimulate more debate as to what Queer Tango is and could be. In short, a better grasp of our history may change how we dance.

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2. Queer Tango's 'Image Problem': Men, Intimacy and Pictures from the Past

Presented at the Joint Society of Dance History Scholars + Congress on Research in Dance Conference, *Beyond Authenticity and Appropriation: Bodies, Authorship and Choreographies of Transmission*, 3rd – 6th November 2016, at Claremont College, Pomona, California, USA.

Abstract: Early 20th century imagery of men dancing tango together is endlessly reproduced on 21st century tango websites around the world. Tango “began with men dancing with each other” so the oft-repeated assertion goes. Perhaps. Late 19th and early 20th century society in Argentina famously consisted of young, largely immigrant men outnumbering women seven to one. But if they danced with each other, what exactly were they doing? And to what extent can these images help us find out? Were they just ‘practicing’, as

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Tobin's (1998; 2009) and Denniston's (2007) 20th century male informants assert? The tango origin myth says (Davis 2015 among others) that they practiced with each other, the better to secure the favours of women on the dance-floor and beyond? Possibly. Were they gay? Presumably some were. Another explanation might be that in a society where physical intimacy of all kinds was in short supply, some of these images show men who found in tango a 'safe space' to hold and to be held. Yet, how are we to know? *The Queer Tango Image Archive* – an online, digital collection of pre-1995 historical imagery – was set up to stimulate debate and address questions like these. Queer theory, among other things, would have us escape the woman-man, LGBT-straight binaries. 'Gay' might be irrelevant. Might this contemporary freedom help support alternative interpretations of historical imagery? And might that credibly alter and enrich our understanding of what we think we see?

The Queer Tango Image Archive

The Queer Tango Image Archive was set up early in 2016 by Gonzalo Collazo and myself supported by

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the Queer Tango Project.¹ We pooled our informal collections of digital files of historical imagery connected to the themes of queer tango and invited others to add them.² So far, we have less than 100 images, but it is early days.³ My particular interest here is in a selection of photographs taken in the early 20th in Argentina and Uruguay. What can we know of the circumstances in which these photographs were generated? Why were they taken? What do they show? What are these men doing? Why are they doing it? To what extent are we equipped to know the answers to these and

1 Also in 2015, the Queer Tango Project emerged out of the Queer Tango Book Project which had been founded by Birthe Havmøller in 2013. The Project consists of a website, a blog and lively Queer Tango Conversation on Facebook, and *The Queer Tango Image Archive*.

2 *The Queer Tango Image Archive* is less than a year old (as of January 2017). Although both Collazo and I are academics, queer tango is not the preserve of academia, and we elected not to frame the Archive in formal, theoretical terms. We are, of course, delighted when those who access the material do just that. At the 2016 symposium, *The Queer Tango Salon: Connecting Bodies of Knowledge* in Paris, where queer tango activists, teachers and academics were brought together to debate and dance queer tango, academics Chiara Iorino, Manuela Ritondale and Mauro Coletto applied art historical techniques to some of the images their paper, "Representation of Performative Identities: images of Queer Tango" which used the *Archive*. To date, including this one, another three papers have arisen from it.

3 Of the images of same gender couples, 31 are of women and 41 show men. Taking the fact of artwork or their being postcards as evidence, 23 the 31 images of women couples are commercial, while only 13 of the 41 images of male couples are.

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similar questions? Towards the end, I will ask how a queer perspective might help us better understand such imagery.

I have chosen these eight images for us to consider:⁴



FIG 2.1. Buenos Aires. Bailando tango en Palermo 1890.

4 All the images referred to in this paper can be found at *The Queer Tango Image Archive* using the “Search” function <http://image.queertangobook.org/>

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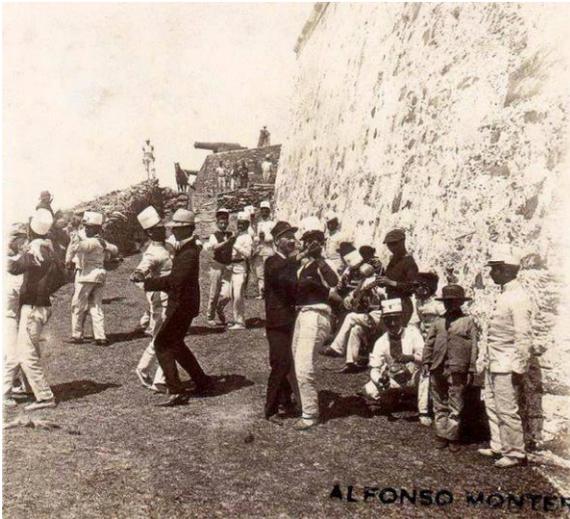


FIG 2.2. Circa 1890 – 1905, Montevideo. Reservists or soldiers dancing tango on one side of the Fortress of the Cerro de Montevideo.



Fig 2.3. Buenos Aires. Men dancing tango in the river. 1904 [or January 1912 "Picnic" on the Rio during a strike of workers of Railway Industries].

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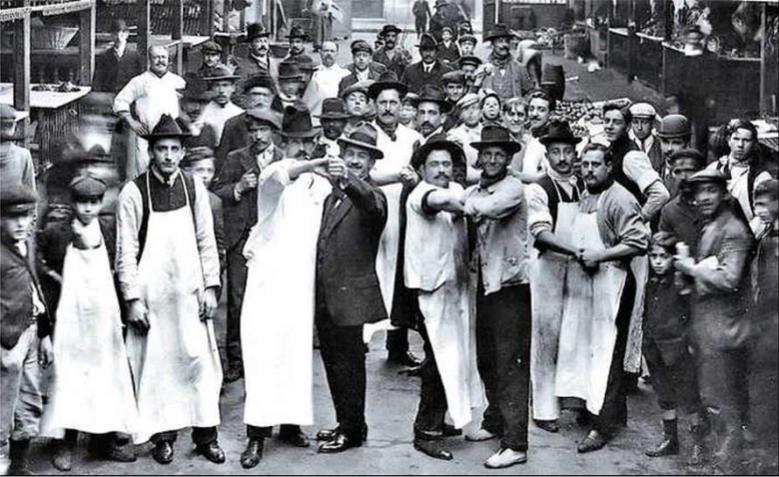


Fig 2.4. Press photo of Market Traders in Tango Poses at the closure of Lorea Market, Buenos Aires, 1909.



Fig 2.5. 1913 Hombres bailando tango en Rosario.

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Fig 2.6. *Private snapshot, 1920s Uruguay. Men dancing tango.*



Fig 2.7. *Men dancing (?) tango with each other in Buenos Aires – date?*



Fig 2.8. Five couples of men posing, Argentina, 1940s or 1950s?

I am going to suggest six reasons why, historically, men danced tango with each other.

Reason One: They were just ‘practicing’

This explanation has had currency for more than half a century: “they were just practicing, the better to secure the dancing and other favours of women”. As myths go, this one has certainly had traction. In the 1990s, Christine Denniston dancing in Buenos Aires listened carefully to older, male dancers who told her how, when younger they *practiced* with other men at all-male *prácticas* for

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up to three years (Denniston 2007). In the Archive, we speculate on these smartly dressed figures in *Fig 2.7*:

...perhaps this group have been out to a milonga and afterwards, with some leftover wine and a bandoneon, continued to dance, or to practice in the street. These five younger men (including, possibly, a sixth behind the camera) might be with their six, more senior, male, tango mentors. Perhaps they are known to them from one of the all-male prácticas referred to in the literature... Once a camera is produced, a half-hearted attempt is made by four of them to pose 'correctly' in couples by way of a record of this bibulous, light-hearted, late night instruction.

We can speculate, but we cannot know. With an historical gender imbalance in Argentina in the early 20th century of seven men to one woman, it seems plausible, but is it the whole truth or just a convenient one?

Jeffrey Tobin in "Tango and the Scandal of Homosocial Desire" (1998) cites a piece of show tango in the 1987 film, *Tango Bar* reminiscent of

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many such scenes in tango shows: to illustrate 'tango history', two men dance with each other but signal that the figures they represent practiced in their pursuit of women by hamming up their unease at dancing with each other, conspiratorially reassuring audiences of their own and their historical antecedents' heterosexuality.

Reason Two: Dancing tango is fun

In lives which were tough and poor, dancing tango with each other could be cheap enjoyment, provided someone had a guitar, violin, flute or later, a bandoneon. Soldiers often enjoyed it where women were not available. This example in *Fig 2.2* is typical: "Circa 1890 – 1905, Montevideo. Reservists or soldiers dancing tango on one side of the Fortress of the Cerro de Montevideo"; or here in 1932 in *Fig 2.9* the newly-conscripted, not yet famous racing driver, Juan Fangio, posing with fellow conscripts. I suggest male, same-sex tango

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Fig 2.9. Juan Fangio, dancing tango while on military service in Argentina, 1932.



Fig 2.10. Scènes de la vie à bord, late 19th, early 20th cent?

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dancing should be set into the wider context of men couple dancing other dances across Europe and – once they emigrated – in the Americas. Once again, in *Fig 2.10* the military are to the fore: “Scènes de la vie à bord, late 19th, early 20th cent?” is typical.

Like many others, this image figures on a post card. If it were thought offensive, it would not be a commercial proposition.



Fig 2.11. Still from silent film of sailors dancing with each other, Rio de Janiero, 1922.

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A rare Pathé newsreel film of naval shows same-sex couple dancing from 1922.⁵ I have nothing so early of tango being danced but I argue for seeing parallels. To us, this imagery is immediately arresting: same sex, uniformed Royal Naval officers and rankings calmly forming a majority of dancing couples in a throng which includes a handful of couples more conventionally constituted. None of the men following are pretending to be women. Beyond a few expressive gestures associated with the dances performed (early Foxtrot...with Castle Walk thrown in and the Duck Waddle according to Sasza Zargowski⁶) none of them is camping it up. The men are men. It is all remarkably genteel, a gentility only slightly undermined by their dancing underneath the warship's monstrous gun barrels. That aside, it is the sheer 'normality' which tests our credulity. Its equivalent today would be unthinkable except as some exercise in 'LGBT inclusiveness'.

5 *The Queer Tango Image Archive*, "Silent Film of Sailors Dancing with each Other, Rio de Janeiro, 1922", <http://image.queertangobook.org/silent-film-of-sailors-dancing-with-each-other-c1917/>

⁶ Facebook correspondence with the author.

Reason Three: Social cohesion

These are not just couples – although the modern pre-occupation seems to be with couples and what their relationships might be. No, these are groups of men. As Mike Gonzales and Marianella Yanes assert, the lives of these largely male, poor working populations were tough AND they were incredibly diverse: as well as the migrants from Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland and Russia, there were the men driven off the land as the pampas were enclosed; there were those left behind after the famous “War of The Triple Alliance” against Paraguay; and the former African slaves from Brazil. Diversity could work against cohesion. They write:

The immigrants met, or clashed in the unlit streets close to the river. They shared neither a language nor a history at first, yet eventually in these crowded alleys they, their cultures, their languages and their rhythms would merge as they learned to dance – and survive – together. (Gonzales and Yanes 2013: 23)

In fact, the men in these photographs are NOT dancing. They are posing as if dancing. [see *Figs. 2.3, 2.4, 2.7, 2.8, and 2.9*] And they smile,

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suggesting they are posing with some pride, happy to be photographed with their fellows in tango poses to record of a picnic by the river because as rail workers, they were on strike, or as a celebration as traders of the closure of their market, or on some football team outing. Again, the sheer normality, the good humour without camp now seems abnormal.

Reason Four: Gay men dancing together

Homosocial or homosexual?

Jorge Luis Borges is not the only authority to describe the extravagant dress of the *compardritos* of the 1890s – large floppy hat, tightly laced trousers, high heeled black boots, big neck scarf, a pink or garnet shirt, fingers covered in rings (*Fig. 2.12* from Borges 1929 quoted by Zalko 2004, 29-30) – which may have been no more or less significant than the dandyism of teddy boys or pearly kings, but meticulous scholarship based on medical and criminological records by Jorge Salessi (1997) and Magali Saikin (2004) proves that, in its earliest years, lesbians and homosexual men danced tango together for their own pleasure. Among those on the margins of society, the poor, criminals, pimps and prostitutes, they were more

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or less free to dance with whomsoever they chose, having little social status to lose. (Saikin 2004: 110)

With regard to men, do the photographs back this up? Who knows?

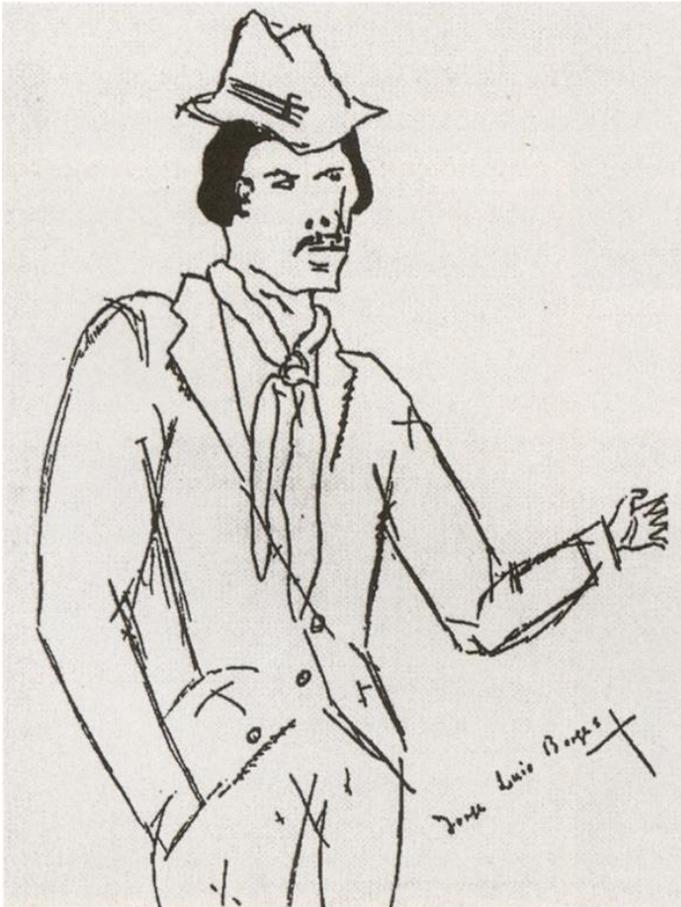


Fig 2.12. Jorge Luis Borges 1928 sketch from memory of a Compadrito.

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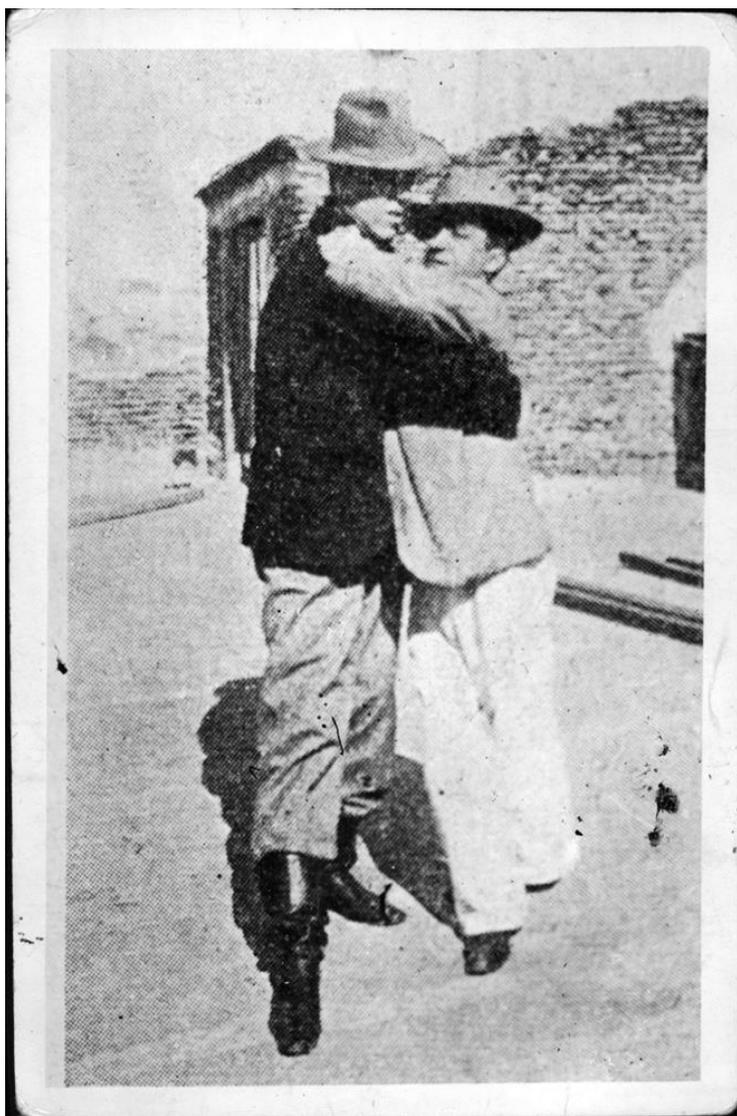


Fig 2.13. Arturo de Navas dancing with another man, Buenos Aires, 1903.

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This imagery (*Fig. 2.13*) from the magazine *Caras y Caretas* [*Faces and Masks*] from 7th February 1903 was the first imagery of tango ever published and it shows the singer, composer, actor and dancer, Arturo de Navas dancing with another man. He never married. He was a friend of Carlos Gardel, who never married – but this is idle gossip without concrete evidence one way or another. This much is relatively certain however: the elite in Argentina switched from viewing this rough dance as a threat to the growth of a modern, European-style state once their wealthy sons, had taken tango from the bars and brothels of Buenos Aires and made it fashionable in Europe, especially in Paris. Tango as an emblem of national identity was made less rough as it entered the salons, and one way or another, it needed a respectable past.⁷ Lesbians, of course, became invisible. Men still danced with each other, yet bizarrely, on 2nd 1916, while the slaughter on the battlefields of Europe was at its height, the Mayor of Buenos Aires passed an edict forbidding them from doing so. (Zalko 2004: 87) Yet as these images show, the practice persisted over the first half of the 20th century and beyond,

7 Incidentally, this neat, plausible account is itself challenged as myth by Ricardo García Blaya (2008). See pp. 66-68, this volume.

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even though, over time, the erotic historical dimensions of 'men-dancing-with-men' was obliterated leaving the benign, demographically necessitated myth of "they were only practicing" by way of explanation. Besides I want to suggest that, from a contemporary, *queer* tango perspective, this twentieth-century framing of the question might benefit from a 21st century queer make-over. With *The Queer Tango Image Archive* in mind as a resting place for these images, I am also reminded of Walter Benjamin's framing in the *Arcades Project*, his unfinished masterpiece, of images as "dialectics at a standstill" or "dialectical images", which, according to Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Benjamin's translators, is his key term for, as in this case, historical objects waiting for collectors to take them up...

...into the collector's own particular time and place, thereby throwing a pointed light on what has been. Welcomed into a present which has the character of a lightning flash. (Benjamin 2002, xii) moment that seems to be waiting just for it – "actualized," as Benjamin likes to say – the moment from the past comes alive as never before...The historical object is reborn as such into a present day capable of receiving it, of

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suddenly "recognizing" it. This is the famous "now of recognizability" (*Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*), (Benjamin 2002)

Reasons Five and Six: Intimacy without, and intimacy with the erotic

In these closing passages, I do no more than run several flags up several flagpoles. Queer theory celebrates, exploits and joyously dismantles gender as socially and culturally constructed. Doing so may not have just issued us today with licenses to re-construct it, it may also inadvertently have provided us with tool the better to understand sexuality in the past.

I suggest nagging contemporary unease at this imagery only makes sense when viewed as a descendant of the homosexual moral panic which overtook the west after the Second World War. Arguably, that was the turning point at which 'innocent' same sex dancing became difficult, if not impossible to believe in. Yet, if we can overcome this perpetual, vulgar sexualization of practically every human relationship, we may make space for two further reasons for these men to dance: firstly, access to deep physical intimacy. Ernesto Sábato asserted as much in 1963 when he wrote:

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It was not [sex] that the lonely man of Buenos Aires worried about...it was precisely the contrary: nostalgia for love and communion, the longing for a woman, and not the presence of an instrument of his lust. (Sábato 1963 in Savigliano 1995)

Far from home, from family, loved ones – and yes, from women – these men may have craved as almost all human beings do, to be held, to embrace and to be embraced and in its widest sense, physically to be loved. Within this ‘safe’ framework of tango, perhaps this was possible, and the homosocial desire in the early 20th century had not yet fully morphed into the “Scandal” which so terrified Tobin’s later respondents. (Tobin 1998)

Scandal? So, what if this dancing was not always scrupulously free from the erotic, what then? Queer theory promises an escape from over neat, constraining binary categorizations of our sexualities and the consequences which must relentlessly flow from them, substituting instead a looser model altogether more fluid. Might that have corresponded more closely to the historical, lived experiences of the men we are looking at? To this day, social tango encounters can deliver agreeable, limited erotic charges WITHOUT

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consequences for lives lived off the dance floor (Batchelor 2016). In the 21st century, you do not have to be gay to be queer. Accordingly, contemporary queer tango need not require these historical men to be 'gay'. Perhaps only now can we free them of this unlooked-for obligation to us, their apparent successors. Paradoxically, perhaps the ambiguity of the imagery seems, if anything, more closely attuned to a contemporary 'queer' sensibility.

I say, "perhaps" because we will probably never know.

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3. Queer Tango – Bent History? The Late-Modern Uses and Abuses of Historical Imagery Showing Men Dancing Tango with Each Other

Ray Batchelor and Jon Mulholland

Delivered at the PoP MOVES conference, *Muse of Modernity: Remembering, Mediating and Modernising Popular Dance*, London, 2016. This version prepared for *Dancing with Memory*, an anthology of papers from that event which is [2020] in press, here augmented with additional imagery.

Abstract: Ascend the winding stair to *LugarGay*, an LGBT Community Centre in Buenos Aires and queer tango venue, and you pass a reproduction of an old photograph of men, wearing aprons, in a market, posing in tango couples (*Fig 3.4*).

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Elsewhere in Buenos Aires, a cropped version in a glass case at the *National Museum of Dance & Hall of Fame* is labelled ‘Baile popular en el Abasto (c. 1910)’. Yet another photograph of men in a street, some standing, some posing in couples, with a seated bandoneon player is a still more well-known example of this genre: historical images of men not dancing but posing with each other as tango couples. Marked, especially since the ‘Tango Renaissance’¹, as documenting important dimensions of tango’s *de facto* history, their meanings remain contested. Drawing on a methodology of visual ethnography, this paper examines how historical photographic and non-photographic representations of male, same-sex tango dancing are deployed in contemporary, late-modern contexts. Specifically, it will examine the manner in which these are used in both ‘mainstream’ and ‘queer’ tango-related web and publicity contexts variably to confirm or contest an ‘official history of tango’. We will show that in the hands of a social media-driven international queer tango community, such historical representations of men dancing tango form an emergent queer

1 The ‘Tango Renaissance’ refers to the period of intense renewed interest in tango immediately following the fall in 1983 of the military dictatorship in Argentina, in part, a function of the need to reconstruct Argentinian identity.

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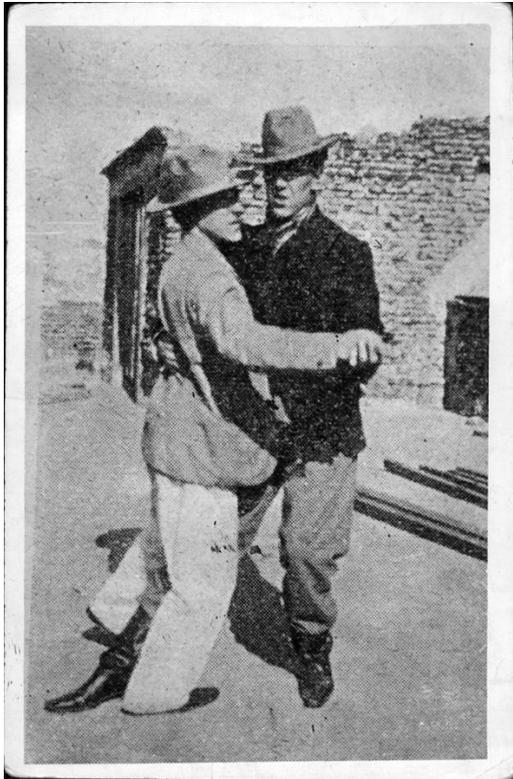
iconography that seeks to reclaim and re-visualise emplaced cultural memories marginalised, in the name of an ascendant queer contemporary.

Tango and ‘men dancing with men’: a contested history

“Tango started with men dancing with each other”. Tango dancers routinely say this, or things like it, to social queer tango dancers like Jon Mulholland and me, reassuring us that our dancing with each other, or with other men has an historical precedent. It is kindly meant. They are only repeating a ‘truth’ they may themselves have heard repeated on or near a dance floor and had confirmed by the historical imagery which digital media ensures is endlessly reproduced today – imagery which shows, or appears to show, men doing just that. Why were they dancing with one another? Were they all miraculously (and improbably) gay? Jeffrey Tobin describes a ‘tango history’

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Fig 3.1. One of a set of five photographs in tango poses reproduced in 1903 in Buenos Aires popular magazine *Caras y Caretas* (Faces and Masks).



choreography in the 1987 film, *Tango Bar*, where men dance with each other – but they stress that they are showing how men in the past *practised*, the better to secure the dance (and other) favours of women. They ham it up, conspiratorially asserting their heterosexual credentials. In the 1990s in Buenos Aires, older, male dancers told Christine Denniston how, when younger, they *practised* with other men for up to three years (Denniston 2007).

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Doubtless, they had their reasons for giving their accounts of their same sex dancing nuanced in this way. With an historical gender imbalance in Argentina in the early 20th century of some seven men to one woman (Archetti 2007), almost everyone acknowledges that men did, indeed, dance with men. But were they *all* just ‘practising’? Always? The nuance starts to seem suspiciously convenient. Suddenly, no one is gay – which is implausible. And no one dances for reasons which have little or nothing to do with sex, and so are less easily accounted for. The nuance in these stories of same sex dancing is a product of the machinery of cultural memory, where historical veracity, completeness and complexity are freely sacrificed to the urgent and evolving demands of contemporary expediency. Much of significance is omitted. In tango, a parallel can be found in the work of Robert Farris Thompson (2006). His forensic, poetic study reinstates tango’s West African origins and the substantial black historical content which, conveniently, had been obliterated by the white dancers who came after them and who were striving for ownership of the dance and for respectability. And so it is with tango’s historical relationships with gender and sexuality. Jorge Salessi (1997) and Magali Saikin (2004) offer

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r alternative, or earlier, or additional accounts of 'men dancing with men'. Tango developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at a time of emergent Modernity and in its 'savage' form, was initially viewed by some of the elite in Argentina as a threat to the growth of a modern, European-style state. In Argentina as elsewhere, both sexuality and crime became territories for 'objective' scientific investigation. They were documented, described and analysed, signalling the formation, indeed, of Foucault's 'disciplinary society', where the human subject becomes the object of new, scientifically-underpinned, technologies of knowledge, and regimes of power (Foucault 1990). Using precisely such records, Salessi and Saikin argue that there is evidence that for as long as tango was chiefly danced – by those on the margins of society – the poor, criminals, pimps and prostitutes – it was routinely and openly danced by homosexual men and lesbians, free to dance with whomsoever they chose, having little social status to lose. Yet when wealthy young Argentinian men who had encountered tango in the bars and brothels of Buenos Aires took it to Europe, not least, in pre-First World War Paris, they were something of a hit with fashionable women. Accordingly, in Buenos Aires in the late 'teens and early twenties, tango migrated from the

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conventillos and brothels to the salons, no longer a threat to the nation, becoming instead an emblem of national identity.

So, “Tango started in the brothels”, but possibly not. This endlessly repeated, neat, attractive, colourful explanation may itself be a product of the imperfect, somewhat coarse processes of cultural memory. Ricardo García Blaya, the distinguished tango musicologist and discographer (Blaya 2014) suggests that the source of this mythology of origination was the pioneering tango scholarship of Luis Bates and Héctor Bates in *La historia del tango*, published in 1936. Blaya takes issue and proposes specific reservations: critically, tango was not the preserve of brothels. It coexisted with other dances and was danced at dance halls, at *academias* in the suburbs, far from the city centre, as well as being performed on stage in musical episodes in dramas in respectable theatres. He disputes the economic practicalities of musicians being paid to play in brothels. Buenos Aires rents were high, making such, at best, tangentially productive expenditure unlikely. Confusion may have arisen, he argues, where some dance halls or *academias* had low reputations and may also have facilitated sexual encounters. That is quite a different scenario. It is

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wrong, too, he asserts, to point to the lascivious lyrics of tangos as evidence of their brothel origins. Lascivious lyrics featured in other types of popular dance music of the time with much cross fertilisation between genres, yet no one suggests this is evidence that *polkas* or *corridos* originated or were chiefly to be found in brothels. Further, there is evidence that tangos were ‘respectable’ long before the Parisian episodes, featuring for example alongside other modern dances at balls from 1902 onwards at the Teatro Opera, a venue from which the poor would have been excluded. Finally, of the more than a thousand gramophone recordings made in Buenos Aires between 1903 and 1910, 350 were tangos, and in the decade following when production increased fivefold, nearly half were tangos, to which must be added there was a brisk trade in tango sheet music throughout the period. The poor could not afford gramophones, gramophone records or sheet music. Sales in this early period indicate a taste for tangos among the respectable bourgeoisie.

Interestingly, Blaya acknowledges that tangos were danced in the street – to street organs – and that men often danced with each other. With characteristic reserve, he stops short of attributing motivations for this practice beyond the

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indisputable lack of women. Others have been less fastidious. One way or another, eventually, polite tango dancers needed a respectable past and in the process, inaccurate or incomplete cultural memory was constructed and proved serviceable. As Salessi and Saikin remind us, lesbians became invisible as a consequence, and 'men dancing with men' was re-configured as a benign, demographically-necessitated heterosexual logic of gender imbalance, exclusively of *practice*, with tango's inconvenient dangerous, overtly erotic content ruthlessly eradicated.

Against such official narratives, queer tango historiography challenges mainstream memorialisations of tango's origin, as part of a broader reclamation of a subjugated past. Histories, and the memories they (re)claim are by their nature emplaced. According to Truc (2011), whilst "our memory might be pure invention after the fact, if it can be precisely located and commemorated in a place, the place itself is real. When people regard their memories as real, their consequences, and particularly their spatial consequences, are also real" (Truc 2011, 148). The 'rivalry' between social groups that characterises collective memory as an institutional phenomenon is a struggle to localise those memories in

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particular places, through a symbolic marking of those places (Truc 2011) as a point of origin for tango. There is no memory that is not in principle transient and contestable, and that is not dependent, in its anchoring and resilience, upon a group for whom that memorialisation is real and important (Truc 2011, 153). In this way, queer tango historiography challenges the heteronormative claims of mainstream tango's official history, which insists on tango's genesis as emplaced in spaces already definitively marked as heterosexual. Queer tango historiography illuminates the heteronormative 'will' that energises such accounts, and the heterosexist power that emanates from such knowledge production (Foucault 1990).



Fig 3.2. Either: men dancing (or posing as if dancing) tango in a river, 1904; or striking railway workers doing the same in 1912.

Representations of men dancing tango with other men

Meanwhile, whatever was being said or written, or believed, the dance was danced, and it was graphically documented: photographs, postcards, drawings on sheet music and so on. As noted, a persistent quotient apparently shows ‘men dancing with men’: in 1903, the first known photos of *tango criollo* were published in the popular Buenos Aires magazine, *Caras y Caretas*, and probably showed Arturo de Navas dancing with another man (Freis 2017) (*Fig. 3.1*); in 1912, striking railway workers are photographed with rolled up trousers paddling in the river Plate, posing for the camera as tango couples (*Fig. 3.2*)²;

2 1904 and not striking railways workers; or striking railway workers in 1912? The *Archivo General de la Nación* hold this image in their archive. In 2013 they posted it on their Facebook Page: “Buenos Aires. Hombres bailando tango en el rio. 1904. Documento fotografico Inventario 22069”.

[https://www.facebook.com/ArchivoGeneraldeLaNacionArgentina/photos/buenos-aires-hombres-bailando-](https://www.facebook.com/ArchivoGeneraldeLaNacionArgentina/photos/buenos-aires-hombres-bailando-tango/651030491588837/)

[tango/651030491588837/](https://www.facebook.com/ArchivoGeneraldeLaNacionArgentina/photos/buenos-aires-hombres-bailando-tango/651030491588837/) accessed 10 January 2019. However, a French source claims that in fact this shows “[translated from French] the photo was taken in January 1912, and the inscription on the back specifies the circumstances: a “Picnic” on the Rio during a strike of workers of Railway Industries (Archivo General de la Nacion, Argentina)” [http://www.histoire-](http://www.histoire-tango.fr/grands%20themes/hommes%20et%20tango_copie.htm)

[tango.fr/grands%20themes/hommes%20et%20tango_copie.htm](http://www.histoire-tango.fr/grands%20themes/hommes%20et%20tango_copie.htm) accessed 10 January 2019. Visitors to the *Archivo* access images digitally. In each case, there is an image of the front of the photograph or drawing and an image of the reverse. For this reason, I am inclined

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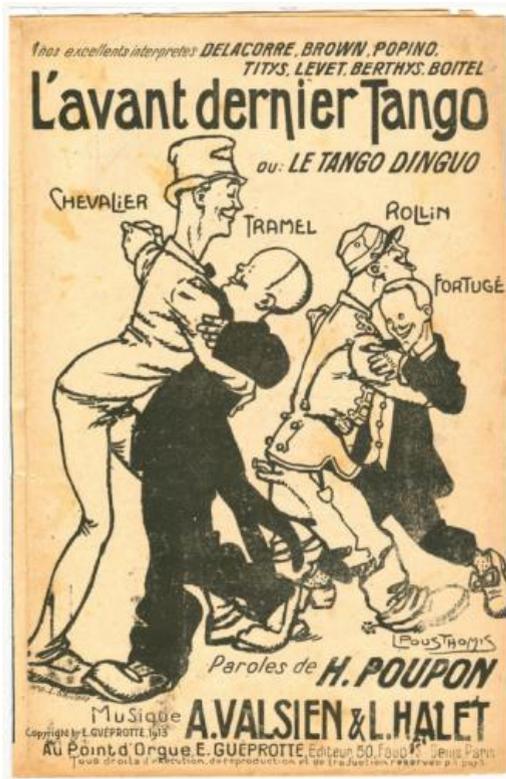


Fig 3.3. Sheet Music for L'avant dernier tango ou: le tango dinguo (The Penultimate Tango or: the Dingo Tango) Paris, 1913.

in Paris in 1913, in a comical drawing on sheet music, the young Maurice Chevalier is leading a diminutive Félicien Tramel, while Rollin (Polin?

to believe the 1912 date, as the author has either literally or digitally 'seen' the back of the photograph. A visit to the Archivo in person in 2018 failed to resolve this issue. An historically archaic system of cataloguing based, not on unique inventory numbers, but on subject areas, with all other information held on index cards only, meant the photograph could not be tracked down either digitally or in physical form.

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– the stage persona of Pierre-Paul Marsalès always included a hat and sometimes boots) is leading Fortugé – the stage name of Gabriel Fortuné, Paris 1913 (*Fig 3.3*); in another photo, probably taken in about 1909, three male couples stare at the camera in tango poses with their colleagues on the occasion of the demolition of Lorea Market (*Fig 3.4*, habitually mis-identified as traders from Abasto Market)³; while in yet another, undated photograph, men in the street, apparently late at night, casually dance, practise or pose (*Fig 3.5*).

The purpose of this paper is not to explain how each of these or similar images came to be, nor to use them to help us understand better what ‘men dancing with men’ might have meant at any one time and place in the distant past. A further paper

3 Once again, for many years, in the generation of cultural memory, plausibility supplanted veracity. In 2011, at the *Academia Nacional del Tango* in Buenos Aires, a label in front of this image read: ‘Baile popular en el Abasto (c1910)’. They look like market traders. Abasto is Buenos Aires’ most famous market, therefore...

and so on. This is the information which routinely accompanies this image online. It is wrong. As recent research proves, these traders are being photographed by a photographer or photographers from the popular Buenos Aires magazine, *Caras y Caretas*, recording a dance held to commemorate the closure and demolition of the Lorea Market prior to the construction of the Plaza del Congreso which was completed in 1910.

<http://image.queertangobook.org/market-traders-in-tango-poses-at-the-market-at-abasto-buenos-aires-1910/> Accessed 5 January 2020.

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Fig 3.4. Market traders in tango poses at Lorea Market on the occasion of its demolition, c1909.



Fig 3.5. Men at night in a street in Buenos Aires in tango poses.

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was needed to begin that process (Batchelor 2016). Instead, acknowledging the fact of their creation, their subsequent digitisation, free circulation and reproduction, allied to the confusion surrounding their precise historical significance, we consider how these images are used in the 21st century, and ask: to what ends?

Queer tango: historical and theoretical contexts

Following a catalogue of significant, generally European and North American precedents in the late twentieth century, queer tango arguably first emerged as a dance practice with theoretical underpinnings in Hamburg in 2000 and has spread to countless other modern, urban contexts (Batchelor and Havmøller 2017). At that time, it appeared to some to have no history at all, beyond a nod towards pre-existent queer theory, or as the latest expression of “gay liberation” (just as it was morphing into something else) which was characterised by the establishment of alternative spaces, apart from the hostile, “hetero-normative” world. Certainly, the trans-local ‘diffusion’ (Knopp and Brown 2003) of queer tango danced to the tune of multiple dynamics. To the extent that queer tango was informed by queer theory, it sought to challenge the hetero- and homo-normativity of mainstream and lesbian and gay

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tango respectively, but did so in a direct relation to those pre-existing forms, and the practices and spaces associated with them. The globalised nature of mainstream, and to a much lesser extent, gay and lesbian tango (both in terms of locally emplaced and international 'festivalised' forms (Mulholland 2018) provided a pre-existing trans-local geography and practice upon which a queering could take place. But the trans-local diffusion of queer tango owes much also to a virtual realm in which queer virtual geographies and practices have been elaborated, again in complex but profoundly connected relationships to mainstream, and lesbian and gay, tango forms. Queer tango in its virtual forms reflects and facilitates much of the fluidity associated with queer geography (Browne 2006) and offers a transcending capacity for queer tango communities to form in the absence of locally-available, 'off-line', options.

Queer spaces are distinctive. As Brown, Lim and Brown asserted in 2007:

Radical queer spaces are important because they provide a constructive and practical attempt to offer a non-hierarchical, participatory alternative to a gay scene that

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has become saturated by the commodity. They are experimental spaces in which new forms of ethical relationships and encounters based on co-operation, respect and dignity can be developed. The queerness of these spaces is constituted as much through the process of building relationships on this basis, as it is from any attachment to specific sexual or gender identities (Brown, Lim and Brown 2007).

Inherently post-structural, queer politics intervenes from the margins and grassroots, re-defining and expanding the political, constructing shared meanings linking past, present and future and giving voice to subjugated lives. Juliet McMains argues that the queerness of queer tango spaces depends on who controls them.

Queer tango is enabled through the designation and naming of a queer space that creates possibilities for alternate interactions, relationships, and experiences to come into being, even if only temporarily, for the duration of a single milonga, festival, or class. (McMains 2018)

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Some locally-emplaced queer tango clubs prosper, while others struggle. International queer tango festivals have multiplied, with some closely resembling their mainstream touristic tango, neo-liberal equivalents (Mulholland 2018). As Melissa Fitch demonstrates in *Global Tangos*, Buenos Aires joins other instances of queer tango activism in the past twenty years becoming queer tango tourism. (Fitch 2015: 103-105). As McMains, Mulholland and Fitch show, queer tango has developed into an entity which at its core remains political and potentially provocative, yet is now less easily distinguished from its more conventional equivalents. In part, it is this tension which creates a need for specifically, recognisably, queer tango historical imagery to set the politics into context, but also to give credibility and legitimacy to queer tango as cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense and as an intellectual commodity.

Online image searching: dodges and dangers

Kjølsrød suggests that:

Leisure communities tend to extend themselves in time and space by establishing carefully edited and attractive websites...[and in so doing facilitate]...interactions between offline and

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online realms and across territorial borders...[creating]...linkages that enable the diffusion of ideas. (Kjølsrød 2013)

In 2016, we mounted online searches of four images (*Figs 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5,*) to establish how and why they are being used. Online image searching has never been easier, nor more treacherous. As has been the case for years, images can be found using computer search engines by dropping keywords relating to them into the search box. More recently, it has become possible to drop images themselves into the search box, such that the search becomes, or can become a more formal one, independent of, or at least less dependent on the words in the search engine's default language. In both cases, once found, the web page provides the image's context. It may have little or no information about the image, or inaccurate information, or 'information' with no indication of sources. Yet, all searches are revealing in terms of what the presence of this image in that context can tell us.

Images in contexts and the generation of meanings

In 2016, we found these four images (Figs 3.2-3.5.) in five types of context:

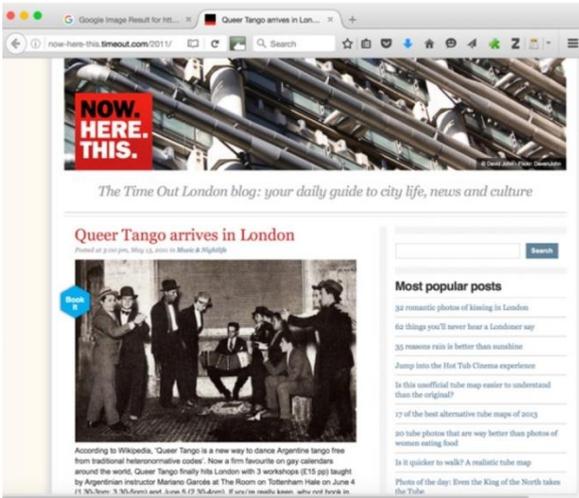


Fig 3.6. A story on the website of Time Out, a London listings publication.

Type 1. Mainstream websites with content about tango or queer tango

This story in the London listings magazine, *Time Out* (Fig. 3.6), was about queer tango dancer Nick Stone inviting Argentinian dancer, teacher and activist, Mariano Garcés to London in 2011. Stone told Ray Batchelor that Garcés probably chose the image used (Fig 3.5), suggesting its currency as a contemporary icon of queer tango and providing an implicit historical vindication. In 2016, the English-language Wikipedia entry for tango – not

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queer tango – included the same image, bizarrely cropped, saying nothing about what it showed, or meant, and a caption which dated it at “ca. 1900” – which was improbably early. The image marks an awareness of a tango past, but a past not easily accounted for or negotiated. The tango entry has been re-edited with the image omitted (2020). The *Wikipedia* entry for “queer tango” includes historical imagery of female couples of the kind generated for mild, heterosexual titillation, but no images of men at all – a bias which may reflect the fact that there are more women queer tango activists than men.

Despite their associations with queer tango, these historical images of men dancing together do not invariably support liberal ideas. The street image (Fig 3.5) and the placid, 1912 ‘paddling’ image (Fig 3.2) crop up in the Russian online magazine, *Kulturologia*, (Fig 3.7), next to links such as that for “Singles Dating” showing attractive young women. Homophobia in contemporary Russia is commonplace. The images are mediated by the accompanying text to support the view that historically, not only did men dance tango with each other *in brothels* in order to seduce women, but also that:

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Sometimes male dancers turned tango performance into a real contest for the favor of a beautiful lady, and, unfortunately, there are cases when these dance duels ended tragically: a knife strike could cut off the sound of music. (*Kulturologia* 2016)



Танго в исполнении мужских пар



Мужчины танцуют

Однако танго - это не всегда загадочное переплетение мужского и женского. Случаи, когда в пару вставали двое мужчин, были нередки на заре рождения танго. Часто кавалеры, ожидая свою очередь в домах свиданий, тренировались в разучивании движений, а уже после, уверенные в своем мастерстве, решались исполнить танец с обольстительной партнершей. Иногда мужчины-танцоры превращали исполнение танго в настоящее состязание за благосклонность прекрасной дамы, и, к сожалению, известны случаи, когда эти танцевальные дуэли заканчивались трагически: удар ножа мог оборвать звучание музыки.

Fig. 3.7. Historical same sex couples shown as signifiers of “authentic” mainstream tango history, Russia, 2016.

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What could be more heterosexual? What is interesting here is not what the sexuality of the men shown actually was – we are unlikely ever to know for certain – but that in today’s Russia, their being gay is explicitly ruled out. The reader is left in no doubt that the men in these historical images are heterosexual, not gay and by implication, cannot be pointed to, as justifying contemporary homosexual behaviour.

Type 2. Mainstream, user-generated web pages such as Pinterest

Usually, the images are pretty much shorn of any contextual information and take the form of visual elements in a mood board for the Pinterest curator’s chosen theme. One such used the image shown in *Fig 3.2*⁴ to support an article arguing that tango was almost killed off by the toppling of Juan Perón in 1955 – an odd, asynchronous use. There are countless other, odd image deployments. Plainly, there is work to be done here about the effects of such usage.

4 <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/rock-n-roll-and-military-dictatorships-almost-destroyed-argentine-tango>

Type 3. Mainstream tango websites

As with Type 1, once again the imagery is usually not much analysed or commented on but contributes to a silent system of signs of tango ‘authenticity’ – a function found offline, too, where the photo of posing market traders is displayed in a glass case in the *National Museum of Dance & Hall of Fame* in Buenos Aires. Online, this Australian tango school website uses the ubiquitous ‘street’ image (*Fig. 3.5*) where other pages of the website in a similar style feature: the folds of a bandoneon’s bellows and a night-time shot of the Obelisco in Buenos Aires. In the marginally more scholarly website, *Todo Tango*, Ricardo García Blaya’s article “Reflections about the origins of tango” cited earlier, uses the same image once again, more for mood as a signifier of ‘authentic history’, rather than as evidence of anything (Blaya n. d.). Indeed, this is without doubt the most frequently reproduced historical picture of men as tango couples. Where the image of men posing in a river (*Fig 5.2*) is commented on, as in another Australian dance school website, *So Tango*, “Men tangoing with men – why?”, it is used as a kind of ‘evidence’ to support gender-based innovations in contemporary practice – in this case, the benefits of men learning to follow or in 2016 on the UK Tango Hub website, “Same-sex

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tango for straight people”, paradoxically, to advocate women dancing with women (This site has now vanished. 2020).

Type 4. Queer/LGBT websites

Qualia Folk's website uses the ‘street image’ – as a banner for the whole group whose avowed objectives are “...twofold: education and celebration [it] provides *the Qualia Encyclopedia of Gay People (QEGP)*, open access to all and free of charge.” Its entry on “Tango” is illustrated by a chiaroscuro image of queer tango activist, Augusto Balizano, dancing with another man. It says tango is....

...an erotically charged, late nineteenth century ballroom dance that was performed by men with men in Buenos Aires and Uruguay in houses of prostitution and on the streets...With its origins as an erotic male-on-male folk dance, tango can be considered an LGBTQ folkway with rural gaucho and urban African Argentine roots. (*Qualia Folk* 2016, defunct 2020)

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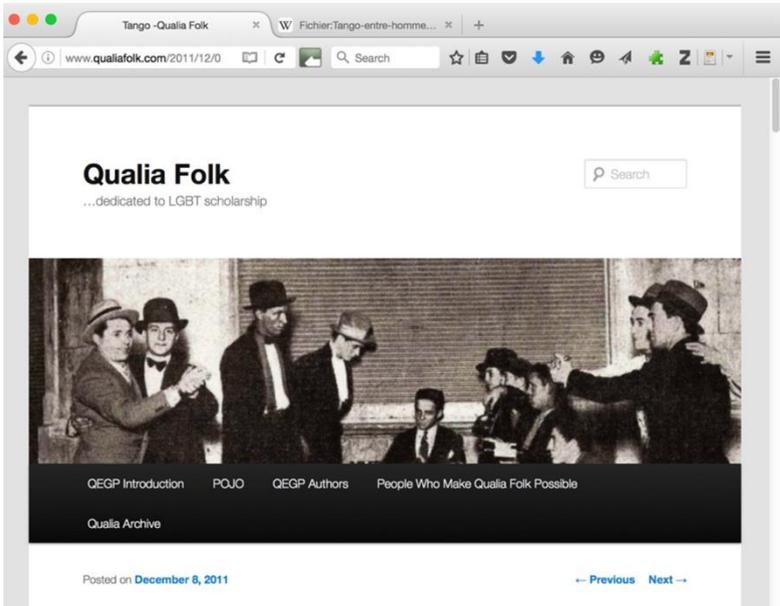


Fig 3.8. Using same sex imagery to “construct” queer history, 2016.

Setting aside the veracity or not of any of these assertions, we note that the imagery is used to raise queer sensibilities among queer people and the wider world alike.

Type 5. Queer tango online presences

As we draw towards our conclusions, we offer just three examples of queer tango presences online: the simplest use is on the Facebook Group of the Hamburg-based community, *Queer Tango - Jungs tanzen mit Jungs* (Queer Tango – Boys dancing with Boys) who have the 1912 paddlers as a

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banner (Fig 3.9). It is at one with their deliberate, gentle, gender bias. The second is on the website

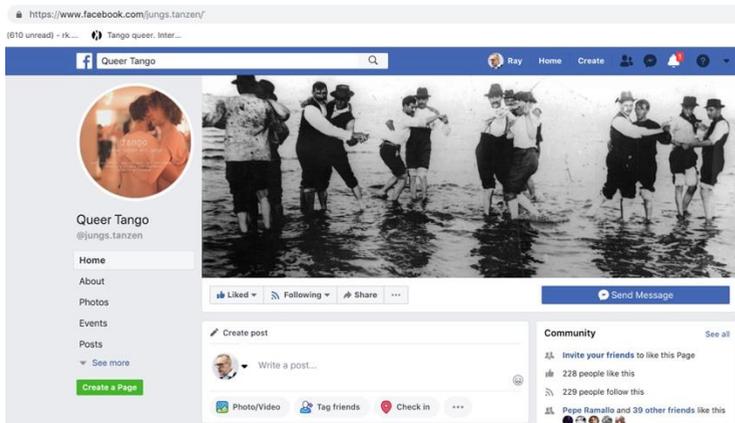


Fig 3.9. Thematic consonance: historical imagery on the Facebook page of the group Queer Tango - Jungs tanzen mit Jungs (Queer Tango – Boys dancing with Boys), 2016.



Fig. 3.10. Tango's "Golden Age" signified by same sex dancers, Paris 2016.

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of the Parisian *La Vie en Rose 3* international queer tango event (Fig 3.10). The theme of the festival in 2016 was the relationship of queer tango to the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of tango, conventionally 1935-1955. The image of ten smartly-dressed young men posing in five couples (which, as Birthe Havmøller pointed out, with another behind the camera would be enough for a football team) is used here, with no overt discussion of its significance, but as implicit validation. In both cases, the imagery is being used loosely to reinforce queer tango’s sense of its identity and of its place in an historical perspective. There is a debate to be had about the legitimacy of this use



Fig. 3.11. Imagery on The Queer Tango Image Archive reclaiming and validating the very concept of “Queer Tango History”.

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– a debate deliberately fostered by our third and final example: *The Queer Tango Image Archive* Founded in March 2015 following discussions in Montevideo between Ray Batchelor and Gonzalo Collazo, it went public in March 2016. *The Queer Tango Image Archive*, which is run under the auspices of *The Queer Tango Project*, offers an online digital archive of historical, pre-digital imagery. It includes ‘men dancing with men’, but its remit embraces all historical imagery touching on the themes and issues connected with queer tango, including women dancing with women, women leading, men following and indeed any imagery which can stimulate and develop the debates surrounding the phenomenon of queer tango.

Queer tango is but one case of the queer reclamation, and reconfiguration, of subjugated knowledges and histories for the pursuit of queer political ends. Such a strategy places the ‘virtual’ archive centrally. Judith Halberstam asserted in 2003:

In [queer] subcultures where academics might labor side by side with artists [to which we might add, “or dancers”], the ‘historic bloc’ can easily describe an alliance

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between the minority academic and minority subcultural producer. Where such alliances exist, academics can play a big role in the construction of queer archives and queer memory, and, furthermore, queer academics can, and some should, participate in the ongoing project of recoding and interpreting queer culture and circulating a sense of its multiplicity and sophistication. The more intellectual records we have of queer culture, the more we contribute to the project of claiming for the subculture the radical cultural work that either gets absorbed into or claimed by mainstream media. (Halberstam 2003: 318)

As we have seen, the emergence of the virtual realm has re-augmented a public sphere in which competing and contesting representations challenge hegemonic norms and meanings. In this final example, not only is this imagery examined to see what, if anything, may be learnt historically from it, but it is also overtly used to re-inforce and legitimise queer tango's sense of its identity and of its place in an historical perspective. It does so in a way designed to stimulate informed debate towards such ends.

Concluding remarks

This study offers an understanding of the contemporary uses of a rich and suggestive body of material. At its core is the image. We have identified different contexts, each with its different uses of and effects on the image; we have identified a range of means by which meaning is generated and the roles the image can play, ranging from the tacit and implicit to the overt and explicit, with the image as evidence; finally, the product of these two variables is a third: the wide and occasionally contradictory range of different meanings the image can be used to support. Contemporary users are mostly ignorant of what little scholarship there is regarding each image's origins. The validity or significance of contemporary uses is not necessarily invariably a function of closer adherence to such knowledge. Imperfectly understood historical graphic material can be used to advance legitimate, contemporary social and political agendas. In fact, a queer historiography challenges the very notion of a singular and definitive veracity, cultural memory, or history. We argue that this entire territory shows channels of social and political debate of greater or lesser formality, validity and consequence. Contemporary (re)use of such images, as queer images, works the gaps and

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cracks of heteronormativity, and less certainly, of homonormativity, ‘revealing the ways in which heterosexism is an incomplete, incongruous, nonhegemonic, and spatially diffuse set of social relations and practices full of possibilities for subversion and reconfiguration, rather than how it is a coherent, complete, spatially fixed, and hegemonic one’ (Knopp and Brown 2003: 413). By resisting heteronormativity’s emplacement and circumscribing of tango’s origins in spaces already definitively marked as heterosexual (the conventional “brothels” narrative, etc.), a queer tango historiography can formulate a ‘new’ cultural memory that gives voice to subaltern experiences lost under the weight of, among other things, nationalism’s heteronormative colonisation of the past.

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4. Tango teas, trousers and autonomy: images of women dancing with each other in the early 20th century

Presented at the joint PoP MOVES + Popular Culture Research Unit Conference, *Im/mediate bodies: materiality and mediation in popular culture*, 15th October 2016, at Kingston University, Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey, UK.

Abstract: “Image is dialectics at a standstill” said Walter Benjamin. If early 20th century images of women dancing tango with each other become available to us in a 21st century, digital archive, can they be subject to utopic and, as Benjamin might have wished, generate new meanings, both “destructive” and “utopian”? Historical imagery of this kind has hitherto attracted a conventional, feminist critique: it was generated for the male gaze, with women’s bodies closely entwined in this notoriously erotic dance, all tight-fitting dresses,

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displays of flesh, and knowing smiles. *The Queer Tango Image Archive* exists to set the themes addressed by queer tango into broader historical and critical perspectives. These themes include physical intimacy between women while dancing. As Catherine Russell notes, “For Benjamin, the collector is a kind of allegorist, for whom the commodity is detached from its original purpose or destiny, and reconfigured as the memory of the desire that informed its production.” While some of these archival images belong to the libidinous genre, others show an alternative immediately attractive to contemporary critics: imagery of fashionably, but modestly dressed women dancing tango with each other and, the “desire that informed its production” seems to be to please the female gaze. At the height of ‘Tangomania’ before the First World War, tea gowns, sometimes with ‘harem trousers’, and often designed by women themselves, permitted the freedom of bodily movement the tango required. Tango teas were feminine domains to which men were admitted on sufferance. These images showed and appealed to women who, in new, cosmopolitan public spaces (so beloved by Benjamin) were asserting greater independence of thought, of action, of association and, arguably, greater degrees of autonomy over their bodies. The burgeoning of digital media

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renders such imagery available for fresh scrutiny, a process which has only just begun.

Walter Benjamin

In a paragraph about Baudelaire in Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-werk* or *The Arcades Project*, his masterpiece, unfinished when in 1940 he decided to take too many morphine pills in the Pyrenees, he wrote:

Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute – seller and sold in one. (Benjamin 2002: 10)

As translators, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin observed:

To speak of awakening [the past] was to speak of the "'afterlife of works;' something brought to pass through the medium of the "dialectical image." The latter is Benjamin's

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central term, in The Arcades Project, for the historical object of interpretation: that which, under the divinatory gaze of the collector, is taken up into the collector's own particular time and place, thereby throwing a pointed light on what has been. Welcomed into a present moment that seems to be waiting just for it – “actualized,” as Benjamin likes to say – the moment from the past comes alive as never before. In this way, the “now” is itself experienced as preformed in the “then,” as its distillation – thus the leading motif of “precursors” in the text. The historical object is reborn as such into a present day capable of receiving it, of suddenly “recognizing” it. This is the famous “now of recognizability” (Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit), which has the character of a lightning flash. (Benjamin 2002: xii)

Benjamin was immersed in the French nineteenth century from a cosmopolitan early twentieth. The “dialectical images” embodying “dialectics at a standstill” I invite you to consider are from the early French twentieth century and we gaze at them from a globalised 21st. Can we in our own age use these ephemera of one which has passed

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both to get in touch with *Urgeschichte* or *primal history* and so ignite an “awakening to myth”?

The Queer Tango Image Archive

These images are taken from *The Queer Tango Image Archive*. The Archive was set up jointly with Gonzalo Collazo in March 2016 following discussions I had had with him the year before in Montevideo, Uruguay. We had both informally collected digital files of historical imagery which, largely devoid of scholarship, we nonetheless judged related to our 21st century queer tango dancing. We pooled our collections and have invited others to add to them.¹² Collazo and I are its curators. Our ambitions for the Archive are modest, but sufficiently open-ended to allow for the processes to which Benjamin alludes. In the ‘About us’ section of the Archive website we say:

We do not set out to supply definitive information about each image. Instead, we reproduce unaltered the information and opinions supplied by each image Donor and

12 Also in 2015, the Queer Tango Project emerged out of work on the *Queer Tango Book* which had been founded by Birthe Havmøller in 2013. The Project consists of a website, a blog and lively *Queer Tango Conversation* on Facebook, and *The Queer Tango Image Archive*.

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then encourage Visitors to comment on what they find. We may add comments of our own. In this informal, collaborative way we hope that inaccuracies (which may themselves be interesting) can be identified and a clearer sense of each image's significances emerge. Even so, we are wholly comfortable with the idea that the same image may be open to a variety of interpretations, and for some of these interpretations to be contradictory or mutually exclusive. Our over-arching aim is to stimulate debate and support the development – and the dancing – of Queer Tango!

Collazo is an academic and so am I, but queer tango is not the preserve of academia and nor is this Archive. We have deliberately not framed it in formal, theoretical terms, although we are delighted when those who access the material do just that.¹³

13 At the 2016 *Queer Tango Salon* in Paris earlier this year [2016], where queer tango activists, teachers and academics were brought together to debate and dance queer tango, academics Chiara Iorino, Manuela Ritondale and Mauro Coletto applied art historical techniques to some of the images their paper, "Representation of Performative Identities: images of

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Early 20th century images of women dancing tango with each other: historical context

It is early days. The Archive is less than a year old. The images consist of postcards, photographs, covers of tango sheet music, magazine illustrations, private snapshots and so on. Even with a total of less than 100 images, certain patterns seem to be emerging (although these may be a function of the tastes or working practices of the image donors, of course). As might be expected, most of the images are of same gender couples – 31 of women; 41 of men.

Benjamin asserted that the dialectical image “...is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. ... is the prostitute – seller and sold in one.” Were these images generated to be sold? Of the 41 images of male couples, 13 of them are postcards, graphics or similar and so “commercial”. Of the 31 images of women couples, fully 23 fall into this category. It would be interesting to compare this tango example with a more general audit of historical imagery divided on gender lines. It is these commercial images of women couples from the early 20th century which interest me here.

Queer Tango”. The present paper is the third to emerge from it and a fourth will be given later this year.

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The Tango

Fig 4.1. The Tango by Luiz Usabal y Hernandez c1913.

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To whom were these images being sold? And what was their attraction?

The *Wikipedia* entry for “Queer Tango” includes one such, captioned (unwisely, in my view) “Queer Tango, postcard from the 1920s”. In a section headed “History of the Queer Tango movement”, having acknowledged the well-known historical images of men dancing tango together, the anonymous authors of the entry write:

There are also French and American [images]...from the first decades of the 20th century which represent tango between women. This feminine replica of man-to-man-tango generated much less literary documentation, yet a more extensive iconography tinged with a voyeuristic accent of eroticism: [and then, quoting J. Alberto Mariñas]

"...They are mostly anonymous pictures of women before the retina of a man one imagines to be complacent with the image of two women narrowing the distance between their bodies, something this dance encourages. One cannot see in them any self affirmation of feminine propriety, but

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rather, flattery or seduction toward the male spectator.[...]..."J. Alberto Mariñas, *They dance alone...* (*Wikipedia* (English) 2016; *Wikipedia* (Spanish)2016)¹⁴

Many of the other images of women couples – artwork and photography, especially in the form of postcards – seem to confirm that semi-pornographic images of women dancing tango were, indeed ‘commodity fetishisation’, images to arouse the ‘male gaze’ and so be exchanged for hard cash. The image found in the *Wikipedia* entry is one of a series of similar such images. They were produced by the London postcard manufacturer with an extensive American operation, Raphael Tuck & Sons and show artwork by Luiz (or in the US Louis) Usabal y Hernandez, a Spanish painter more commonly associated with portraits of Hollywood silent movie stars.

Still another series of postcards, this time from France use photography and show women dancing

14 On *Wikipedia*, the link [accessed 6 October 2016] is to a decayed English-language website where the images have vanished: <http://www.esto.es/tango/english/enEllas.htm> Its Spanish original has fared better: <http://www.esto.es/tango/espanol/Ellas.htm> and the image is found there, with others.

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together in figure hugging sheath dresses in a range of poses surely intended to titillate.



Fig 4.2. French postcard, 1913.

And yet... There are to date these two striking images of women dancing tango together that seem not immediately to fit this model. Just as their more easily explained counterparts may represent more, as yet undetected imagery, so too, these might be the tip of small and interesting iceberg. It is time to explore.

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Fig 4.3. Sheet music cover for a tango, “Elegancia”, and detail, Paris, 1913.

Firstly, from 1913, a sheet music cover for a tango composed by Ángel Villoldo (Fig 4.3). At the centre of the sheet music is an image, signed ‘A. Morel’. In the ubiquitous flat, Japanese aesthetic style, it shows two women dancing – tango, given the context – against an idealised background of a grand garden with a staircase. Like the other examples seen so far, the women are in a close, if slightly awkward embrace, but what is interesting here is that unlike those images, there is not a great deal of flesh showing, nor any of Usabal’s conspiratorial glances in the direction of the ‘fourth wall’ and the male gaze. On the contrary

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both women are modestly dressed in fashionable 'tea gowns'.



Fig 4.4. Still taken from a *Journal Gaumont* newsreel, 1913.

The second image (Fig 4.4) is indeed, 'dialects at a standstill'. It is actually a still taken from a *Journal Gaumont* newsreel of 1913. In it we see a fashionable gathering of smartly and indeed, expensively dressed women, two of whom, eyes fixed on the camera, appear to have emerged from glass doors in an unmistakable tango embrace. Tea is taken. The key to understanding what might have brought both these images into being might

be the *female* gaze. As it rested on women's fashions and what these images implied about a utopia of social and political changes.

To return to the sheet music: Ángel Villoldo, the Argentinian composer of *Elegancias* was famously enterprising. He composed many tangos including *El choclo* one of the most famous (and bawdy). Villoldo was sponsored along with singers Alfredo Gobbi and his Chilean wife, Flora Rodriguez by a large, fashionable, Buenos Aires Department Store, Gath & Chaves to come to Paris in 1907 in order to make tango phonograph recordings.¹⁵ Gath & Chaves was modelled on the Parisian *Gallerie Lafayette*. Nor do the sheet music's links with fashion retail end there. According to the website *BibleTango*, Villoldo's *Elégancias* was a tango dedicated to the Spanish-language, fashion magazine, *Elégancias* which was directed by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío from 1911 until

15 Spanish *Wikipedia* gives the date of the trip as 1903; the website *Todo Tango* says 1907.

<http://www.todotango.com/english/history/chronicle/167/The-Gath-&-Chaves-shop-also-released-records/> accessed 8 October 2016.

[added, 2020] For a near-definitive account see Rafael Mandressi.

2017. "Dancing with "le sexe". Eroticism and exoticism in the Parisian reception of tango (1907-1914)" https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_CLIO1_046_0087--dancing-with-le-sexe-eroticism-and.htm

Accessed 10 June 2020.

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1914, and which served the South American community in Paris.¹⁶ What could be smarter, in terms of marketing? Paris was desperate for Argentinian tangos, not just because tango was fashionable, but also because, as Robert Henard complained in January 1914, very few tangos were actually known in Paris, meaning that orchestras were often reduced to repeating them once they had exhausted their meagre repertoire. (Henard 1914). *Elegancias* naturally, included guidance of how to dance tango.

Turning back to the film still, this too, shows 1913 Paris fashion. I have tracked the original film clip

16 According to *BibleTango*: “Tango dédié au magazine mondain *Elégancias* de la communauté sud-américaine à Paris, dirigé depuis 1911 jusqu’à 1914 par le poète nicaraguayen Rubén Darío. Partition imprimée à Paris.” [Author’s translation: “Tango dedicated to the fashion magazine *Elégancias* serving the South American community in Paris, directed from 1911 until 1914 by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. Edition printed in Paris.”].

http://www.bibletango.com/tangotheque/tgth_detail/tgth_det_e/elegancias_tgthdet.htm Accessed 6 October 2016. According to Rubén Darío’s entry in *Wikipedia*, “In 1912 he accepted an offer from the Uruguayan businessmen Rubén and Alfredo Guido to direct the magazines *Mundial* and *Elegancias*. To promote said publications, he went on tour in Latin America visiting, among other cities, Río de Janeiro, São Paulo, Montevideo and Buenos Aires.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubén_Dar%C3%ADo Accessed 6 October 2016.

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down, but not secured it in time to show you now [2016]. It is of a mannequin parade at the Paris establishment of London fashion designer, Lucile, the professional name of Lucy Christiana, Lady Duff Gordon. Starting business in London in 1893 after a failed marriage, Duff-Gordon often claimed to have invented the 'mannequin parade', precursor to today's catwalk shows. If, as Caroline Evans reminds us she did not, in fact invent them, she certainly brought drama to them (Evans 2001).



Fig 4.5. Gath y Chaves, Buenos Aires, c1908.

As Hilary Fawcett acknowledges:

...[while] the line of her dresses might have

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followed the Parisian directive, the extravagant and erotic nature of both her designs and the fashion shows which she organized were uniquely spectacular...Lucile's sister was Elinor Glyn, who was later to create the Hollywood 'It Girl' personified by Clara Bow, and helped to orchestrate Lucile's collections and fashion shows. The themes of romance and seduction were writ large in her work. (Fawcett 2004: 153)

The female gaze? An erotic environment? Lucile had adopted the fiction of inviting her socialite clientele at tea time using "dainty little cards", as if the invitation were a social one among equals rather than an opportunity for commercial transactions and trade. (Kaplan and Stowell 1994 in Evans 2001) She took her rivalry with Paul Poiret and Jeanne Paquin seriously, opening a branch in Paris in 1911. According to Evans,

Lucile's first Parisian presentation capitalized on the tango craze by replicating a thé dansant in which her mannequins tangoed [presumably, with each other] while an orchestra played and the clients took tea. (Evans 2004: 278)

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Between 1911 and 1913, interest in the tango had only increased and it would seem Duff-Gordon's formula continued to have currency. It certainly helps explain not only the two figures dancing, but also the two figures on the right, one, seated with a teacup and saucer, the other, attending with a milk jug.

Tango teas and the erotic

But what of the erotic? A Scottish tourist in Paris and former resident of Argentina, the politician, Robert Cunningham Graham, published his impressions of the tango in 1914 and they were not favourable. Arriving at a Parisian hotel the ladies:

...descended delicately from their cars, offering a fleeting view of their legs covered by transparent stockings, through the slits of their skirts. They knew that every man [...] would be excited by such a spectacle [...] and even the most virtuous sense pleasure at their capacity to disturb men's emotions. [...] This is how without a need for the vote, they demonstrate they are equal to men. (Cunningham Graham 1938 orig. 1914 in Savigliano 1995: 115)

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Once inside the hotel, “the atmosphere is charged by the emanations of the flesh and the fumes of whisky”. There is worse to come: “Lesbos had sent her legions and women exchanged intelligent looks [...] The color of their cheeks accentuated when their eyes met, unexpectedly, those of another priestess of the secret cult.” He goes on to lament the mixing of French and English with North Americans, Hispanoamericans and Jews; the men “murmuring into [women’s] ears anecdotes that made them laugh, embarrassed”; and the general, self-contained quality of such events, oblivious to the more serious concerns of the wider world. As Marta Savigliano notes:

The ambience of the *tango-thé* as described by the Scottish traveller, was indisputably decadent. For him, that meant: rotten rich, up to the point of uniting racial, ethnic, and national enemies; highly sexualised when considering proper heterosexual manners; sexually deviant, in that women could show desire for one another; gender transgressive, in that women played seduction openly just as they craved for the vote; and unpoliticized, in that everyone ignored the most basic of world affairs. (Savigliano 1995)

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Lesbianism at tango teas? Possibly. I offer two scraps of evidence to support the idea. The caricaturist, Georges Gousat, better known as “Sem”, was famous for savagely satirising French society. In 1913, he published *Tangoville sur Mer*, a book of cartoons based on what he saw (or what he imagined) while on a trip to the fashionable resort at Deauville. In among the many other famous figures shown dancing tango were three same-sex couples. Nijinsky dancing with the Jewish impresario Gabriel Artaud – a sketch at once homophobic and casually anti-semitic (Bellow 2013: 66); the famously camp music hall artist, Felix Mayol with his arms around the equally famous, more robust music hall star, Dramen; and finally, Madame d’Artox dancing with Lise Radoline (*Fig 4.6*). I have found nothing out about this couple, save that they are shown together in other cartoons by Sem.

The second piece of evidence is the less well-known tango scene from the 1921 Rudolph Valentino film, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* purporting to show a Parisian *thé dansant* in 1913. It may or may not be accurate, but in a few short minutes it depicts Cunningham Graham’s accusations, almost as if they were a

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Fig 4.6.
Madame
d'Artex
dancing
with Lise
Radoline
(top right)
as
represente
d by Sem in
"Tangoville
sur Mer",
1913.

check list including – be quick or you'll miss her – a butch, monocled lesbian taking tea with her simpering, feminine lover (Fig 4.7). Returning to the cover of the sheet music, the overall design is that of the cover of the fashion magazine itself. It is not unreasonable to believe most of the readers of *Elegancias* were women and that Morel's



Fig 4.7. Lesbians at a Parisian Thé Dansant, 1913, from "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", 1921.

artwork is inserted into a position where those women readers might normally have expected to see an image of the fashions of the day. Is this sheet music aimed at women? Quite probably. Why else did the magazine sponsor, Villoldo use the fashion magazine's name except to appeal to women? The image is there to make the sheet music more attractive and so more saleable. So why an image of two fashionably dressed women dancing together, rather than one fashionably dressed woman alone, or one dancing with a handsome man? I discount the possibility that they

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sought to appeal to a lesbian market as being vanishingly unlikely for a mainstream publication, but I am always open to persuasion. Looking at the image again, it is hard to tell if it is, or was intended to be erotic at all. I sense not and that these women are first and foremost friends practicing their tango technique. It is worth remembering that many of the purchasers of sheet music bought it for the home. At home, there might not be a man willing to dance – but there might be another woman who shared your passion for fashion and for the tango. Secondly, if Lucile's – and perhaps other mannequin parades – included women dancing in fashionable tango tea gowns, from *Elegancias'* point of view, it would increase the association with the *purchasing* of fashion, rather than just its more abstract enjoyment.

Finally, if these are indeed, friendly women dancing, then the image might, arguably, have been seen as *less* controversial than that of a woman in the arms of a man. *Thé dansants* and tango lessons like the tango itself, had attracted controversy. Women were paying to be in the arms of a man of their choice, and the man, as we have seen, might be foreign, exotic, young, attractive and not their husband. The gendered

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Fig 4.8. The cover of Elegancias fashion magazine catering for Argentinians in Paris.

vector of capitalist exchange was, for once, reversed and it might have been the image of the man who could be seen as “the prostitute – seller and sold in one”.

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4.9. *Dancing with a man who is not your husband. A Parisian Thé Dansant, 1913, from The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, 1921.*

Do these images indicate some signify some limited form of increased personal freedom?

Mica Nava (1998), links the *Ballet Russe*,¹⁷ tango and the activities in London of the American retailer, Gordon Selfridge, to argue that in the retail arena, a popular, commercial cosmopolitanism emerged which critiqued

17 Especially influential in fashion terms was the ballet, *Sheherezade*. While the Sultan, Shahriyar, is away, the harem of women elect to have an orgy with their eunuchs. The Sultana chooses the handsome Golden Slave for herself. In imagery, he is often shown with dark skin. Needless to say, the Sultan returns and everyone is slaughtered.

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“imperialism, snobbery, traditional hierarchies and narrow nationalisms”. Much of it was fashion aimed at women: “Three quarters of the store exists to meet the needs of women” asserted Selfridge who famously supported women’s suffrage and who, on 1st July 1913, held a tango ball in his Oxford Street store for 5000 guests which lasted until 5.00 am, when breakfast was served.” Nava tacitly agrees with fashion historian, Beatrice Humbert that “tango was the detonator of a new morality, that it promoted the liberation of women and provided them with a venue to exhibit their sensuality in public.” (Nava 1995: 32-34)

Caroline Evans suggests:

When the haute couture houses began to show their clothes on live models, these figures were mirrored by the dummies of the department store windows. The clothes they displayed were bought by middle- and upper-class women. As active consumers of luxury goods, these women can be construed as subjects of the society of the spectacle; yet, when they turned themselves into a vision by donning their purchases they

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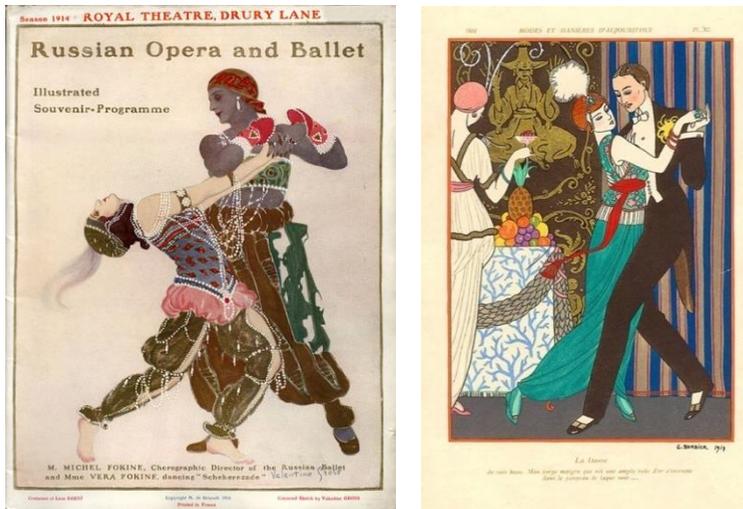


Fig 4.10. Women's costumes in the Ballet Russe (left) inspired the tango dancers' loose, divided "Jupe Culotte"(right) permitting great freedom of physical movement.

became, simultaneously, its object and image too. (Evans 2001: 272)

Yet the fuller picture is less clear cut. Evans continues:

Contrary to her assertion, Lucile's parades, like Poiret's in Paris, were intended for male as well as female viewers, the former "lured by the prospect of inspecting flesh as well as fabric" (Kaplan and Stowell 1994: 119). Lucile's coup was to commodify sensuality

through her gowns and their presentation.
(Evans 2001: 275)

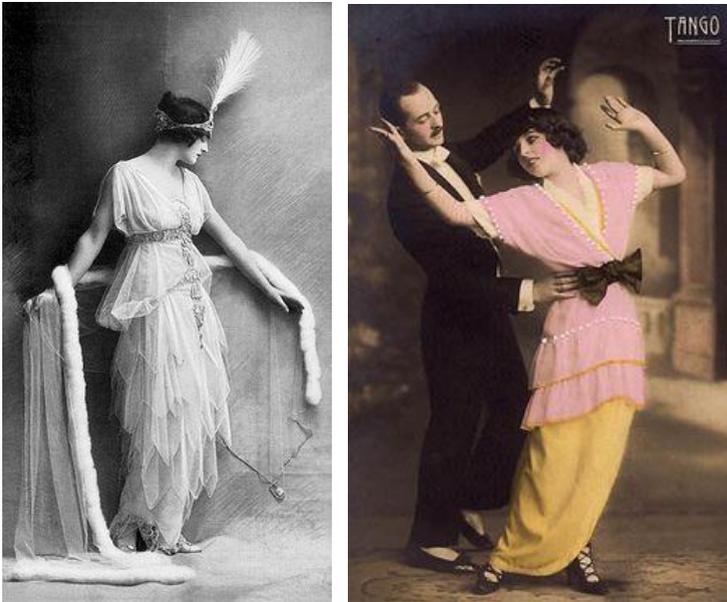
Early 20th century images of women dancing tango with each other: contemporary context

At the outset, I asked: Can we in our own age use this historical ephemera both to get in touch with *Urgeschichte* or *primal history* and so ignite an “awakening to myth”? In *The Arcades Project* Benjamin wrote of collectors:

The collector...makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. But *he* bestows on them only connoisseur value, rather than use value. The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but also into a better one – one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful. (Benjamin 2002: 9 emphasis added)

I would argue that The Queer Tango Image Archive successfully helps fulfil this function. By drawing

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4.11. A dress by couturier, Lucile (left) and something bearing a generic resemblance to it (right) in a tango postcard, both c1914.

together hitherto scattered images relating to the themes of queer tango – a concept alien to the pasts out of which they emerged – we cannot only apply contemporary connoisseurship and indeed, scholarship to develop a sense of what each may have meant in the past but, freed of their original commodity functions of satisfying the male gaze, or even the female gaze, the imagery is made available to us to be used as imaginative props for all manner of contemporary utopias. The *Urgeschichte* is perhaps the shifting of tectonic

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plates over centuries with regard to the roles of women and their sexuality in society. The dialectic, brought to a standstill, the detailed interplay of the forces and ideas which effect or hinder the change. These images already had digital currency before the Archive was created and their myriad contemporary uses attest to their ability to be used as signifiers of “tango history” or “authenticity” or “heirs to the erotic tradition” and indeed “lesbian history” or even part of “the ‘history’ of queer tango”, whatever that is. The Archive may hasten the furnishing of these utopias, and these utopias may be instrumental in destroying some of the very habits of thought, prejudices and assumptions which may have brought some of the images into the world in the first place.

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5. When Gomez Tangoed with Lurch: a Queer Tango Perspective on “Humorous” Historical Representations of Men Dancing Tango with Each Other

Delivered at the inaugural Conference of the Dance Studies Association, *Transmission and Traces: Rendering Dance*, at The Ohio State University, Columbus Ohio, USA, on 20th October 2017

Abstract: If you are invited to laugh at two men dancing tango with each other, what are you invited to laugh at? In a c1965 episode of the US TV series *The Addams Family*, Gomez attempts to teach Lurch the tango. With a rose between his teeth, Gomez is the “beautiful señorita” and Lurch “her” suitor. They are replicating the well-worn,

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heterosexual tango creation myth used to explain the countless images of men dancing tango together, that historically, they “practised” with each other, the better to secure the favours of women. Of course, they did. *The Queer Tango Image Archive* (an online collection of historical imagery relating to the themes addressed by queer tango) includes many images of male-male couplings devised for comic effect, ranging from the amiable to the vicious. Can this variety be accounted for by the varieties of contexts in which tango was danced, and out of which the images came? Or by the differing themes and ideas found in those contexts? Or by the different comic effects aimed at by their creators, in order to comment on those themes and ideas? I consider in detail two such images, both created in Paris in 1913: a tango sheet music cover and a ‘Sem’ cartoon. By setting each into particular contexts and using a simple model of how humour works, I build a methodology for considering Gomez and Lurch’s tango, the better to reveal, more precisely, attitudes towards masculinity, sex and sexuality, as well as the homosocial and the homosexual.

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If you are invited to laugh at a representation of two men dancing tango, what are you invited to laugh at (*Fig 5.1*)? The earliest published photographs of tango dancers in 1903 (*Fig 5.2*), show two men dancing with each other, but as blogger, Walter Fries confirms, the images in *Caras y Caretas*, a popular Buenos Aires magazine, were offered as snapshots of life, with no humour residing in the fact of the dancers being men (Fries 2017). Yet by 1965-ish, Gomez and Lurch follow in the footsteps of other comical, male couples, representations of which, archived online at *The Queer Tango Image Archive*, have featured in the history of the tango *almost* from the outset. Comic representations of women are fewer in number and I leave considering them for another occasion.¹⁸ The sheer variety of humorous, male same-sex imagery can perhaps be explained by the varieties of contexts in which tango was danced, and out of which, the images came; by the differing themes and ideas found in those contexts; and by the different comic effects aimed

¹⁸ It strikes me as interesting that – on present showing – there seem to be far more cartoons and comic images of men dancing together than there are of women. Why? In part, this is consistent with the more general ratio of women couples to men couples, but one wonders: are women dancing together not as funny to the male gaze? Are they less threatening (to men), so that they do not need the release of laughter to neutralise their power?

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at by their creators, in order to comment on those themes and ideas.



Fig 5.1. Gomez teaching Lurch to tango in an episode of the US TV Series, The Addams Family, c1965.

Types of Humour and the Queer?

To understand how they do that, we need a rudimentary appreciation of how humour “works”. Arthur Asa Berger noted three possible models: Firstly, *incongruity* theory, which is the most important and also the simplest. It involves:

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...some kind of a difference between what one expects and what one gets. The term “incongruity” has many different meanings – inconsistent, not harmonious, lacking propriety and not conforming, so there are a number of possibilities hidden in the term.

Historically, “lacking propriety” or “not conforming” might be recognised from our 21st century perspective as representations of the “anti-normal” aspects of the “queer” (Davis 2015: 131). Secondly, a group of “*Superiority theories*” typified by that described by the seventeenth century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, who wrote that:

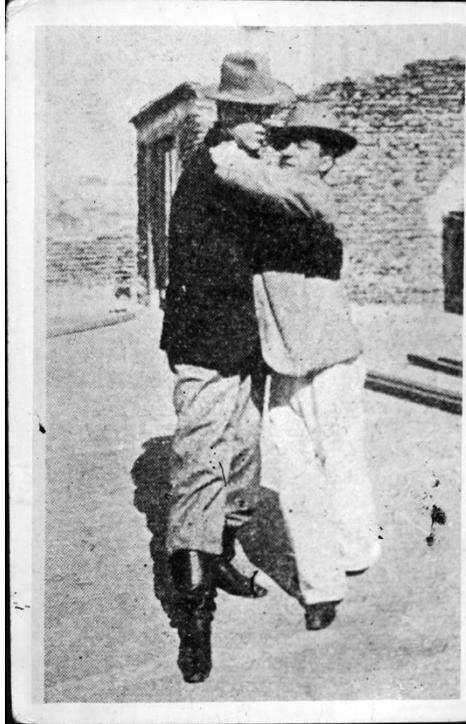
The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others...” (Hobbes 1651 as cited in Briggs 1993)

Heterosexist sneering at homosexuals figures in the material which follows. Finally, Berger also points to *psychoanalytic* theory, and in particular, to Sigmund Freud who argues that humour is, in reality, masked aggression and that we “...derive

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pleasure camouflaging our aggression and hostility (and thus evading the strictures of our superiors).” (Freud 1960 in Briggs 1993)

Fig. 5.2. One of the series of photographs of tango dancing from Caras y Caretas, 1903. Archivo General de la Nación



So, incongruity, superiority and aggression.

Ideas and Themes in Context

To illustrate an approach which acknowledges both context and humorous mechanisms, I will consider two images, both created in Paris in 1913: a sheet music cover (*Fig 5.3*); and a cartoon by

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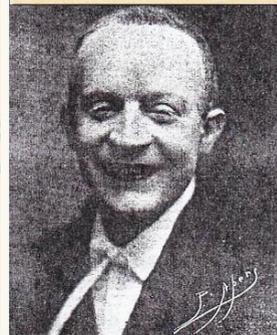
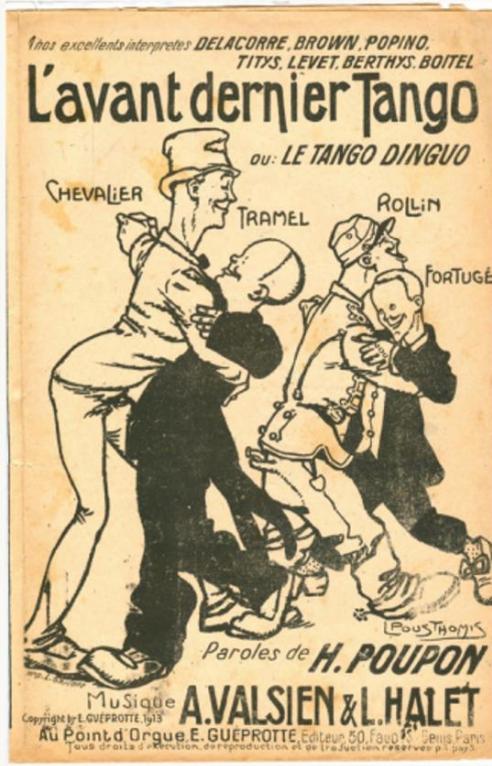


Fig 5.3. Sheet music cover for L'avant dernier Tango ou le Tango Dinguo, Paris 1913, and contemporary photographs of those caricatured.

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Georges Gousat, better known as “Sem” (*Fig 5.4*). In the first, the cover of some music called *L’avant dernier tango ou le tango dinguo*, [The Penultimate Tango or The Dingo Tango] a young Maurice Chevalier (25, maybe?) towers over and leads the music hall and silent film star, Félicien Tramel, while “Rollin” (or should that be “Polin”? Certainly, Polin, the stage persona of Pierre-Paul Marsalès always included a hat and sometimes boots) is leading Fortugé, the stage name of Gabriel Fortuné.

In the second, a young, nearly naked Nijinsky, clad only in ballet pumps and a few roses [as he appeared in *Le spectre de la rose* in 1911], is held firmly in the embrace of the bearded, ageing, balding journalist and theatrical impresario, Gabriel Astruc, their thighs entwined at crotch level. Nijinsky looks like he is about to fellate, or be obliged to fellate, Astruc’s nose, which Sem has chosen to show as phallic and enormous.

Two representations of same-sex male tango couples from the same time and place yet the first is, arguably, humorous, affectionate and possibly benign; while the second, by contrast seems humorous, vicious and aggressive. Why these differences? And what does each image tell us

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about different contemporary attitudes towards masculinity, sex and sexuality?

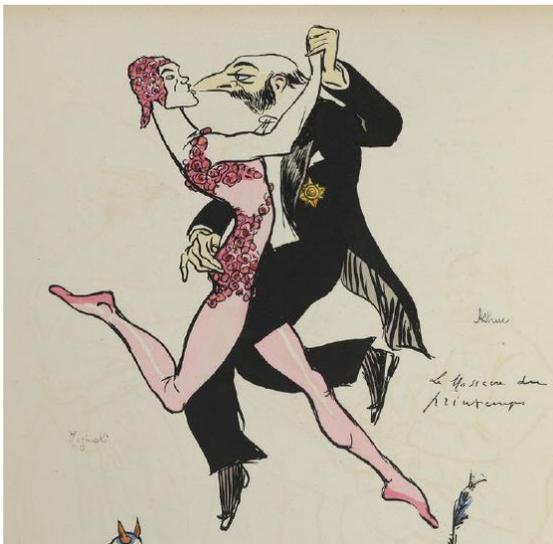


Fig 5.4.
Cartoon “Le
Massacre du
Printemps”
from
Tangoville
sur Mer,
George
Gousat
known as
“Sem”, Paris
1913 and
photographs
of Nijinsky
as he
appeared in
Le Spectre
de la Rose in
1911; and of
Gabriel
Astruc.



Certainly, the appetite among the fashionable in Paris for the tango peaked in 1913, as in other capital cities around the world, but here, there is a

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marked social, class difference between the subjects represented in the two images: the first shows figures from *popular* musical theatre, aping the fashionable, tango-dancing elite; while the second represents and caricatures that elite directly, attacking not only them and their tangoing, but also their equally fashionable enthusiasm for the *Ballets Russes* at which the magnetic – and sexually ambiguous – Nijinsky was the main attraction. Both images exhibit incongruities with a broad, common model of a ‘normal’ tango couple in Paris in 1913, but it is worth noting that this model may be similar, but not identical to that of our own age, or, indeed, that of 1960s America. Among ‘ordinary’ people, rather than the fashionable – that is, people closer in social status to those shown on the sheet music cover – men dancing with each other in couples was thought nowhere near as remarkable, or suspect, as it was later to become (*Fig 5.5*).

The sheet music cover was created to advertise the music inside, which it was hoped the viewer would then want to buy. That is its function. In fact, *L’avant dernier tango* is a spoof on a tango called *Le dernier Tango* published earlier in the same year, the lyrics of which according to the

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Fig 5.5. Men dancing in couples in the street, Paris 1914.

website, *Le temps du tango* are about poor Rita who – in classic tango fashion – dances one last time with a rejected lover and is strangled by him. (*Le Temp du Tango* 2012) By contrast, these men are having a whale of a time dancing with each other, smiling as they innocently parody their emotionally more complex, social superiors, who, if they *are* attacked, are only amiably and obliquely mocked. There is no aggression. Those who see this cartoon may want to share in their joy, or to savour the mild lampoon laughing as they congratulate themselves (in Berger’s terms) as being the superiors, both of these amiable clowns,

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Fig 5.6. Cover of sheet music for *Le dernier Tango*, Paris 1913.

As well as of the posturing, tangoing fashionables they imitate. Such positive emotions may have prompted them to take the sheet music off the music shop shelf and buy it.

Sem's targets get off less lightly.

To some, both the *Ballets Russes* and the tango were fashionable, controversial and suspect. Astruc, the son of the Grand Rabbi of Belgium, had already been the subject of anti-Semitic attacks by the right-wing politician, Leon Daudet. Astruc first brought Diaghilev's company to Paris in 1909, confident that controversy was good for business. Indeed, he declined to manage Isadora Duncan, as

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he thought her too tame. In 1913, with the *Ballets Russes* installed in his newly-built Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, a brilliant season climaxed on 29th May with the notorious premier of *Le Sacre du Printemp* or *The Rite of Spring* – and the riot that ensued. Sem’s cartoon, to which he had added the caption, *Le Massacre du Printemps* was, Juliet Bellow reminds us, part of the anger that production provoked:

In reviews of *Le Sacre du printemps*...critics directed their outrage about the ballet at the perceived influence of Jews and enjuivés (“the Jewified”) on the troupe. We can see this in [this] overtly anti-Semitic and homophobic caricature by Sem... (Bellow 2013: 66).

Six months after the premier, Astruc was financially ruined.

So much for the humour’s anti-Semitic, homophobic and anti-*Ballets Russes* dimensions, but anti-tango? As Mica Nava put it, tango was...

...more influential and more contentious than the Ballet...because it involved not only

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the pleasure of looking – of being a spectator – but also body-to-body encounters of an unprecedented sensuality and intimacy which took place in the public domain. (Nava 1998: 33)



Fig 5.7. The fashionable gathered at Deauville, 1913.

Many did not approve. Nardo Zalko says that Sem was by no means alone in attacking this dance craze, with satirical material appearing in magazines such as *Femina* and *Le Sourire*, as well as his own work which appeared in *La Vie Parisienne*, where he was quoted as saying “Le tango, monsieur, est une abomination.” [“The tango, monsieur, is an abomination”], though Zalko implies the quote may have been

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manufactured by the journalist. (Zalko 2004: 67-71)

Tangoville sur Mer was a catalogue of such cartoons based on what he saw (or what he imagined) while on a trip to the fashionable resort of Deauville (Fig 5.7). The conceit of the book is that he caricatures famous figures as tango dancing couples. All of them exhibit incongruity to comic effect, but the effects are varied. Four of them are male and same sex. In one, a slender, discomfited Alberto Santos-Dumont, the aeronaut and “lifelong bachelor” (Wikipedia 2020) clasps the plump actor, Adrien Bernheim, drawn to look like a leaky balloon; in another, the famously camp music hall artist, Felix Mayol, is evidently enjoying having one leg of the more manly, music hall star, Armand Dramen, thrust between his own. Dramen is drawing Mayol towards him and takes pleasure in doing so. In yet another, the 22-year old, homosexual artist, Maurice Rostand is shown dancing with himself, leading in evening dress and top hat, following in a kilt, tartan socks and lacy underwear. But whereas these three seem relatively good-natured,

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Fig. 5.8. Three male, same-sex couples dancing tango from Tangoville sur Mer by Sem, 1913.

the Nijinsky-Astruc caricature is a savage attack. It appears on a page which also shows a jockey

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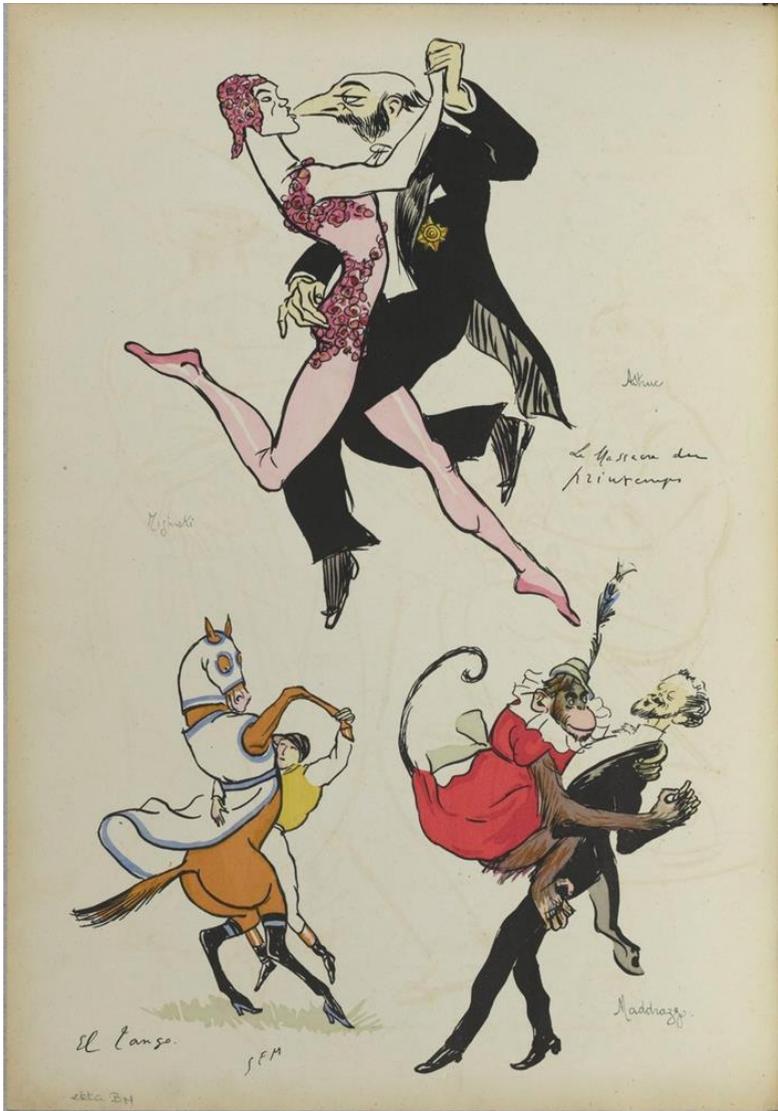


Fig 5.9. The Nijinsky-Astruc cartoon (top) in the context of the page in *Tangoville sur Mer*.

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dancing with his horse and the artist, Raimundo de Madrazo y Garreta, dancing with a monkey dressed much like the women who figured in his popular genre paintings. Taken as a whole, the page suggests that, in Sem's eyes, and perhaps in those of the people he expected to buy and enjoy his book, all these are examples of grotesque, 'unnatural' couplings. So, mapping the sheet music cover and the Sem cartoon carefully to their different particulars in the "common context" of France in 1913 shows how the amiable and the vicious can coexist. Are these the two broad genres of comic imagery of same-sex, male tango dancing? Possibly.

I will proceed almost immediately to Gomez and Lurch, to set them in context and see how their humour works, but pause to indicate, at lightning speed, evidence for these two genres over the intervening years – a body of evidence, at once superficial and inconclusive, but suggestive. A vicious example: from just before the First World War, a French postcard aimed at French and English audiences showing Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, Franz-Josef, as pigs, hocks locked in another "Le dernier tango" of their unnatural Dual Alliance,

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while the English, French and Russians merely look on, providing a musical accompaniment. An

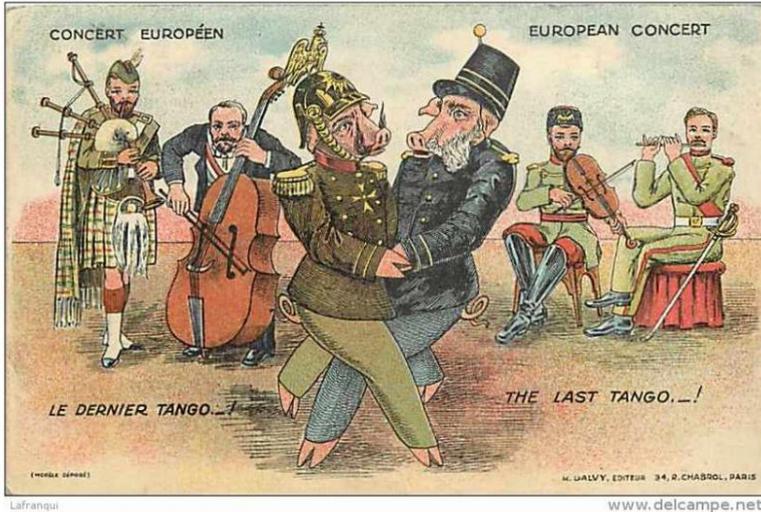


Fig 5.10. A pre-First World War French satirical cartoon showing Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, Franz-Josef, tangoing as pigs.

amiable example: a First World War, morale-boosting German postcard showing victorious German soldiers dancing tango with each other in the “Londoner Tango Club” (Fig 5.11). There is a long history of military same sex couple dancing. Another amiable one: not quite a tango, but Popeye and Bluto dance an *apache* dance, its violent cousin, in the 1937 cartoon, *Popeye the Sailor – Morning Noon and Nightclub*

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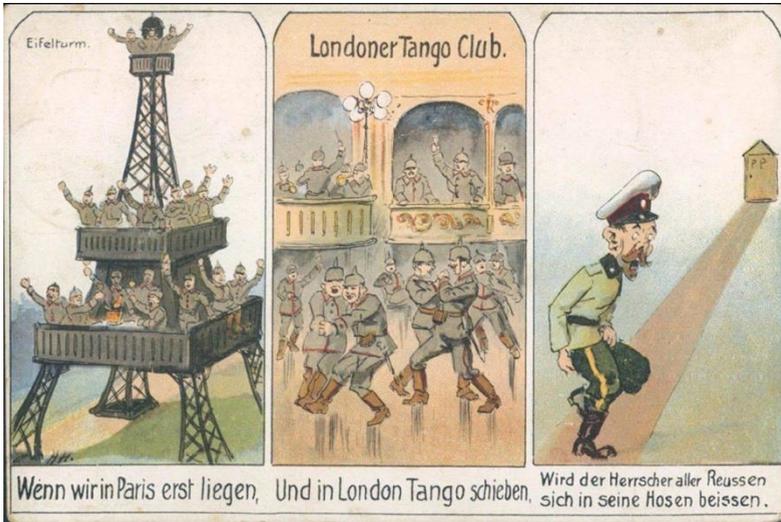


Fig 5.11. A German First World War propaganda postcard.



Fig. 5.12. Popeye and Bluto dancing the apache dance in Popeye the Sailor – Morning, Noon and Nightclub, 1937.

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(Fig 5.12).¹⁹ They dance *intercambio* – swapping roles as they dance with each other – but preserve their masculinity when leading by repeated acts of violence towards the other which, unlike in the actual *apache* dance, are comic, rather than vicious.

To return to Gomez and Lurch. The time and place are significant: America in the mid-sixties was deep in the throes of political, social and sexual turmoil. An emerging counter culture of political protest, music, drugs, clothes, and behaviour, challenged bourgeois norms, including those of sex and sexuality. Indeed, this scene draws on another, still more famous same sex, male tango scene in an earlier film, controversial on its appearance in 1959, and which subsequently acquired a reputation for sexually radical content: Billy Wilder's *Some Like it Hot* in which Jack Lemmon, disguised as a woman to escape the mob in 1920s prohibition America, is obliged to dance a tango with Osgood, the millionaire. Writing in 1993,

19 The two dances arrived in New York some 25 years earlier more or less in tandem, courtesy of Maurice Mouvet, and were thought to share the common characteristics of being latin, and overtly sexual in nature. Street Swing. blog. "Maurice Mouvet".

<http://www.streetswing.com/histmai2/d2mouvet1.htm>

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Judith Butler is dismissive of the idea that this and other similar Hollywood “drag” films were in any way radical, yet concedes “these films are surely important to be read as texts where homophobia and homosexual panic are negotiated” but argues instead that they “are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy” (Butler 1993 quoted in Carver 2009).

Fig 5.13. Jack Lemmon dancing tango with the millionaire, Osgood, *Some Like it Hot*, 1959.



As Suzanne Woodward writing in 2012 observed, many since then have disagreed with Butler, and in particular, with regard to *this* film. She, herself asserts:

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Some Like It Hot ...is notable for the ways in which it renders...traditional gender and sexual boundaries visible, but in addition, it stands out from other gender-bending comedies because it refuses the conventional reinstatement of a heteronormative status quo. (Woodward 2012)

Who, indeed, can forget the film's ending?

By contrast, Gomez teaching Lurch to tango is less radical, as it is to help him secure the heterosexual favours of the “beautiful señorita” he so imperfectly personates. The pair simply replicate one of the well-worn tango creation myths used to explain why, historically, men danced with each other (Batchelor 2016). *The Addams Family*, much like *The Flintstones*, are essentially critiques of American suburbia. Laura Morowitz cites Stephan Cox as suggesting that, both the *Munsters*’ – the other comedy gothic sitcom of the time – and the *Addams families*’...

...refusal to conform, aligned them with the burgeoning counterculture and in fact made them a far less threatening version of it.

[Cox writes:] ‘They become television’s first

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countercultural role models in an age when non-conformity was beginning to be regarded as an asset, not a liability.’
(Morowitz 2007)

So, perhaps the trace of a smile playing on Lurch’s otherwise immobile face smuggled in to US TV audiences in the 1960s an acceptable, unthreatening example of the incongruity of a man enjoying dancing tango with another – except of course, Lurch isn’t a man like you, or like me, is he?

He’s a freak!

Conclusion

While queer tango is, arguably, a largely 21st century phenomenon, its immediate roots are in late 20th century, counter-cultural social and political developments (Batchelor and Havmøller 2018). Queer tango addresses themes and ideas of sex, sexuality and gender with long ‘pre-[queer tango] histories’ stretching back to the very beginnings of the dance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In humorous historical imagery, these roots are most obviously expressed through same-sex couplings, but also through couplings where the gender identity of one or other or both of the dancers departs from whatever conventions

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applied to a “normal” tango couple at any one time and place, although I note that these norms are not a single constant, but vary over time. Following Berger’s informal classifications of humour mechanisms, humour in these images often hinges on just such apparent incongruities. However, by considering in more detail the precise, particular circumstances out of which the contemporaneous productions of the sheet music cover and the Sem cartoon emerged in Paris in 1913, we can see that notionally similar content can achieve quite different effects, and we can see how and why: in the first case (again, following Berger) we can see how the humour hinged almost entirely on incongruity, with only the mildest sense of superiority in the viewer, and no signs of aggression. To some in the 21st century, in some parts of the world, the ease of the dancers with each other might be read as a welcome, queer, “anti-normal” riposte to contemporary anxieties; while to others dancing in more liberal environments, it may be a welcome confirmation that the ease in choosing their dance partners they now enjoy has historical precedents. By contrast, Sem’s casual use of established anti-Semitic, and homophobic tropes: the fleshly, sensuous, big-nosed Astruc; and the feminine, un-manly Nijinsky, are repugnant to those self-same, 21st century

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liberal sensibilities. In Paris, in 1913, the incongruities in Sem's cartoon provided a firm foundation for a casually contemptuous portrayal, inviting the superior viewer to sneer with the superior artist, and to share in his anger and aggression. An arbitrary selection of other 20th century comic imagery of same sex, male, tango dancing couples seems to suggest that these two broad categories – the amiable and the aggressive – may be considered as genres, with most falling into the first, although that assertion is by no means proven here. However, once its debt to the superior, and more radical *Some Like it Hot* is acknowledged, I suggest that the example taken from *The Addams Family* falls into the first category of the amiable. Its specific value in its time and place was that it offered viewers unthreatening role models of non-conformity and helped them address the social and sexual issues emerging in the counter culture of the time. Once the human laughter joined the canned, an audience of TV viewers who might otherwise feel threatened, were put at ease, and in control.

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

Ray Batchelor and Birthe Havmøller

Presented at the second Queer Tango Salon, *Dancers who Think and Thinkers who Dance*, 15th-16th September 2017, London, UK. Slightly revised by the authors in 2020 to accommodate new research for this work.

Abstract: 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

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origins on Facebook [in 2017], he was inundated with candidates, all earlier than 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. The “origins” question may be unanswerable but setting out more clearly the many roots of queer tango must be to everyone’s advantage.

When was queer tango first danced?

And where?

And by whom?

To which we might add: who wants to know? And why?

As Mariana Docampo has noted with understandable irritation, this has often seemed to some to be a simple matter (Docampo 2017). 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

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sprang up around the world, not least in Buenos Aires shortly afterwards and now in London too. (Havmøller, Batchelor and Oramo 2015: 135)

He was, or rather, I was, after all only parroting what I had read elsewhere, not least from *Wikipedia* where you can still (2017 and still in 2020) 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. [Emphases added, original *Wikipedia* hyperlinks and footnotes are deleted] (*Wikipedia* n.d.)

...to which the anonymous authors graciously add:

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In the bastion of traditional heteronormative tango, in Buenos Aires, the first Queer Milonga, La Marshall, home for the LGBT tango community, opened its doors in 2002.

So, there we have it. In Germany, in Hamburg, In 2001. Neat. Memorable. Routinely repeated. In *Wikipedia*! And possibly completely wrong. Or, if not wrong, exactly, then at best, incomplete.

2000 or 2001?

The date is definitely wrong. It was 2000. The confusion arose because of the publicity for “10th. International Queer Tango Festival” in Hamburg in 2011, implying to the unwary that it was 2001. But the text accompanying the virtual flyer – written, we assume, by Ute Walter herself – is unambiguous:

August 2011

Dear Queer Tango fans,

with this year’s 10th festival from September 30th until October 3rd the International Queer Tango Festival Hamburg celebrates an anniversary.

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What started as a try-out 11 years ago has now become part of Tango history.

In 2000 the International Queer Tango Festival was worldwide the first event of this kind. By now the idea has spread around the globe: Stockholm, Buenos Aires, Oslo, San Francisco, New York, Mexico City, Paris, Kopenhagen, Berlin, Cologne, ... [Emphasis added] (Walter 2011)

...a date confirmed by Timm Christensen, in conversation with Ray Batchelor in Berlin in July 2017. Christensen, a German of Danish extraction joined the Hamburg team the year after the 2000 event, so he should know. Birgit Sonntag, a tanguera and woman leader based in Hamburg also told Birthe Havmøller that it was 2000 and suggested a year may have been skipped early on, such the tenth Festival was, indeed, in 2011.

Pre-2000 Roots:

2015 was bumper year for books in English on tango: Kathy Davis. *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World*, and Melissa Fitch, *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary*. Fitch in particular cites historical

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antecedents which pre-date this 2000 episode in Hamburg.

When, in 2017, the Paris-based queer tango activist, Federico Imperial (“Fede”) 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 2000. 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 her own ideas very clearly in both the *Queer Tango Book* and more recently, today, in her “10 Dogme Rules for The Dance Style of ‘Queer Tango’” (Havmøller 2017). As her title 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

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danced, and this argument may have merit. I have set my ideas out in a discussion piece called “What is Queer Tango?” originally published in 2014, where I argue that, in the absence of agreement, it is best defined by dancing it, and elsewhere, my emphasis is not on practices – apart, perhaps from role changing within the dance, *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). (Batchelor 2014b) Of course, this tidy little model breaks down, if the queer social and political queer sensibility resides, not in the dancers themselves, but in the observers, who can see these queer dimensions, even if the dancers themselves are unaware. 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, or what we should think about them, 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

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outlined above. So, as with history, it is perfectly possible for something – some image, or piece of knowledge – to be relevant to queer tango, but not *be* queer tango. (Batchelor 2014a)

So: When was queer tango first danced? And where? And by whom?

Birthe and I set out this provisional catalogue, not of competitive claims, but of complimentary 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 be more widely known. So, to those named, and still more to those not, we say sorry; and please contact us.

However, casting caution to the wind, we begin with...

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The European Candidates

From the evidence which came to light in response to Fede's 2017 Facebook post, and from other sources, the 2000 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 mid eighties*. 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: 98)

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" (Walter 2017)

Yet, it seems they were not alone. On the same thread, Sabine Rohde answered the question, with a tantalising suggestion for the time and place for the origin of the term "Queer Tango":

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*Fig 6.1.
Marga
Nagel
(left)
and
Ute
Walter.*

Hamburg! in Our studio Tango Exil start 1985, Ute Walter, Marga, Andrea, cafe 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

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(awesome) Ute and [I] co coined "Queer Tango" (Rohde 2017)

In publicity for the 2011 Festival, Walter confirms Rohde's assertion about the origin of the term: "Back then in Hamburg we created the term Queer Tango..." (Walter 2011) ...though it is unclear whether or not she meant in time for the 2000 Festival or earlier.

Rohde makes a critical assertion when she 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, according to Rohde, there were others experimenting in Germany:

Munich: Dont remember the name of the gorgeous both roles-dancing ginger haired tall woman with a slim gorgeous dancing man/following...

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Nothing further has come to light regarding a root in Munich but, also according to Rhode, something interesting was happening in Berlin.



*Fig 6.2.
Brigitta
Winkler
(left)
and
Angelika
Fischer.*

Brigitta Winkler's website asserts that in 1986 with Angelika Fischer, she established the *Tanzart* school in Berlin, precursor to *Phynixtanz*. (Winkler n.d.) In an interview with "Tango Forge", (the creation in 2010 of the then, Sydney-based,

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American dancer, Violet “Vio” Sarazza and Sanjay Pancha) Winkler set out a clear, detailed personal chronology as follows:

The initial spark was the Horizonte Festival in the Künstlerhaus in Mariannenstraße in Kreuzberg [the gay district of Berlin] in 1982. They had Latin American cultures and they invited an Argentine group who used to live in Paris, Alejandra Sedano and Coco Orlando Días, together with a live band. That was the first time that I saw tango. Jaun [sic] Dietrich Lange was there as well. Later there was a fight between Lange and us because he said how could it happen with two women. He’s not doing that now anymore. He’s very good with us.

After that show I was mesmerized – “What is it that you’re doing?” Two weeks later I was in Paris and I started working with them. I was already a dancer but not tango.

I was wearing Birkenstocks and I would never wear heels. It was important for me to find out what does it mean to be a woman. I was attracted to the tango to make a

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strength out of that. I wanted to find out more about what it means to be a woman to me, on a personal level. I still am a feminist. For me personally it was like playing with all the facets of what it could be to be a woman. And going into that feminine side with my heels. After a while I practiced in Paris and he would teaches classes here, to me and my girlfriend, *Angelika* Fischer. (Winkler 2015)

1982 is, to date, the earliest reference to dancing *and* thinking in queer tango terms, even without the terminology and as a Uruguayan of German parents, Juan Dietrich Lange provides some *rioplatenese* underpinning to events in Germany, as do other contacts and as does her first visit to Buenos Aires in 1984. (Winkler n.d.). As Winkler makes plain, she was using her dancing body to explore social, political and emotional significances, a vivid illustration of queer tango's existence in what is danced, quite independently of language. (Winkler 2015) Critically for our purposes, Winkler and Fischer worked as a "Frauentanzpaar", women dancing together,

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sometimes for the Klaus Gutjahr Ensemble or with Juan Jose Musalini jnr.²⁰(Winkler n.d.)

Rohde – albeit with less certainty about dates – confirms Lange’s presence in Berlin and adds the name of another innovative German woman dancer:

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 pursued this last lead.

Why Berlin? Winkler in her interview is very clear it was the confluence of a range of very specific social, political, cultural and economic factors:

What helps with Berlin is the long experience, the long tradition. It’s 35 years

20 “1986 opening of Tanzart school in Berlin with Angelika Fischer”
“1987 gründete sie zusammen mit ihrer Tanzpartnerin Angelika Fischer das Studio **Tanzart** in Berlin. Als Frauentanzpaar arbeiten sie u.a. mit dem Klaus Gutjahr Ensemble oder mit Juan Jose Musalini jun.”
<http://www.brigittatango.de/bio.htm> accessed 14th September 2017.
Winkler confirmed in September 2017 in a private Facebook message to Ray Batchelor that Tanzart was founded in 1986.

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ago [in 2015]. Nowhere else. Not in New York. So that gives us our own roots. Why could it root here and not somewhere else? That is because of the specific and unique situation Berlin had as this island in nowhere land. All the laws were different than somewhere else. I came here because of that. There were no young people, everything was empty, you could occupy the houses, you could have lots of dance space. I could not have opened a dance studio in any other city than Germany in 1986. The city was empty. Tango was blossoming here, a big point in the pre-punk culture. We were dancing tango up and down the street in our punk outfits in the early 1980s. (Winkler 2015)

Tony Damen and Andreas Jans

Before leaving Europe, we might make mention of Tony Damen and Andreas Jans, owners of *Tango Brujo*, Hasselt, in Belgium. Their *Tango Brujo* website reads: “the founders, tony and andreas, 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. (Tango Brujo n.d.; Tango Brujo 2012)

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North America

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 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 (...) (Tango Mujer n.d.)

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 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-

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follow skills that are the foundation of social tango. (Shulman n.d.)

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. (Trenner in Fitch 2015: 99)

...in other words, at a time when wider, gender politics was on the move. (Trenner, Shulman 2010) 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 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

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this new attitude of openness was becoming apparent almost twenty years ago. (Fitch 2015: 99)



Fig 6.3. Rebecca Shulman and Daniel Trenner.

And Argentina?

What of Argentina?

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

Edgardo Fenández Sesma writes on Facebook:

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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 “Gasoil 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 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. (Fernandez Sesma 2017)

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Fig 6.4. Augusto Balizano (right) in 2009 in a photograph by Ezequiel Scagnetti.

Mariano Docampo has given us an authoritative account of her own role in importing the term

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“queer tango” from Europe, but setting out a distinctively different, more Argentinian and more theoretically grounded practice of her own. Moreover, she reminded us that historically, “Argentinian Tango” thrives on contact with “the other:” that is, European and North American practices. (Docampo 2017)

Conclusion:

When was queer tango first danced?

And where?

And by whom?

If Brigitta Winkler is sometimes a little “relaxed” about precise dates, it may be because she is not especially interested in queer tango history:

I am not so interested in the history. I think the history serves for the experience you have. You collect experience. What is interesting is what do I do with all of that now. Since the future is not written, what matters is what you do with it. (Winkler 2015)

We agree with her in this last observation. We hope that an appreciation of where queer tango has come from will inform and support that

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making of futures. We have galloped through a brief catalogue of, now, historical, 20th century tango occurrences which, seem to us to have embodied some of the dance practices, or some of the social or political concepts, or both which queer tango today includes or is founded on respectively. We have omitted some other, similar, late 20th century examples, the countless shows, 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 which I argue elsewhere form something of a “pre-history” for queer tango. (Batchelor 2014a) Similarly, we have focussed on origins, rather than the process of queer tango diffusion to (or eruption in?), say, St Petersburg or Moscow, to Istanbul or Tel Aviv, to San Francisco or Montreal, or not to mention, Paris and London, of course.

Plainly, there is work still to be done.

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

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practices which queer tango addresses, but is not confined to:

- Same sex couples
- Women leading
- Men following
- Women leading men
- Men leading women in a queer tango context
- Role change within the dance (*intercambio*)
- A systematic challenge to norms of sex, gender and sexuality
- Some awareness of the social and political dimensions of the significance of the dancing by those dancing or those observing or both

...we believe we have begun to set out some credible “origins” narratives – and that as there is a range of issues and themes, so the plural is important. 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” fully queer tango, according to most people’s

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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, then the histories it requires are likely to be equally changeable in character.

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Fig 1.1 Author's photo

Figs 1.3, 2.7, 3.5, 4.2, 5.5 Wikimedia Commons:

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/99/Tango-entre-homme.jpg>

Fig 2.1, Archivo General de la Nación

Fig 2.2 Tango Queer Uruguay:

<https://www.facebook.com/800965816663929/photos/a.800965883330589/800972193329958/?type=3&theater>

Figs 2.3, 3.2 Archivo General de la Nación:

<https://www.facebook.com/ArchivoGeneraldeLaNacionArgentina/photos/a.141923792499512.21231.138633046161920/651030491588837/>

Figs 2.4, 3.4 Archivo General de la Nación, Documento Fotográfico. Inventario 12379

https://www.facebook.com/pg/ArchivoGeneraldeLaNacionArgentina/posts/?ref=page_internal

Fig 2.5 Archivo General de la Nación, collection de Lidia Ferrari

Fig 2.6 Private photograph by permission of Edward Moreira Bahnson.

Figs 2.13, 3.1, 5.2. Argentina, Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento Documentos Fotográficos o AR_AGN_DDF/Consulta_INV: 295455_A

Fig 5.1 Argentina, Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento Documentos Fotográficos o AR_AGN_DDF/Consulta_INV: 295459_A

Fig 5.2 Argentina, Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento Documentos Fotográficos o AR_AGN_DDF/Consulta_INV: 22069_A

Fig 5.5 Parisen Images.

The Queer Tango Project

initiated by Birthe Havmøller, supports the Queer Tango community around the world in developing critical ideas, stimulating debate and resources about how and why Queer Tango is danced. We encourage the queer tango movement to reflect on itself and hope to draw together and give voice to both queer tango academics, activists and dancers. We also work on reducing the “Spanish-English” language and cultural divide in Queer Tango.

Our publications

We publish free eBooks about queer tango. Go the Free Books to see our [publications](#).

The Queer Tango Conversation at facebook

If you are a dancer, an activist, author, academic or an artist or all or any of these or in any other way interested in Queer Tango, we invite you to air your views here, to start discussions, raise issues, ask questions, respond to comments and compare your experiences with others around the world contributing to [The Queer Tango Conversation](#).



In normal times, Ray Batchelor is a queer tango dancer, activist, teacher, researcher, author, independent scholar and historian. Part of Queer Tango London since 2011, he works with, Birthe Havmøller on The Queer Tango Project for which he writes and co-edits publications, curates the Queer Tango Image Archive and contributes to and co-moderates The Queer Tango Conversation discussion forum on Facebook.

In abnormal times, he has more opportunities to write but fewer opportunities to dance.