

# Queer Tango Futures

Dancing for Change  
in a Post-Covid  
World



Ray Batchelor, Birthe Havmøller  
& Mori Plaschinski

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# Queer Tango Futures

Dancing for Change in a Post-Covid World

Edited by Ray Batchelor, Birthe Havmøller and Mori Plaschinski  
A Queer Tango Project Publication



# Thank you!

The cultural lockdown in response to Covid-19 in 2020-21 may have stopped us from socialising, hugging, dancing and co-creating with each other; however, it has not stopped us from sharing our ideas about how to improve our queer tango communities once the lockdown is over and we can meet again without any restrictions like we used to do before the lockdown happened. This publication is a non-profit community project with contributions from around the world initiated by my co-editor Ray Batchelor. The anthology presents materials by social dancers, artists, scholars and teachers.

I thank all the contributors on behalf of the editorial team. *The Queer Tango Futures – Dancing for Change in a Post-Covid World*, would not have been possible without the generosity and support of all who have shared their experiences, ideas and visions for the future of queer tango with us.

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On behalf of the editors, I would also like to thank Jerome Farrell, husband of Ray Batchelor for his diligent and expert support in proof-reading the final drafts of Queer Tango Futures English language texts. And Mori Plaschinski for her work with the Spanish language texts. I hope this Queer Tango Project Publication will serve as inspiration for hundreds of queer tango dancers. May our future be bright and our dances filled with joy!

Abrazos,

Birthe Havmøller

Editor and Initiator of The Queer Tango Project / [www.queertangobook.org](http://www.queertangobook.org).

Denmark, May 2021.

## Acknowledgement of Birthe Havmøller

Ray Batchelor

Birthe Havmøller is a modest person who will not point to her own contributions both to this particular book, and to queer tango as whole. I have no such inhibitions. Whilst some may sense how hard she works for all of us from the many manifestation of the Queer Tango Project, of which this but the latest publication, I have had the privilege of working closely alongside her since our first tentative contacts in 2013. It is not purely hard work. I have learnt to appreciate at first hand her rich range of skills - not least, when their sophistication is quite beyond my own. Her practise of these skills is invisible to most of us in the things which emerge from these creative processes. Add to versatility and diligence, passion and intelligence – she cares about queer tango and thinks hard about it (even if we don't always agree!) – and we in queer tango have in Birthe Havmøller a uniquely significant individual. If, in my view, that fact is under-acknowledged, I hope this little marker will help put that right. And if anyone is looking for further evidence that I am right, I commend to you this excellent book. It would be nothing without all the others who have contributed, but it did not make itself. With a little help from others, it is only a slight exaggeration to say, Birthe did.

And for once, I invite you to join me in thanking her for this, as well as for all her other achievements. Queer tango would not be the same without Birthe Havmøller.



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# Introduction

Ray Batchelor

London, United Kingdom

A simple question, if it is the right one asked at the right time, can generate a rich variety of complex answers. In asking for this book, in the midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic, “How should we do queer tango in a Post-Covid Future?”, Birthe Havmøller, Mori Plaschinski and I were simply putting into words what many had been wondering anyway. “Do” rather than “dance” because we recognised that the social and political objectives of queer tango are (normally) pursued by dancing, obviously, but with a constant stream of representation, commentary, questioning and analysis – the “discourses” – running alongside. With few obvious answers beckoning, complexity and variety in those subsequently offered to us were inevitable. We present them here.

With the vast majority of queer tango dancing prevented by the Pandemic, as many successful online queer tango events have demonstrated, the discourses came into their own. Since its launch in 2015 by Birthe Havmøller and me, the Queer Tango Project has fostered discourses to the extent that they support the dancing as an instrument of social and political change. We do this through our publications, our website resources, the historical material curated in Queer Tango Image Archive and the lively discussions facilitated by The Queer Tango Conversation on Facebook. It seemed to us that this enforced period of having to forsake the dancefloor was painful, but temporary. Eventually, probably, all of us will have the chance to dance queer tango again. If we could not dance now, or not much, we could reflect on our dancing. Time for a Queer Tango Project publication: *Queer Tango Futures: Dancing for Change in a Post-Covid World*. The intention behind it has been to capture those reflections the better to inform how, when we can, in an altered world, we re-inhabit and renew our queer tango dancing in ways which will make it a still more vibrant, effective agent of change.

Queer tango in a Post-Covid world?

How much of what, in “Normal Times”, we celebrated and enjoyed but took for granted, will return? How much of it should? What will have vanished? What will have changed? How will we, each of us as dancing individuals, not to mention as members of local, national and international communities, have been changed? What will there be that is new? What will we need to do, that is new? Which criteria should we use to decide what to revive, what to discard, what to initiate and what to resist? We cannot properly answer any of these questions without re-examining what queer tango is for. Our answers to that question have always consisted,

chiefly, of queer tango's perpetually provisional responses to the changing state of the wider world.

What "queer tango is for" was changing even before the Pandemic struck. In a climate of increased populism and the rise of far-right, racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic politics, we had already been obliged to renew with some vigour our core, historical pre-occupations with issues of gender and sexuality. At the time of writing (May 2021), this is set to remain as true as ever. Yet, in part, in response to those wider social and political changes, we had increasingly been recognising our responsibilities to support and work alongside other groups at risk of violence and oppression – the old, the disabled, or the targets of racial or religious persecution, for example. Will the Pandemic have changed that trajectory? If so, how? Only once we start dancing again and talking about that, will the new answers to the question, "What is queer tango for?" start to emerge. It is our hope that this work will help inform, enliven and advance that debate.

Our call for materials for *Queer Tango Futures* was different to any other we had ever made. To begin with, we were making it in the strangest of times, when many people were living with, dying from and/or trying to overcome the effects of an almost unprecedented pandemic. By March 2021, it was reported that, globally, 2.6 million people have died from Covid-19. We have been offered materials from a range of different places across the world, each expressing views – literary or artistic – more or less informed by their local social and political contexts. That these contributions have come from Buenos Aires, Paris, London, Rome and St Petersburg was, perhaps, to be expected, and Aarhus in Denmark, Birthe Havmøller's hometown, could also have been predicted, but we have here materials from Stockholm, Zurich, Bologna, Estella in Navarre (Spain), Valparaíso (Chile), Mexico City, Seattle (USA) and Vancouver (Canada). So, while some are expressing their thoughts from liberal, more or less functioning democracies, other writings or artworks come from places where such political machinery, to the extent that it has ever existed, may be under threat. Sadly, though varying in degree, right now, almost everywhere is in the process of acknowledging how historical violence towards and the murder of women urgently needs to be countered. In what follows, the locations of contributors are indicated. Context helps explain content.

Secondly, consistent with our wanting to encourage dancers to express their thoughts, we deliberately widened the parameters of the kinds of materials we wanted to consider for inclusion (dancing academics don't need encouragement) beyond, but still including, the conventional "essay" format. Once the deadline passed, we were glad that we had. As you will see, however different from each other in type, most were of a quality which warranted inclusion in this unique

collection. As a consequence, stimulating, fairly formally-framed essays, are to be found next to looser opinion pieces, short, sometimes impassioned statements from dancers, and some more poetic or playful uses of language, not to mention the thoughtful and contrasting range of artworks.

Events have been moving rapidly. With a submission deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021, all the materials you see here were fashioned when the Pandemic was still raging, and many contributors were living in various states of Lockdown. *Queer Tango Futures* is a snapshot taken at a very particular moment in time. In one sense, as you now consider them, these contributions are already history. We think this a strength. This rich, diverse collection represents ideas from dancers who care passionately about queer tango, in work developed when opportunities actually to dance were few, and when the dangers from Covid-19 were at their worst. All of them address that question: “How should we do queer tango in a Post-Covid Future?” and we think all of them, sometimes in very different ways, will help stimulate the debate we need to have before the reconstruction of queer tango. As circumstances unfold, we urge you to test the relevance of these ideas, the better to help you and your queer tango communities – by agreeing, disagreeing, developing or otherwise reacting – create your own conceptions of what effective *Queer Tango Futures* might be, and to act, and dance accordingly in the years ahead.

We commend the work of *all* our contributors to you. We have arranged them to be adjacent to works touching similar themes – the themes which emerged from the submissions themselves – and to provide contrasting responses. In “Building a Post-Covid Queer Tango” our contributors meditate on where we have come from, and so, where we should go next, each reflecting on their contrasting experiences. If the term, “queer tango” has existed for twenty years or more, perhaps we have grown thoughtless in its use. In resurrecting queer tango, perhaps it is time for us to review if it is, or will be “Queer Enough Tango”? We follow this with some striking artworks, all responses to our central question: How should we do queer tango in a Post-Covid future? Has our radicalism grown too cosy? In “Radical Queer Inclusivity” authors (including me!) ask if this interruption might be a chance to review and renew what we might mean by “inclusivity”. Finally in the very best traditions of queer tango inclusivity to date, a collection of suggestions for the future from a wide range of different contributors about “What we Want”.

English or Spanish? We asked for and received submissions in English and in Spanish. Spanish is the historical language of tango, though the position with queer tango and language is less clear cut, given its particular history. Over the years, the Queer Tango Project has been grateful to a series of generous Spanish-speaking dancers who have helped us take steps towards trying to bridge the Spanish-English

linguistic, and so cultural divide. To date, we have had some successes, but the process is far from complete. We have been fortunate that Spanish-speaking Mori Plaschinski, queer tango dancer from Mexico, at present in Amsterdam, offered in November 2020 to help us in this work. Mori has assumed a pivotal role in the editing of this book. From the first, unlike earlier volumes, we were agreed that this book would include material in both languages. As a language, English can be a thug, and while we only have a few pieces in Spanish here, it is a start. We had reasoned that contributors with Spanish as their first language and no opportunity or desire to write in English or to have their work translated could then authentically express their views. From the point of view of readers speaking either language, unlike in the past, it is now perfectly possible to use the “document” feature of translation apps to secure “mechanical” translations of English texts into Spanish and Spanish into English, translations which, while inelegant and shorn of imagery, are pretty serviceable in terms of grasping an author’s original meaning.

Have any other common themes emerged? We leave it for you to discover but we cannot help remarking on one: time and again, the relationships between queer tango practices, purposes and effects are being considered alongside those of the various innovations in the practices and cultures of so-called mainstream tango, where same-sex dancing and more inclusive environments increasingly figure. It is open to question as to the extent to which the example of queer tango as a point of reference stimulated these changes and how much they are responses to social and political changes in the wider world with regard to gender and sexuality. Either way, given the frequency with which this territory is examined here, it seems inescapable that these developments are having/will have consequences for both sets of practices, even if it is as yet unclear what those consequences will be.

Please read/look at the materials here, and then let us know what you think! Best of all, post your thoughts, questions and suggestions on [The Queer Tango Conversation](#) so we can get this show on the road!

And let us hope that future generations will not judge us as naïve or foolish, in imagining that we *are* moving, be it ever so gradually, into an era when The Covid Pandemic will be over, and we can dance again.

Ray Batchelor  
London  
19<sup>th</sup> May 2021

# 1. Building a Post-Covid Queer Tango

## Construir comunidad y pertenencia dentro del tango queer

© Alex Pacheco

México

Cuando hablamos del futuro del tango queer una pregunta que emerge es si éste sigue siendo necesario como espacio separado o si ha cumplido su cometido y puede diluirse en el tango como totalidad. Esta pregunta tiene que ver con la relación que hay entre el tango queer y la comunidad del tango en general.

¿Cómo se construye y de qué está hecha esa relación? ¿Qué tensiones hay entre la necesidad de construir nuestros propios espacios y el deseo de tener incidencia y visibilidad dentro del tango *tradicional* o *no queer*? ¿Cuáles podrían ser las apuestas del tango queer al respecto en los tiempos que corren?

Hace 10 años (acá, en la Ciudad de México) la organizadora de una milonga *tradicional* nos pidió, a mí y a la amiga con quien tenía una relación en ese momento, que habláramos en privado. Nos llevó a una esquina de la pista y nos pidió *-por el bien de la milonga-* que fuéramos más discretas. Nos propuso que nos metiéramos al baño del parque si queríamos besarnos. Nos dijo que ya era suficientemente difícil para la gente que pasaba por ahí el ver a dos mujeres bailando juntas y nos pidió que, de preferencia, no lo hiciéramos tanto.

Una década después, estoy segura que nadie dentro de la comunidad milonguera sería capaz de hacer algo así. Incluida aquella organizadora, la cual pensaba en ese momento que sus acciones no tenían nada de malo y, quizás, ahora sería capaz de verlo de otra manera.

Estoy convencida de que algo así no podría volver a pasar. Especialmente, porque es más o menos claro que hoy gran parte de la comunidad del tango no lo permitiría.

La visibilidad que la práctica del tango queer ha obtenido dentro de la comunidad tanguera en general ha construido (por lo menos acá en la Ciudad de México) una especie de sentido común. Es de sentido común que no tiene nada de malo el intercambio de roles ni las parejas del mismo género. Es de sentido común que la discriminación por orientación sexual es, por lo menos, *políticamente incorrecta*.

Grandes maestros y bailarines de tango queer (Jathan Sánchez, Carlos Blanco y Rey Flores) son cada vez más reconocidos a nivel nacional, e invitados a dar clases y exhibiciones a muchísimas milongas de tango *no queer*.

Al mismo tiempo, impulsadas tanto por los vientos crecidos de los feminismos en el mundo, como por el amor al tango y el deseo de conocerlo completo, cada vez más milongueras están explorando el bailar ambos roles. Y decidiendo bailar juntas.

Es desde este lugar y este momento que escribo.

Pero también lo hago desde un país donde hay 10 feminicidios al día; y en el cual, solamente el año pasado, fueron asesinadas 117 personas de la comunidad LGBT+ (hubo un aumento del 27% respecto del año anterior).

Con estas cifras, ¿es posible decir que los espacios seguros ya no son necesarios?

Para mí siguen siendo vitales. Y, con esto, no estoy queriendo decir que siento que mi vida esté en riesgo dentro de la comunidad del tango. Pero el peligro de ser mujer y lesbiana en este país (y en el mundo) es real y brutal. Y es real la experiencia de vivir con ese riesgo inscrito en el cuerpo.

### **Tener un lugar siendo lo que somos**

Una de las motivaciones para la creación de espacios seguros es la pertenencia. La necesidad de reconocerse parte de una grupalidad que comparte experiencias, dolores, deseos, sueños y pesadillas.

Vivimos en un mundo capitalista, heteropatriarcal, colonial y racista. Todxs estamos atravesadxs de maneras particulares por esos entrecruzamientos de opresiones y violencias.

Por eso no es suficiente el sentido común que señala la discriminación contra lxs *otrxs* como políticamente incorrecta. Pues lo que hay es una experiencia sistemática y sistémica de que no pertenecemos y de que nuestra existencia tiene menos valor.

Mientras sigamos siendo *otrxs*, en relación a quienes simplemente *son*, nuestra experiencia de vida seguirá siendo la de nadar a contracorriente.

Los espacios seguros son eso: oasis de aguas tranquilas donde podemos simplemente *ser*.

Bailar. Desarrollarnos. Pertenecer no a pesar de lo que somos sino debido a ello. Tener un lugar siendo lo que somos. Una comunidad.

En México, aún no existe propiamente una comunidad de tango queer. Somos algunxs (muy pocxs) quienes nos reconocemos como parte de la comunidad internacional de tango queer y que intentamos generar propuestas desde el tango queer. Pero aún no tenemos ni milongas, ni espacios constantes de encuentro y de desarrollo como comunidad nacional de tango queer.

A mi parecer, esto opera como un círculo vicioso: somos demasiado pocxs para ser una comunidad y para, por ejemplo, sostener una milonga queer de manera periódica, por lo que nos mantenemos bailando y accionando mayoritariamente dentro de las esferas del tango *tradicional*. Y, en tanto nos mantenemos dentro de esa esfera, no contribuimos a crear espacios seguros o de pertenencia que posibiliten que más personas de la comunidad LGBTQ+ se acerquen al tango. Entonces, no crecemos y seguimos siendo demasiado pocxs para conformar una comunidad propia.

¿Qué ganamos y qué perdemos en la apuesta por ser *includxs* en el tango *tradicional*?

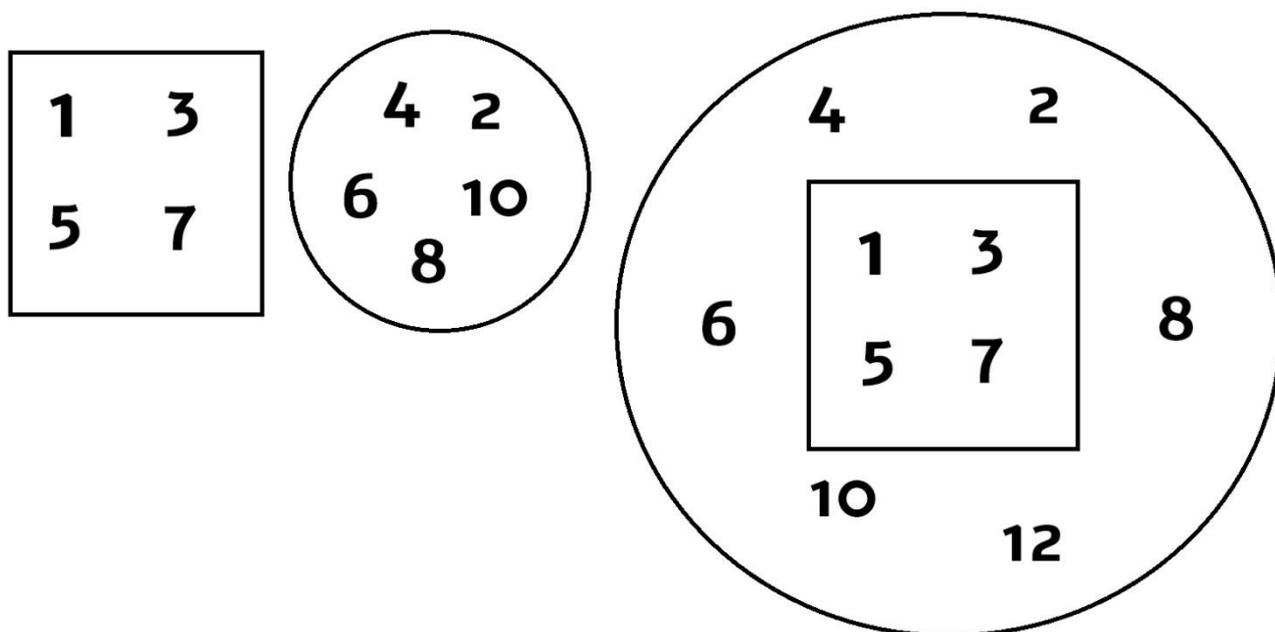


Diagram: pertenencia vs. inclusion.

## ¿Será que sí cabemos en la inclusión? ¿O nos queda chica?

Desde la teoría de conjuntos, podemos definir la diferencia entre inclusión y pertenencia de la siguiente manera. La relación de inclusión se da entre conjuntos y subconjuntos. Es decir, que podemos hablar de que un subconjunto está incluido en un conjunto mayor pues se encuentra dentro de éste. Pero no podemos decir que un subconjunto pertenece a ese conjunto mayor. Para hablar de pertenencia tenemos que hablar de que un elemento es parte de un conjunto y mantiene una relación con los otros elementos de ese conjunto. Entonces, no es lo mismo ser parte constitutiva de una comunidad y pertenecer; que estar dentro de una comunidad y ser incluidx por ésta.

¿Cuáles son las razones para no permanecer exclusivamente dentro de espacios seguros? ¿Qué queremos lograr cuando vamos a una milonga tradicional y decimos con nuestros cuerpos *¡nosotrxs también existimos y así bailamos!?*

He escuchado a personas de la comunidad del tango queer decir que es un error quedarnos encerradxs dentro de nuestros espacios, segregadxs en una especie de gueto. Y que tenemos que ir a los lugares de tango *tradicional* para irlos transformando de a poco con la visibilidad de nuestra *presencia sin disculpas*.

Y sí, la visibilización es vital. Puede generar nuevos sentidos comunes que, aunque insuficientes, son valiosos y, sin duda, ayudan a generar mejores condiciones para las luchas contra las violencias en general.

Hay otra motivación que tiene que ver con sabernos o querer sabernos parte de una comunidad tanguera más grande. De ser *includxs* o *pertenecer*. Con la esperanza de que si llegamos a estar includxs totalmente podemos dejar de nombrarnos desde la *diferencia* y ser todxs simplemente tanguerxs de una comunidad amplia, incluyente y armónica.

En uno de los conversatorios internacionales que nos permitió la virtualidad a la que esta pandemia nos arrojó, dentro del Chamuyo Queer International Tango Meeting,[1] emergió la discusión sobre si el tango queer desaparecerá en tanto que ya no sea necesario, pues cada vez más se puede bailar como se quiera en las milongas tradicionales. Una compañera dio una respuesta que me parece redirecciona la pregunta sobre el futuro del tango queer. Ella cambió el enfoque y dijo -palabras más, palabras menos- que si llegáramos a un momento donde el tango queer no fuese necesario (yo explicitaría: dónde no hubiera marginación, sexismo, lgtbfobia) lo que en realidad tendría que desaparecer es el tango tradicional. Dando paso a un tango que siempre y en todos lados sea un espacio de libertad.

Pues hay una cosa que no tiene vuelta: dentro de las “reglas” del tango queer cabemos todxs, incluida la pareja hombre/mujer. Por el contrario, ésa es la única pareja que cabe dentro de las “reglas” del tango tradicional.

Más allá de las denominaciones de *tango queer* o *tango tradicional*, si pensamos en términos de las lógicas, las prácticas y los discursos ¿Quién puede incluir a quién? ¿Quién puede diluirse para pertenecer? ¿Qué es lo que no tiene ya razón o necesidad de existir?

Me da la impresión de que frente a estas preguntas solemos dar la respuesta que sentimos que podemos dar. Nos imaginamos ese futuro del tango y deseamos ya no necesitar espacios seguros, pues deseamos dejar de vivir en un estado de cosas que nos mantiene al margen. Y claro, nos imaginamos entonces lo que está en nuestro control. Lo que nosotrxs podemos decidir es dejar nuestros espacios separados y diluirnos dentro del conjunto del tango en búsqueda de ese estado de pertenencia armónica.

Esto es algo que podemos hacer.

En cambio, si la respuesta que nos damos es la que la compañera nos dio en el conversatorio, si lo que pensamos que debería dejar de existir como entidad separada con sus propios códigos y lógicas es el tango *tradicional*, entonces esto escapa a nuestro control. Este proceso claramente no depende ya de nosotrxs. Reconocer esto es fundamental. No está de nuestro lado el poder de desmontar lo que otras personas deciden seguir reproduciendo.

Lo que está en nuestras manos es construir lo que nosotrxs necesitamos: la comunidad a la que pertenecemos, la valía y el gozo de ser quienes somos, la potencia de un tango que se renueva y crece libre y alegremente.

Y sí, también está en nuestras manos el camino de la visibilidad. La capacidad que tenemos como comunidad de incursionar en los espacios de tango tradicional y regalarles la posibilidad de asomarse a ver una verdad profunda: que su experiencia no es la experiencia universal.

Pero eso es todo lo que nosotrxs podemos hacer.

El que l@s compañer@s de la comunidad del tango no queer decidan ver esa verdad y accionar en concordancia, es algo que sólo dependerá de ell@s. [2]

Reconocer que su experiencia de vida, como personas o milonguer@s cisheterosexuales, no es la experiencia universal. Relativizar sus certezas a partir de reconocer que, así como no conocen en carne propia cómo es la vida de una persona de las disidencias sexogenéricas, tampoco saben cómo experimenta esta persona una milonga o una clase de tango tradicional. Reconocer que hay un montón de formas de violencia y marginación que ocurren en los espacios de tango y que no son percibidos desde su experiencia. Poder entender entonces el porqué la aceptación o la inclusión no son suficientes. Por qué no deseamos que nos *permitan* ser parte de un juego cuyas reglas básicas (pareja heterosexual, dominación hombre-mujer) nulifican y marginan nuestra existencia.

Todas estas son acciones y procesos necesarios para que algún día todxs pertenezcamos a una gran comunidad milonguera, y podamos decidir juntxs que el tango sea todo lo que puede ser.

Pero son acciones y procesos que no nos tocan a nosotrxs.

¿Será que nos corresponde, entonces, la pregunta sobre si sigue siendo necesario tener espacios separados? ¿O le corresponderá a alguien más esa pregunta?

¿Hacia dónde nos convendría dirigir nuestra energía? ¿Hacia qué preguntas?

## **Encontrarnos en las alegrías y en las tristezas**

¿Cómo construir comunidad desde el cuidado? ¿Podemos procurar genuinamente a alguien sin conocerle?

Una de las potencias del tango es el encuentro. La posibilidad de abrazar a otrx cuerpx, de reconocer a otra persona con todo lo que ella es y, desde ahí, dialogar. Hay un momento de comunión y de cercanía que pasa por conocernos a través del abrazo y del movimiento. ¿Cómo podríamos experimentar esa conexión más allá de la pista? ¿Qué pasaría si dentro de un espacio de tango queer decidimos contarnos lo que nos duele y lo que nos da alegrías?

En noviembre de 2019, en el espacio de reflexión política del 2do Festivalito de Tango Queer en Montevideo, lxs coordinadorxs nos propusieron una serie de dinámicas donde pasamos de encontrarnos con la mirada a contarnos historias, unx a unx, sobre cómo habíamos llegado al tango y al tango queer y sobre qué experiencias de violencia habíamos vivido dentro del mundo del tango. Lloramos, nos abrazamos, nos entendimos. Y fue desde esa vivencia compartida que empezó el conversatorio "Todo tango es político".

Al siguiente día del festival, el bailar con quiénes compartimos ese espacio de encuentro fue una experiencia mucho más rica. El encuentro estaba nutrido por la complicidad y el cariño/cuidado hacia quienes ahora habían adquirido, en el proceso de conocer sus historias, una mayor complejidad o completud. Como si ese cuerpo tuviera una mayor sensación de tridimensionalidad al contener historias y vivencias, y al sabernos conectadxs a través de éstas.

Quienes hemos atravesado experiencias de violencia sistémica conocemos el poder que nace de compartir lo vivido con nuestrxs iguales. Que alguien pueda atestiguar lo que he vivido a la vez que yo atestiguo su vivencia es la forma más profunda de sabernos acompañadxs.

Esto nos posibilita encontrar las lógicas que subyacen a las experiencias compartidas. Saber que esto no sólo me ha pasado a mí. Por lo tanto, no hay ninguna manera de que lo sucedido sea mi culpa. Las causas son siempre mucho más grandes de lo que alcanzo a mirar en mi experiencia concreta.

Es imposible nombrar (y combatir) el racismo, el sexismo, la lgbtfofia, la misoginia, sin antes pasar por el reconocimiento colectivo del carácter sistémico y social de nuestras vivencias individuales.

Así, la potencia que nace de compartir nuestras experiencias comunes de violencia y marginación, es múltiple. Por un lado, nos permite conocernos más profundamente, haciendo un tejido más cercano desde el cariño y el cuidado. Por el otro, nos permite ir construyendo miradas colectivas sobre las opresiones que nos atraviesan para así poder delinear juntxs estrategias antiopresivas y caminos para la transformación.

### **¿Qué tipo de comunidad queremos para nosotrxs?**

Hay algo más que ocurre cuando nos permitimos platicar con otras personas sobre nuestras experiencias de vida. De la misma manera en que podemos ubicar las cosas que compartimos, las semejanzas en lo que hemos vivido, también tenemos la oportunidad de mirar las diferencias que hay entre nosotrxs.

Al interior de los espacios de tango queer, aun compartiendo algunas formas de marginación, también hay opresiones y violencias que no nos atraviesan de la misma manera. En algunos momentos nos encontramos en distintos lados de la experiencia: quienes tenemos marginación / quienes tenemos privilegios.

Si podemos reconocer esto, podemos partir de la certeza de que también nosotrxs tenemos puntos ciegos en relación a la experiencia de lxs demás. También dentro

del tango queer se suceden formas de exclusión y de violencia que no todxs experimentamos ni alcanzamos a observar.

A mi parecer, aquí reside la tarea más grande y a la vez más potente de los espacios propios. Es en nuestros espacios dónde podemos tener una agencia mayor. En nuestros territorios nosotrxs podemos decidir cuáles son los protocolos, los acuerdos, las reglas y los códigos bajo los cuales nos encontraremos para bailar. Así, está en nuestras manos transformar no sólo las maneras en las que bailamos, sino en general cómo nos tratamos lxs unxs a lxs otrxs. Y qué formas de socialización y de tejidos comunitarios queremos construir.

Tenemos la posibilidad de mirar nuestras propias formas de reproducir y reforzar sistemas opresivos como el cis-sexismo, el racismo, el capacitismo, etcétera. Y podemos decidir asumir una responsabilidad de accionar para que nuestros espacios puedan ir siendo cada vez más espacios de liberación, de pertenencia y de alegría para todxs.

Finalmente, es claro que no es posible construir una sola respuesta a la pregunta sobre el futuro del tango queer. Cada comunidad y espacio sabrá cuáles son las necesidades y los retos que les toca enfrentar en sus circunstancias concretas. En cada país y ciudad las condiciones en las que se construye el tango queer son particulares. Así como son particulares las formas en que se expresa la violencia y la opresión en cada una de esas sociedades. Tampoco es lo mismo lo que entendemos por tango tradicional o no queer, en Buenos Aires, que en México, que en Rusia.

Me parece vital poder tener una mirada situada sobre estos procesos para poder delinear estrategias y caminos tanto locales como coordinados internacionalmente. Sin embargo, los anteriores han sido algunos elementos que pienso que podrían servir como claves para pensar los futuros del tango queer. Futuros que ojalá sean así: muchos, múltiples y de largo aliento.

## **Notas**

1. A inicios de la pandemia, en abril de 2020, el Chamuyo Queer International Tango Meeting tuvo que cancelar sus actividades presenciales ha realizarse en Valencia. Decidieron lanzar en su lugar una serie de conversatorios virtuales durante todos los domingos de mayo del 2020. Estas son algunas de las preguntas que plantearon para iniciar el diálogo: ¿Encontramos en el tango queer lo que esperábamos? ¿Qué más cosas nos gustaría que pasaran o que no pasaran? ¿Cómo construimos nuestro deseo de bailar con alguien o de una determinada manera? ¿Cómo generar un ambiente de tango queer de mayor cuidado?

2. Quizás un proceso en ese sentido, que valdría la pena observar, es el que se construye en Argentina desde espacios de encuentro y organización como el Frente Federal de Unidad Tanguera y la Asamblea Federal de Trabajadorxs del Tango donde si bien hay compañerxs del tango queer y disidente participando, no son espacios de tango queer ni necesariamente feministas y se han dispuesto a tener como ejes transversales de trabajo una mirada sobre el género y en contra de las violencias machistas.

### **Alex Pacheco (ella)**

Alex Pacheco baila tango social desde 2006. Se ha dedicado a impulsar talleres y espacios de encuentro entre mujeres y lesbianas desde la práctica del tango queer y feminista. Forma parte de la Colectiva La Revirada; así como del grupo Tango entre nosotras, en el cual se desempeña como facilitadora para el aprendizaje de ambos roles. Le interesa explorar el tango como herramienta para la construcción de redes y tejidos comunitarios que puedan ser espacios para la transformación social.

*This translation of Alex Pacheco's essay, Construir comunidad y pertenencia dentro del tango queer, has been made possible by the support of Abrazo Queer Tango, USA. We send our thanks to them.*

## **Constructing Community and Belonging Within Queer Tango**

© Alex Pacheco

Translated by Luna Beller-Tadiar

Mexico City, Mexico

When we talk about the future of queer tango, one of the questions that emerges is the question about if it is still necessary for queer tango to keep existing as a separate space or if it has fulfilled its mission and should now dissolve into tango in general. This question has to do with the relationship between queer tango and the tango community generally.

What is this relationship made up of, and how is it constructed? What tensions exist between the need to construct our own spaces and the desire to be impactful and visible within *traditional*, or *not-queer* tango? What do we want to achieve and what is at stake in the intersection of these two endeavors?

Ten years ago (here, in Mexico City), the organizer of a *traditional* milonga asked me and the friend with whom, at the time, I had a relationship, to talk to her privately. She took us to a corner of the dance floor and asked us – for the good of the milonga (sake) – to be more discreet. She suggested we go to the park bathroom if we wanted to kiss each other. She told us that it was already difficult enough for the people who came there to see two women dancing together and asked us to please not do it so much.

A decade later, I'm sure no one in the tango community would even think about doing something like that – including that organizer, who at the time clearly thought that there was nothing wrong with her actions and, perhaps, now might be able to see them in another light.

I am convinced that something like this could no longer happen especially because it is fairly clear that, today, a large part of the tango community would not allow it.

The visibility that queer tango has gained in the general tango community has created, at least here in Mexico City, a sort of shared understanding, a kind of common consensus. It is the understanding that there is nothing wrong with changing roles, nor with couples of the same gender. It is now commonly agreed that discrimination based on sexual orientation is, at least, *politically incorrect*.

Great queer tango teachers and dancers (Jathan Sánchez, Carlos Blanco and Rey Flores) are increasingly recognized at a national level and are invited to give classes and perform at many *not-queer* milongas here in Mexico.

At the same time, motivated as much by the growing waves of feminism in the world as by a love of tango and a desire to encounter it fully, more and more women tango dancers are exploring both roles, and deciding to dance together.

It is from this place and this moment that I write.

But I also write from a country in which there are 10 women killed every day; in which, just last year, 117 people from the LGBT+ community were killed (a 27% increase from the year prior).

With these numbers, is it possible to say that safe spaces are no longer necessary?

To me they continue to be vital. And by this I do not mean to say that I feel my life to be in danger inside the tango community. But the danger of being a woman and a lesbian in this country (and in the world) is real and brutal. And real, too, is the experience of living with this risk inscribed in one's body.

## **To Have a Place Being What We Are**

One of the motivations for creating safe spaces is that of belonging. The need to recognize oneself as part of a group that shares experiences, hurts, desires, dreams, and nightmares.

We live a capitalist, hetero-patriarchal, colonial, and racist world, which means that we are all affected in particular ways by these intersections of oppressions and violences.

This is why it is not enough to have a 'common agreement' that marks discrimination of "others" as politically incorrect. For what exists is a systematic and systemic experience in which we don't belong, and our existence has less value.

While we continue to be *others*, in relation to those who simply *are*, our experience of life will continue to be one of struggling to swim against the current.

Safe spaces are this: oases of calm waters in which we can simply be.

Where we can dance. Grow. Belong not in spite of what we are but because of it. Have a place being what we are. A community.

In Mexico, there is no real queer tango community yet. There are a few of us (very few) who recognize ourselves as part of the international queer tango community and work hard towards making real the aspirations of queer tango. But we still do not have milongas, nor consistent meeting spaces in which to grow a national queer tango community.

It seems to me that this operates in a vicious cycle: we are too few to be a community and to, for example, sustain a regular queer milonga, which is why we continue to dance and to operate within the *traditional* tango sphere. And, inasmuch as we move mostly in that sphere, we don't create spaces of safety or belonging that would allow more people in the LGBT+ community to find tango. And so we don't grow, and continue to be too few to constitute a community of our own.

What do we gain and what do we lose in the wager to be *included* in *traditional* tango?

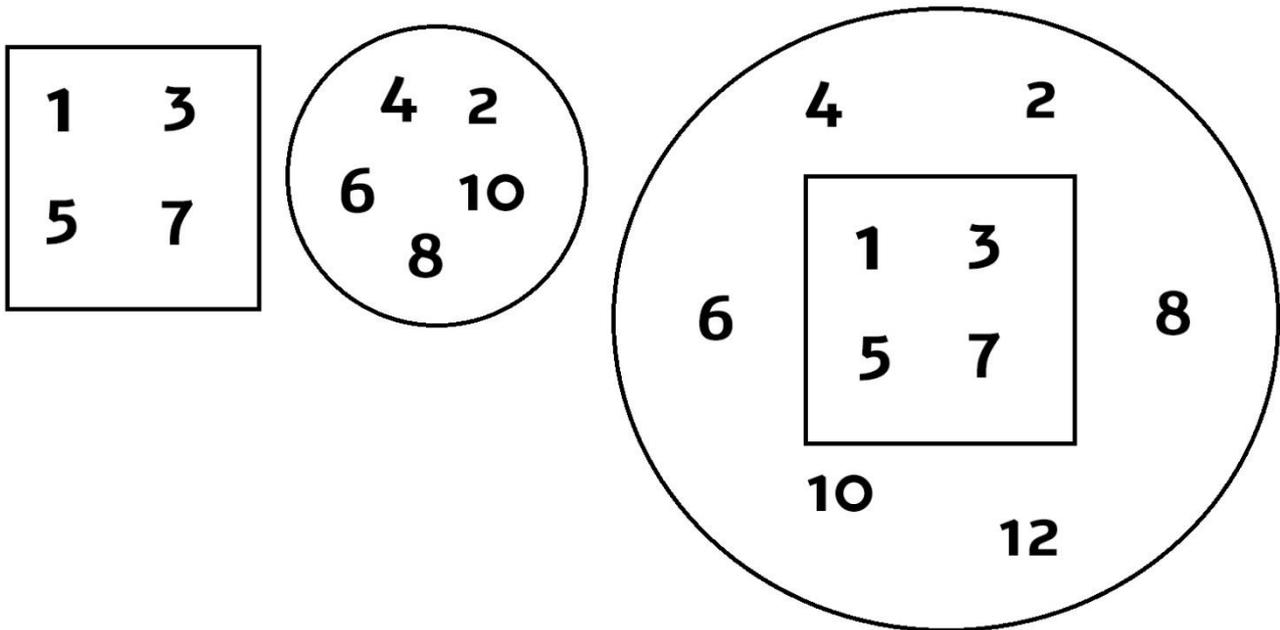


Diagram: belonging vs. inclusion.

## Do We Fit Inside Inclusion? Or Is It A Little Small?

Using set theory, we can define the difference between inclusion and belonging in the following way. The relation of inclusion occurs between sets and subsets. Which is to say that we can talk about a subset as included in a bigger set because it is found inside of the latter. But we cannot say that a subset belongs to this bigger set. In order to talk about belonging we have to talk about an element that is part of a set and maintains a relation with the other elements of this set. Therefore, being a constitutive part of a community and belonging is not the same as being inside a community and being included by it.

What are the reasons not to remain exclusively within safe spaces? What do we wish to achieve when we go to a traditional milonga and say with our bodies: *we too exist, and this is how we dance!*

I have heard people in the queer tango community say it is a mistake to keep ourselves shut up inside our own spaces, segregated into a kind of ghetto. They say we must go to traditional tango places in order to transform them, little by little, through our visibility and *unapologetic presence*.

And yes, visibility is vital. It can generate new kinds of common understanding, which, though insufficient, are valid, and certainly help create better conditions for the fight against violences in general.

There is another motivation that has to do with knowing – or wanting to know – ourselves to be part of a larger tango community. To be *included* or *belong*. To the point of thinking that if we are totally included then we can stop naming ourselves as our *difference* and all simply be tango dancers, part of an open, inclusive, and harmonic community.

In one of the international meetings made possible by the virtuality into which this pandemic has thrown us, part of the Chamuyo Queer International Tango Meeting [1], there emerged this discussion about whether queer tango would disappear if it became unnecessary, since it is increasingly possible to dance as one wishes in traditional milongas. One woman gave a response that seems to me to redirect the question of queer tango's future. She changed the focus and said – more or less – that if we reached a moment in which queer tango was no longer necessary (explicitly: in which there were no marginalization, no sexism, or LGBT-phobia) then it would actually be traditional tango that had to disappear, making way for a tango that would be always and everywhere a space of freedom.

For there is one thing from which there's no turning back: we *all* fit into the "rules" of queer tango, the man/woman couple included. On the other hand, this is the only couple that fits into the "rules" of traditional tango.

Beyond the names of *queer* tango or *traditional* tango, if we think about the logics, the practices, and the discourses, who can include whom? Who can dissolve in order to belong? What no longer has a reason or need to exist?

I get the sense that, faced with these questions, we usually give the answers we feel we can give. We imagine this tango future and we wish to no longer need safe spaces, because we wish to stop living in a state of things that keeps us on the margins. And, of course, we imagine what is within our control. What we can decide to do is to leave our separate spaces and dissolve ourselves inside the tango set in search of that state of harmonic belonging.

That's something we can do.

On the other hand, if the answer we give ourselves is the one that this dancer gave us in the Chamuyo conversation, if we think that what should stop existing as a separate entity with its own codes and logics is *traditional* tango, then that escapes our control. That process, clearly, does not depend on us. Recognizing this is fundamental. It is not within our power to dismantle what others decide to keep reproducing.

What *is* in our hands is the construction of what we need: the community to which we belong, the worth and enjoyment of being who we are, the power of a tango that renews itself and grows freely and joyfully.

And yes, also in our hands is the path of visibility. The ability that we have as a community to venture into traditional tango spaces and gift them the possibility of looking beyond themselves and seeing a profound truth: that their experience is not the universal experience.

But that is all we can do.

For the members of the *not-queer* tango community to decide to see this truth and to act in accordance is something that depends solely on them.[2]

To recognize that their life experience, as cis-heterosexual people or tango dancers, is not universal. To relativize their certainties by recognizing that just as they do not know what life is like for a person of non-normative gender and/or sexuality, they

also do not know how that person experiences a traditional tango milonga or class. To recognize that there are many forms of violence and marginalization that occur in tango spaces that they do not perceive. To be able to understand, then, why acceptance and inclusion are not enough. Why we don't want them to *allow* us to be part of a game whose basic rules (heterosexual binary couple, man-woman domination) nullify and marginalize our existence.

All of these actions and processes are necessary for us to one day all belong to one great big tango community and be able to decide, together, for tango to be everything it can be.

But these actions and processes are not up to us.

So then, is the question, are separate spaces still necessary, a question for us? Or is that a question for someone else?

Where should we direct our energy? Towards what questions?

### **Finding Each Other In Joy And Sorrow**

How do we construct community from a place of care? Can we genuinely care for someone without knowing them?

One of the powers of tango is the encounter. The possibility of embracing another body, of recognizing another person and all that they are, and beginning dialogue from there. There is a moment of communion and closeness that is made possible by meeting through the embrace and movement. How can we feel this connection beyond the dance floor? What would happen if, within a queer tango space, we decide to share what hurts us and what brings us joy?

On November 2019, in a space for political reflection during the second edition of Montevideo Queer Tango Festivalito, the coordinators proposed a series of exercises in which we met each other with the *mirada* and then told each other stories, one by one, of how we had gotten to tango and to queer tango, and of the violences we had experienced in the tango world. We cried. We hugged. We understood each other. And it was from this sharing of lived experience that we began the collective conversation session, "All tango is political."

The next day of the festival, dancing with those with whom we shared that space was an even richer experience, nourished by complicity and by care for those who had now acquired, in the process of getting to know them, a greater complexity or wholeness. As if we could feel that body's three-dimensionality even more strongly,

knowing it contained stories and experiences, and knowing ourselves to be connected through them.

Those of us who have experienced systematic violences know the power that emerges when we share those experiences with our peers. For someone to bear witness to what I have experienced, and, at once, for me to bear witness to what they have experienced, is the most profound way of knowing ourselves not to be alone.

This makes it possible for us to find the logics that underpin these shared experiences. To know that this did not happen only to me. Which means that there is no way that what happened is my fault. The causes are always much bigger than what I am able to see in my concrete experience.

It is impossible to name (and fight) racism, sexism, LGBT-phobia, and misogyny without a collective recognition of the systematic character of our individual lived experiences.

Thus, the power born from sharing our common experiences of violence and marginalization is multiple. On the one hand, it allows us to know each other more deeply, to weave a closer-knit fabric of care. On the other hand, it allows us to build collective analyses of the oppressions that affect us, and so develop, together, anti-oppressive strategies and paths towards transformation.

### **What Kind Of Community Do We Want?**

There is something else that happens when we allow ourselves to discuss our life experiences with others. Just as we can situate the things we share, the similarities of our experiences, we also have the opportunity to look at the differences between us.

Within queer tango spaces, even while we share some kinds of marginalization, there are some oppressions and violences that do not affect us in the same ways. Sometimes we even find ourselves on opposite sides of the experience: those who are marginalized and those who are privileged.

If we can recognize this then we can begin our work with the certainty that we, too, have blind spots with respect to the experiences of others. Within queer tango, too, there occur forms of exclusion and violence that we do not all experience or are not all able to see.

It seems to me that here lies the biggest, but also most powerful, task of our own spaces. On our own territory, we can decide what the protocols are, decide on the agreements, rules, and codes with which we come together to dance. In our hands, then, is the transformation of not only the ways in which we dance, but of the ways in which we treat each other – and of the kinds of socialization and social fabric we want to construct.

We have the possibility of looking at our own ways of reproducing and reinforcing oppressive systems such as cis-sexism, racism, ableism, etc. And we can decide to take on the responsibility of operating in a way that allows our spaces to become, more and more, spaces of liberation, of belonging, and of joy for all.

Finally, it is clear that it's not possible to formulate a single answer to the question of the future of queer tango. Each community and each space will know what their specific needs and challenges are, given their concrete circumstances. In each country and city, the conditions within which we build queer tango are particular. Just as forms of violence and oppression in each society are specific. What we understand by traditional or not-queer tango also varies, in Buenos Aires, in Mexico, in Russia.

To me it seems vital to have a situated analysis of these processes in order to sketch out strategies and paths, both internationally coordinated and local. However, the above have been some ideas that I think may serve as key elements for thinking the futures of queer tango. Futures that, hopefully, will be like this: many, multiple, and long-lived.

## **Notes**

1. At the beginning of the pandemic, in April 2020, the Chamuyo Queer International Tango Meeting had to cancel its face-to-face activities to be held in Valencia. They decided to launch instead a series of virtual conversations every Sunday in May 2020. These are some of the questions they posed to initiate the dialogue: Did we find in queer tango what we expected? What else would we like to see happen or not happen? How do we build our desire to dance with someone or in a certain way? How to create a more careful queer tango environment?

2. To this point, perhaps a process worth observing is the one being generated in Argentina by meeting and organizing spaces such as the Frente Federal de Unidad Tanguera and the Asamblea Federal de Trabajadorxs del Tango, which, while involving the participation of queer and dissident tanguerxs, are not queer or even

necessarily feminist tango spaces, and have arranged themselves so as to have perspectives on gender and against sexist violence as key parts of their work.

### **Alex Pacheco (ella)**

Alex Pacheco has been a social tango dancer since 2006. She has dedicated herself to promoting workshops and meeting spaces between women and lesbians through the practice of queer and feminist tango. She is part of Colectiva La Revirada; as well as the group Tango entre nosotras, in which she works as a facilitator for learning both roles. She is interested in exploring tango as a tool for the construction of community bonds and networks that can be spaces for social transformation.

# The Double Role Tango Movement in Sweden - A Queer and / or Feminist Project?

© Henny Stridsberg, Malin Backström, Silvia Bruzzone  
Stockholm, Sweden

## Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to outline the specificities of what can be called the Swedish way of the queer tango movement and to try to delineate some future perspectives. We will first present the historical framework in which a queer tango scene emerged in Stockholm in the beginning of the 2000s, as the affirmation of a norm-critical and gender-political agenda – aiming to criticise heteronormativity and to work for gender equality both on the dance floor and in society. The first initiatives developed and have in the last years consolidated in the project of the so-called “double role tango” among women (but not only among women). It is a feminist project brought about by both queer and straight women, which is attracting also more and more men. In parallel to this trend, and in connection with it, in the last part we discuss the reappropriation of the term “queer” by LGBTQ tango dancers willing to organize specific “queer” tango events and attract other LGBTQ people to tango dancing.

By “double role” we mean the same as dual role. We prefer to use the term double role as it is closer to the Swedish “dubbelroll”, that was inspired by Totally in Tango's use of the term “double role”.

## Background

Sweden is a country that has long been in the forefront internationally concerning both LGBTQ rights and equality between the sexes. For example, women obtained the right to vote in 1921, homosexuality was legalized in 1944 and a gender-neutral marriage law was introduced in 2009.

It is therefore not surprising that queer tango was introduced rather early in Sweden, despite the fact that the Swedish tango scene was comparatively small at the time. It was the pioneer Charlotte Rivero who started and developed queer tango in Sweden. Rivero started with classes in leading for followers and classes in role exchange as early as 2000, and these activities would later develop into “queer tango” – a term she was the first in Sweden to use for her classes. Rivero gave the first official queer tango class together with Sabine Berge in 2005. In 2006 Rivero founded the school, Tangoverkstan – Roles in motion® which is still active, and which is characterized by a gender/queer/norm-critical pedagogy and mixed participant groups with regard to sex/gender and sexuality.

In 2007 Rivero organized the first Stockholm International Queer Tango Festival. At that time there was only one other queer tango festival, organized in Hamburg since 2001, but later in 2007 a queer tango festival also started in Buenos Aires. The Stockholm International Queer Tango Festival took place every year between 2007 and 2013. Rivero also organized regular queer prácticas / practilongas during those years, but since 2014 they have only appeared very sporadically (for instance at Pride weeks).

In parallel with Rivero's activities, others active in Sweden – many of them former students of Rivero – started to create their own queer courses in different couple dance genres. In 2010, for example, Malin Backström and Peter Helm founded QueerSalsa Stockholm (today this school is led by Peter Helm and Johan Björk under the same name). In 2012 Backström and Lotta Bohlin initiated a – nowadays international – tango retreat for women at the feminist school Kvinnohöjden ("Women's hill")[1] in the Swedish countryside. This retreat and Backström's double role tango courses at Wiks folkhögskola (since 2012) have become important new places for the development of double role tango dancing and learning.

In 2015 Gabriella Berggren started Följare för, as a self-instructing group for experienced followers who wanted to practise leading. After three years the group decided to engage Malin Backström and (a little later) Henny Stridsberg as teachers. The self-instructing group thus turned into more regular courses that were growing fast. Early in 2020 – before Covid-19 – in Stockholm alone, there were around 70 women participating in the courses in leading for followers ("Följare för"), today organized by Backström and Stridsberg. Lately, Backström has also started courses in following for leaders ("Förare följer") in collaboration with Stridsberg. In this context, Milonga Queerida[2] and Praktika Dubbelt upp[3] were started up in 2020 – addressing both queer and double role dancers – thus adding to already existing "open-minded" tango spaces such as Practica Humilde organized by Fotini Gerani since 2014.

In Gothenburg, the second city of Sweden, queertango courses and practicas were started in 2012 by Mikael Dexlöv and Kristin Bjarnadottir. (Rivero had also held some short, inspirational courses in Gothenburg before that). In 2013 Dexlöv and Bjarnadottir organized the first Queer Tango Mini Festival Gothenburg, a festival that since then, Dexlöv has continued to organize together with the German tango teacher Andreas Lehrke (the 8th edition was held in January 2020). Bjarnadottir has since continued sporadically to give queer tango workshops in Gothenburg with different partners.

## What is queer in couple dance in Sweden?

In 2012 dance archivist Anna Nyander started documenting the growing phenomena of “queer” couple dance activities in Sweden through the study of four different genres: tango, salsa, lindyhop and polska[4]. In the article “Queer dance: the wish to be oneself at the dance floor”[5] from 2014, Nyander and Stålnér ask the question what differentiates “queer” courses from other couple dance courses – considering that both same-sex dancing and gender-neutral teaching had been present in Sweden since the 1970s, for example within same-sex latin and ballroom dancing (since the late 1990s) and within the folk-dance scene (since the 1970s). The interviews they held with different Swedish queer dance teachers in 2013 (among them Rivero, Backström and Helm) show that, compared to previous experiences, the “new” queer dance pedagogies at that time could be defined as being driven by a more conscious norm-critical and gender-political agenda – aiming to criticize heteronormativity and work for gender equality both on the dance floor and in overall society (Nyander and Stålnér, 2014).

According to Backström, who since 1998 was already highly involved in the Swedish same-sex latin and ballroom scene, same-sex dancing was at that time primarily a LGBTQ political project. The most important issue was to make it possible for 1) people of the same sex to dance together, and 2) women being allowed to lead and to act and dress “masculine”, and for men to be allowed to follow and act and dress “feminine”. Backström’s account seems to be supported by Rivero’s first experience of the International Queer Tango Festival in Hamburg in 2003: Rivero was a little disappointed to find that the festival was more “gay” than “queer” – in the sense that it was more about same-sex dancing than about “roles in motion” or about new ways of perceiving leader and follower roles. The female leaders were all dressed in masculine clothes while all the followers were very feminine, and Rivero and her partner were the only ones changing roles during the dance (Nyander and Stålnér, 2014).

Backström claims that when she went from teaching same-sex dance for LGBTQ people into teaching salsa and lindyhop – and later tango – with queer pedagogy, many of the participants were the same people. So, it is definitely possible to talk about a continuum between same-sex and queer dancing.

Since the beginning there has been no easy way to define what “queer” couple dancing is, which is probably a good sign – considering that openness and a reluctance to impose any kind of categorization are at the core of the queer movement. However, in 2014 it was possible to talk about a central and common dance didactic strategy in queer couple dance courses in Sweden: the teaching of both leading and following to all course participants, as well as an aim to separate

these roles from traditional gender roles. This is for example done by talking about “leaders” and “followers” instead of men and women during classes, but also by questioning stereotypes and some unequal presumptions about the roles and images that have traditionally been associated with them – such as the idea that the leader is the one who invites and is the active one and “decides” in the dance, while the follower is invited, passive and “just” follows.

According to the queer dance teachers interviewed by Nyander and Stålnér, the exchange of roles was perceived by that time as a new norm within the new “queer” couple dance practices – a norm that it is (still) believed makes couple dance practice more inclusive. More inclusive to those who wish to be able to dance with people of the same sex, as well as to those who wish to explore both roles and / or who don’t feel comfortable in adapting to conventional gender roles and expressions in the dance. In this sense, the queer dance teachers claimed that queer dancing holds the potential of being more equal. And that learning both roles also allows for a fuller comprehension of the dance.

In 2013 Nyander and Stålnér conducted a survey with queer dance participants. Many of them perceived couple dance courses announced as “queer” as safe spaces, and some of them claimed to dance exclusively in contexts announced as queer. From those interviews it also emerges that at that time, despite an increasing visibility, it was still problematic for people dancing with same sex partners to feel accepted in couple dance courses and social events. Participants reported a risk of complaints and discrimination which made many of them feel insecure to visit couple dance occasions not announced as queer.

The interviewed queer dance teachers expressed a wish that queer dancing should also be visible and take place outside specifically queer environments, in order to influence couple dancing in general. They all emphasized the importance of reaching different groups of dancers and not limiting queer dancing to LGBTQ people, and that is why they sometimes used the word queer when naming their courses and sometimes not[6]. For them the objective would be to change the norms in the couple dance world, to create dance environments where more people can feel comfortable and included.



*Double role tango workshop given by Malin Backström at Wiks folkhögskola, Sweden, November 2017. Photo credits: Malin Backström*

## **Tango between women – a queer and / or feminist practice?**

Today in 2020 there is no doubt that women in particular are claiming space on the Swedish tango floors – leading and dancing with other women. As the Swedish tango dancer and leader, Karen Lewis, comments on Facebook (2020) there was in 2009 only about five women leading in the Stockholm milongas, while today women leading is more the rule than the exception. This might be a bit of an exaggeration, but nonetheless it bears some truth. Some norms do seem to have changed rapidly in the last years, and this is the reason why we suggest talking about a growing double role tango movement in Sweden (some people would even want to call it a “revolution”, a “boom”, a “turn” or “paradigm-shift”).

The women-separatist tango retreat taking place at Kvinnohöjden since 2012 is one important factor behind this change. As Stridsberg shows (2018), this place has made a significant difference for many women, making it possible for them to start leading in mainstream milongas, and not only in the women-separatist or queer tango circuits. The tango courses and prácticas at Kvinnohöjden provide a safe space to learn to lead and gain confidence in one’s own leading, as well as a place to form supportive alliances (for instance, to help each other to dare to go into mainstream milongas) and to find tango partners to dance with in milongas. According to several participants, the women-separatist nature of this tango retreat has facilitated such “empowering” processes in several ways. In 2017 (Stridsberg, 2018), participants report for instance that it is easier to invite and assume the leading role in the tango practice at Kvinnohöjden – because in the absence of men, the women are expected to take the leading role and to dance with each other. They also find it easier to overcome their uncertainties about leading in this place, thanks to the “allowing”, “patient” and “kind” learning atmosphere. They believe that such an ambience is partly created thanks to an inclusive and non-judgmental tango pedagogy. But many of them also think it is easier to learn to lead in a group of people who are experienced followers. For all these reasons, many of the participants in 2017 considered women-separatist places where they can learn tango as important (Stridsberg, 2018).

On this topic it is relevant to say that, if the majority of women attending Kvinnohöjden have historically been lesbian or bi-sexual, the tango courses have attracted many heterosexual women. The group of women learning and practising tango at Kvinnohöjden is today mixed in terms of sexuality, with a majority of heterosexual women. This also reflects the population attending the courses in leading for followers, today taking place mostly in Stockholm but also increasingly in other parts of the country.[7] As for the other double role courses and events we have considered elsewhere, the participants are today mostly heterosexual women (approximately 75-80%[8]).[9]

This reality explains why the use of the term “queer tango” has become a less obvious choice, both for tango courses and social dancing events. In the process of initiating a new milonga in Stockholm in 2020, the authors of this article reflected on the relevance of using the term “queer”, and decided on the name “Milonga Queerida” – which refers to the word queer while maybe leaving the interpretation more open. Judging from the great interest in this new milonga as well as in its “sister-practica”, Practica Dubbelt upp, it is possible to say there is today a wish for more social dance venues where double role dancing is explicitly encouraged, as well as for queer tango environments where LGBTQ people can feel safe and non-questioned. So far, these new events have attracted both LGBTQ and heterosexual participants.

Being mostly led by women, the growing double role movement in Sweden could definitely be considered as a feminist project, according to what we have discussed so far. Heterosexual women express that they are “tired of waiting” to be invited, and tired of dancing only with men. But, if it might be reasonable to consider using other labels than “queer” to describe this movement, one could actually argue that this tango practice between women – independently of sexuality – also brings a queer political critic which we consider still relevant in the Swedish context.

In her article “What is queer tango?”, Rivero (2006) argues that: “The tango codes are disciplining dancers into a world where differences between women and men are made very explicit.” It is possible to say that a “heterosexual matrix”[10] is upheld and reproduced when the dance roles are linked to a certain sex / gender, and when expressions of masculinity are reserved for men and femininity for women (such as clothing norms) – with the result of hindering both same-sex dancing, explorations of the “other” role and of self-expression outside of the binary gender system. Although such a heteronormative discourse could still be considered as (implicitly) dominant in Sweden, it is without any doubt being increasingly challenged. On the one hand, by the queer pedagogies described above. On the other hand, by the increasingly visible tango practice between women (and between some men), as well as by the double role practice on the Swedish tango floors. We would argue that these practices could also be considered as queer practices, in the sense that they are destabilizing the “traditional heteronormative tango discourse” (Rivero, 2006). They do so as they introduce more diversity – in terms of representations and appropriations of the tango – as well as more space for exploring a wider range of relations between women – as well as (hopefully more and more) between men.

## Questions / Perspectives on the future

From what we have mentioned so far, we can outline two main perspectives – one already consolidated and a potential one – in queer tango today in Sweden (Stockholm).

The first perspective refers to the affirmation of a double role practice and project, mainly developed by women. It emerged as a feminist project, which is grounded in the queer tango movement in Stockholm (with Rivero, Backström, Stridsberg and others) as well as in feminist experiences such as Kvinnohöjden and the collective Följare för-initiative.

Our ongoing dialogue with women starting to assume the leading role shows that this process is not always easy. Some of them claim not to feel fully legitimate in leading in mainstream milongas. At the same time there is a persistent power imbalance between the dance roles, whereby leading is often perceived as being more difficult and, in a way, more important. In reaction to that, the new appropriations of dance roles experienced in tango learning among women let new feelings emerge of agency, mutuality and gentleness that some women in (mainstream) tango lack. In some cases, women have even expressed relief at not having to submit to what is perceived as violence from male leaders on the dance floor either verbally, in the form of negative feedback/comments such as “You are not following what I lead”, “You are too heavy”, “No, you should do it like this...”, or physically, as in being “held too hard” or “forced” into movements. Some women have also experienced being deliberately “pushed” or “elbowed” by men from other couples when leading on the dance floor. Such experiences seem to suggest that tango learning among women is (still) relevant in the Swedish context today.

This is something particularly interesting to observe as Sweden is acknowledged to be one of the most advanced countries in terms of gender equality. One might expect that the values of gender equality might have affected tango practices as well. This is partially true, and is confirmed by the high number of women leading in comparison, for example, to southern European countries. Nonetheless, this does not mean that women’s leading role in Sweden is unquestioned and perceived as fully legitimate.

At the same time, what is also observable is the fact that more and more men are willing to learn to follow, and courses – such as “Following leaders” (Backström and Stridsberg) and practice groups – such as Tango Mango (an initiative by Magnus Nodelijk) – starting being to organized. In this sense, one can talk of a certain questioning of traditional roles also by (some) heterosexual men. This could be said to be mirroring the more gendered equal position that Swedish men assume in

wider society, where they increasingly take on roles and responsibilities traditionally assigned to women.

So, until now, we have identified a queer-feminist practice affirming itself, even though the “queer tango” is not put at the front. A second future perspective may develop specifically from this point. Earlier in this article we have seen that the early queer tango practitioners in Sweden such as Charlotte Rivero and others shared a vision whereby values and practices related to queer tango – such as equality and inclusivity – would ideally finally spread to bring a redefinition of norms within mainstream tango. In this sense, queer tango was never intended exclusively for LGBTQ people while the main focus was on double role learning/dancing, exchanging dance roles and liberating these from gender.

We have suggested that such a redefinition of norms is currently taking place, and that heterosexual women are taking an active part in this change.

This leads to the question: what about LGBTQ people then? To what extent do they feel welcome and included in the tango scene in Stockholm and Sweden?[11] And more broadly, who *is* excluded from it? We believe it is today relevant to continue to use the “queer” word in tango in Sweden and Stockholm. We have seen that explicit queer events – such as “Milonga Queerida” (January-February 2020) – have attracted people who do not normally attend mainstream milongas. This concerns both LGBTQ people (mostly the older generations) feeling safer in queer spaces, as well as younger people (regardless of sexuality) seemingly attracted by “queer values”. In this regard, as London-based queer tango practitioner Ray Batchelor (2019) suggests in a recent article, we believe that – in order to stay politically relevant and inclusive – the queer tango of tomorrow should continuously investigate how to address types of discrimination other than gender – and sexuality-related ones such as those related to ethnicity, religion, disability or age. It is in this sense that this second perspective represents more of a new questioning than a clear and already consolidated trend.

In this article, we have shown that it is not possible to talk about one queer tango project in Sweden, and we have put forward at least two perspectives. On the one hand, a double role project affirms itself among a mostly heterosexual public, and, on the other hand, there is a wish for (new) queer social dance spaces. To our knowledge there have been no regular queer prácticas or milongas in Stockholm between 2014-2019, so the “queer tango” scene has been quite invisible during this period. These perspectives are, by the way, nourished by an international dimension. Many Swedish dancers in fact take part in both queer tango festivals, such as the ones in Berlin and Oldenburg, as well as in double role events, such as

“Totally in Tango”. And some of the Swedish events (such as the tango retreat at Kvinnohöjden and the tango courses at Wiks folkhögskola) attract more and more international participants (both queer and straight).

From what we have set out so far, it should be now clear that the two perspectives are not opposing or separated entities but are always in interplay and, to some extent, even overlapping. This suggests that a double strategy in teaching and in the organization of social dance events may be appropriate and desirable in the future.

## Notes

1. Kvinnohöjden is a feminist course and guesthouse where courses for women have been organized since 1986. The school welcomes cis- and trans women with a female personal identity number. Every summer since 2000, a couple dance week has been organized there, by Backström together with different partners. At first, the genre was same-sex latin and ballroom dancing, then salsa and lindyhop, and from 2012 the dance week has developed into a double role tango retreat with more and more international participants.
2. Milonga Queerida was initiated by Henny Stridsberg, Silvia Bruzzone and Malin Backström in January 2020. From 2021 this milonga will change its name to avoid being mixed up with the Queer Tango Marathon Queerida in Riga.
3. The name “Dubbelt upp” refers to double roles. This práctica was initiated in December 2019 and is being run by some of Backström’s students from one of the leading courses for followers – Jessica Carleson, Arja Stenholm and Marja Haapalainen.
4. Polska is a Swedish folk dance.
5. Nyander, Anna and Stålnér, Elsa. (2014). “Queerdans: om önskan att få vara den man är på dansgolvet”. In *Noterat: svenskt visarkiv*, n°21
6. Other words used in the Swedish context have been for example “Tango with open roles”, “Roles in motion”, “both-role tango” or “Tango with gender pedagogy”. The teaching of both roles to all participants remains a central strategy in these courses.
7. For instance in the Swedish cities Norrköping, Umeå and Karlstad.
8. Our estimation.
9. To be compared with Rivero’s classes where, in 2007, the participants were more evenly distributed, both concerning gender and sexuality (Holago, 2007). It seems to be especially queer/gay men that have disappeared from the tango scene in Stockholm during the last 7-8 years. Maybe at least partly because there have been fewer tango events named "queer"? However, an increasing number of heterosexual men are seen following in the Stockholm tango scene – and the demand for a following course for leaders, in which around 15-20 men are engaged today, also indicates this change.

10. Judith Butler's queer theory of the "heterosexual matrix" as a system regulating mandatory heterosexuality refers to the socially dominant idea that the individual should adopt a gender and sexuality aligned with their biological sex (Butler, 1999).
11. One could compare this with the school QueerSalsa Stockholm which has attracted a notably higher number of LGBTQ people as well as younger people to their activities, compared to the tango scene.

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*Top: The International Both Role Tango Retreat for Women at Kvinnohöjden, Sweden, August 2-8, 2020. Bottom: Open air queer tango milonga in Stockholm, Sweden, July 2020. Photo credits: Malin Backström.*

## **Henny Stridsberg (she/her)**

Henny Stridsberg started teaching different couple dances with a gender / queer pedagogic approach in 2010. She discovered the Argentine tango in 2011 and has been dancing mainly in Paris where she lived and studied 2012-2019. Arriving in Paris she quickly became part of Tango Queer Paris, where she was active mainly as organizer of milongas, practicas and classes between 2014-2019. Her passion for dance led Henny to obtain a Master of Arts degree in Dance at University Paris 8, where she specialized in feminist dance pedagogy and tango. Since her graduation in 2018 she continues to study dance and dance didactics at the Stockholm University of the Arts (DOCH). Based in Stockholm since 2019, Henny gives double role tango classes, as well as classes in leading for followers and following for leaders in collaboration with Malin Backström. Together with Malin she also runs the tango retreat for women at Kvinnohöjden (Borlänge, Sweden) every summer since 2014. In addition to tango, Henny nowadays also teaches various dance styles to children and young people.

## **Malin Backström (no pronoun)**

Malin Backström, writer and tango teacher, is a pioneer in the development of queer dancing in Sweden. For the last 20 years she has been dancing and teaching same-sex latin & ballroom, salsa, lindyhop, and Argentinian tango. In 2010 she co-founded QueerSalsa Stockholm and she was also involved in the creation of queer lindyhop in Sweden. In 2012 she initiated the International tango retreat for women at the feminist course- and guesthouse Kvinnohöjden. She has also been organizing both role tango courses at Wiks folkhögskola since 2014, twice together with Brigitta Winkler (Germany). Based in Stockholm, Malin has also been teaching in many cities all over Sweden. Internationally, Malin has taught at queer tango events in San Francisco, Paris and Berlin.

Since 2016 Malin has specially focused on developing leader courses for followers, and lately also follower courses for leaders, together with Henny Stridsberg – with whom she recently formed “*Tango Queerer Stockholm*”, to gather and make visible their common (queer- / both role- & feminist) tango projects. As a poet / fiction writer, Malin has published two books in Swedish: *Berättelser som inte får vidröras* (1997) and *Bara det här med dörrarna* (2012). She has been working as a teacher of creative writing since 1998.

## **Silvia Bruzzone (she/her)**

Silvia Bruzzone is a lecturer and researcher in social science as well as a tango dancer. She has been dancing tango since 2002, first in Italy and then in Berlin. When she moved to Paris, she joined Tango Queer Paris and became involved in the organization of the monthly milonga. In this context she conducted video-interviews

with tango dancers and a documentary film will (fingers crossed) come out soon. Since her arrival in Sweden, two years ago, she has been assiduously attending open role and queer tango events and has been one of the organizers of Milonga Queerida (2020) together with Henny and Malin.

## ¿Cómo sería el tango queer del futuro?

© Colectiva Útera Tanguera

Valparaíso, Chile



*Día de la mujer luchadora. Intervención para el 8 de marzo 2020 en Pza Victoria- Valparaíso. Credits: Danay Labraña.*

Somos una colectiva que baila, siente, comunica y entrega tango. Creemos en la democratización de los saberes, en la politización de la vida íntima, en las conexiones y los lazos fraternos. Reafirmamos el sentir de la danza libre y sin ataduras, sin situaciones que pongan en riesgos físicos y/o emocionales a lxs danzantes.

Pensamos en un tango al alcance de todxs, donde no existan impedimentos ni discriminaciones físicas, de género, clase, etnia o color.

Pensamos un tango queer feminista donde las relaciones entre bailarinxs sean equitativas, en el que los roles no sean automáticamente determinados por el género ni mucho menos por el sexo biológico, sino más bien decidido armónicamente entre lxs involucradxs en el tango.

Buscamos también desmitificar y desaprender prácticas violentas dentro de espacios de disfrute como lo son las milongas, clases y/o eventos tangueros. Invitamos a la concientización de nuestras cuerpos, de su conexión con la otredad y con el espacio, para así relacionarnos -desde el tango queer de forma amigable y amorosa.

Esperamos deconstruir prácticas coercitivas, abriéndonos a nuevas interpretaciones que valoren afectos no dominados por la heteronorma y el patriarcado, donde se observe la intimidad entre otras relaciones no necesariamente sexo-afectivas

## **Manifiesto Útera Tanguera – voces colectivas bailándonos por la confianza, el amor y la resistencia**

### **La confianza**

La vida colectiva,  
unides y pulsando.  
¡Autodefensa feminista!  
La confianza  
y el sentir hacen que bailar con un par  
se complemente en un movimiento armónico...  
Tan sólo se siente como si volaras,  
porque es un espacio seguro y de autocuidado.  
Bailar entre mujeres para reconocernos  
en la diversidad de nuestras corporalidades  
y sabernos arte y movimiento juntas.  
Probemos el viento hasta que nos crezcan alas.  
Cuidarnos también es revolución.

### **El amor**

Déjame cambiar de forma, de pelaje,  
botar colmillos, recoger huesos.  
Goce,  
la vida te dará un abrazo  
y el placer nos invada, desborde, transporte,  
porque finalmente no hay mayor latido  
que el de un libre corazón.

### **La resistencia**

Mas será otra la historia

la de todes les que se levantaron.  
Cuando lo personal transgrede el límite  
se transforma en el Colectivo  
y tomar con ambas manos el corazón  
de la rebeldía.

Porque es una respuesta rebelde al sistema que  
nos enseñaron desde siempre,  
las memorias pueden adquirir la magnitud de vivencia.  
Pena sin vergüenza, sacando voces desde adentro  
e imprimiendolas en el afuera, con fuerza,  
porque si no puedo bailar con mis compañeras,  
tu revolución no me interesa.

## **Colectiva Útera Tanguera**

Bloque feminista separatista integrado por 5 mujeres diversas (señoras, mujer delfín, mulher, no-binarix, etc.) que llegamos al tango principalmente por lo queer, aunque una de nosotras viene del tango tradicional. Todas comenzamos con el intercambio de roles en 2017-2018 a través de la Milonga Queer Valparaíso.

La colectiva surge de manera espontánea cuando decidimos reunirnos a bailar tango entre mujeres y disidencias con intercambio de roles en la Plaza Victoria de Valparaíso-Chile para el 8 de Marzo del 2019.

La propuesta de la Colectiva es generar por medio de la enseñanza del tangoqueer un encuentro entre mujeres y disidencias, donde todxs podemos bailar, guiar o seguir, debido a que no hay roles establecidos. Separamos y flexibilizamos los roles más allá del género. Proponemos una enseñanza amorosa sin estereotipos y dejamos fuera todas las malas prácticas que hemos observado y vivido en el tango tradicional. Al mismo tiempo hacemos activismo desde una expresión física, ya que el baile y el abrazo también son políticos.

Bajo esta propuesta intervenimos diversos espacios con talleres y otras actividades. Sólo para mujeres, no binarixs y trans. Así, tratamos de remecer la tradición y crear un espacio seguro de disfrute. Todo este proceso lo consideramos un acto de resistencia y sanación a la estructura patriarcal extractivista neoliberal. Nuestras acciones son una invitación a recuperar nuestros cuerpos-territorios desde el tango, el disfrute y el compartir roles.

La Colectiva somos:

Camila Zúñiga

Constanza Urzúa

Loreto Ledezma

María José Albornoz

Vania Berríos

## 2. Queer Enough Tango?

### Queer Tango Futures? A Whole Lot of Questions for A Vision

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Vienna, Austria



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Blurry photographs as Queer Tango Future? This needs some context: I took these photos at Degenera 2019 in Rome/Italy. The blurriness itself is the result of the ongoing appropriation of my camera to snap a photo of people dancing. To press the button at the right moment is a constant struggle because as soon as the focus is set people have already moved. This asynchronous temporality seems to be just right for describing pictorially the aesthetic expression that underlies the leading question of Queer Tango Project's call: since we may have ideas but no sharp image

the future is blurred. *How exactly* the future will look, and *how precisely* individuals interweave social networks is unpredictable.

The photos show some dancers from the Queer Tango Community. They allow us to recall memories, to feel a tango partner in a warm embrace, to hear the music, to sense the atmosphere. And sometimes, while being in contact with those memories, they also unleash the intention of proposing or interpreting a nuance of musicality of a tango, playing in our mind. In any case, they bring to the fore effects we don't want to miss; effects that are healing and stimulating at the same time. Looking at these photos we might become aware of the mimetic processes that are operating while we dance – something that starts right in the tango class and continues as a patterning dynamic within societies and communities. I am very interested in Mimesis, as it allows us a closer look at those things we do when we *do* something – especially when what we do it is less language-driven, but more concentrated on the use of our bodies. Interestingly, literature teaches us that mimesis is central to transformation. That is, what is becoming is somehow relational to what already is. Therefore, it is comprehensible for the individual, for communities and societies. Mimesis has a citational character. Even though different and new it stays intelligible, but diffractively moves meaning and therefore spaces for individual existences.

As the concepts defining mimesis are quite diverse and disputed, I here coin one possible way of thinking about them. I break the term into two – mimesis and mimicry. Both stand for imitation and/or adaptation – something we always do. While mimesis in a queer-feminist understanding (Diamond 1997) points at the ruptures and the creation of space for new meanings through alienation of seemingly fixed understandings, mimicry points at the reproduction of the ever same, an imitation that leads into death (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002).

Having this opposition in mind I want to propose for this reflection that we shall ponder whether Queer Tango follows a track of creative mimesis or rigid mimicry. Does Queer Tango open spaces, create new meanings, break seemingly stable understandings, alienate habituated attitudes and generate new relations? Or does it rather harden the spectrum of expressions into stereotypical forms that force us to rigidly follow the norm and a certain concept of Queer Tango? Again, this connects to the blurry photos' asynchronicity: consciously, we are not able to trace the mimetic process when it takes place, only in the aftermath do we see what the actions taken have evoked and may affect. But we are able to reflect on what has come to the surface. Dialogical reflection – taking place in conversations or also in forms like this Queer Tango Project publication – keeps our senses open to perceive the possibilities we did not know so far, or have failed to see.

As I mentioned before, nobody is able to give a concrete answer about what Queer Tango Futures will look like. Nor do I think that my ideas might become reality – they provide only one perspective amidst many. When transformation takes place, all of us transform. Therefore, Queer Tango Futures will constitute themselves on what Queer Tango dancers do all together to provide something that may be called a better future. Hence, for the purpose of this essay, I decide rather to ask questions. Questions are an invitation to dialogue. Isn't a dialogue something that is claimed about dancing Tango? Dialogues or even polylogues are what I really believe in, contributing as they do to transformation and better futures. They lead to an understanding of, or at least approach the plural worlds we, the many different Queer Tango dancers, live in.

### **1. What is QUEER in Queer Tango?**

A friend of mine always wears a classic suit and a tie when going to a queerfeminist conference. He says, wearing a suit is the queerest thing to wear at such a conference. Especially, when it has evidently become a tacit norm to not participate in hegemonic forms of being dressed is the hegemonic norm within the queer-feminist conference community.

This perspective shall be transposed to Queer Tango. When all the dancers are queer (as broad term for non-hegemonic existences), what is it then that is queer within Queer Tango? Is there operating a certain definition of behaving, looking like, interacting with or preferring that marks somebody as queer? Doesn't this sound like mimicry, i.e. like an in-or-out line? While the representation of same-sex couples or women leading men might be considered queer in a conventional milonga, is it really queer in Queer Tango? Could it be that it is queer instead to ask those for a dance who look strange for us or who sit and wait? Thus, is it that queer attitudes strengthen community in the end? Even though we all want to have good dances and feel the Tango, is it actually more queer then to dance some tandas with those we, individually, consider as not-so-good-dancers? So isn't queer rather something that should be called “queerness” – labeling the way we act in terms of transformation or interpersonal connection, rather than linking it with identity? Do we have to remind ourselves that we, the so-called queers, are the hegemonic majority within Queer Tango? And when it is labeled “queerness” how does it operate within the community in the form of mimesis, through creating, transforming, and liberating?



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## 2. Where is Queer Tango QUEER?

Different countries, different situations. Different communities, different unreflected norms. As a Queer Tango dancer in a conventional tango community in Vienna in Austria, I'd still assert same-sex-dancing is a queer thing. It has to do with breaking the stereotypical male-leader/female-follower-couple, questioning desire in dancing, making myself visible and therefore claiming space within a heteronormative community – and at the same time, prepare the space for those to come. It is a privilege here in Austria to do so without being harmed. But again, how queer is it in a community that accepts? A question which reminds me of Daffyd in the UK TV comedy series, *Little Britain* – claiming his gayness with nobody being bothered by it. I think queerness is something that transgresses borders: Queerness questions the norms, differentiates which make sense and which just contribute for shrinking one's own or a group's range of expression – no matter if in Queer or conventional Tango. So, is Queer Tango at a Queer Tango Festival or Queer Milonga always queer? What are the norms we unquestioningly bring and perform within our community – and thereby keep on excluding, mimicry-like, and building hierarchies similarly to the hegemonic convention but hidden under a rainbow flag?



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### 3. How can QUEER be represented within Queer Tango Performances?

Queer Tango queers what we find in Tango culture, the milongas or in the etiquette. But we also invest in representation. Even though Tango is conceived of as a social dance, I here pick Tango performances as they are key to the representation of (sub)cultural standards. We must not forget that the neoliberal times we live in also affect our – bluntly said – coercive participation in re/presentation. Therefore, I would like to ask what could be the mimesis-like purpose of a Queer Tango Performance? Generally speaking, performance as we find it nowadays in the capital(ist)-driven world still hunts after an idea of exceptionalism, an idea of stardom – look for example at some of the digitalized videos of Tango in the 1980s in contrast to the shows we see nowadays. On the one hand, the professionals and on the other hand, the admirers struggling to do the same – a suction towards perfection in technique, narration, skill and accomplishment of being the tanguer@. Could there be danced a (Tango) story in a personal style instead? Still, I myself want

to enjoy performances. There are so many great dancers that even though I am only watching them dance, they make me feel the Tango. Without pointing at specific examples of performances within the Queer Tango Community, I think it is important to ask whether having performances unquestioningly within Queer Tango events is just a reproduction of the hegemonic version in queer terms? Are there options for a Queer Tango Performance to be different apart from same-sex couples and/or role switching? And then I ponder whether the connection of Queer and Tango could contribute much more to an expressive level than to a technical display. Could the QUEER in Queer Tango performances tend to be more creative, something that I miss in these hyper-technical shows that remind me much more of mastering a task than dancing together? Isn't Tango an expressive art, that consists of bringing the differences of those dancing into communication? What happens when something that is understood as Social Dance is staged and performed? Isn't creativity to be understood for example in terms of showing the dancers' personality, of hilarious or intelligent wit, of showing instead of performing emotion? Could, in this sense, performances as a display of Queer Tango Culture concentrate more on improvisation than on choreography, on playfully dancing than on boxing themselves into a perfect tango representation?



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#### **4. Is QUEER in Queer Tango a notion of a safe playground?**

It is one of the most valuable things I find within the community: to enter a space and participate in a gathering with an atmosphere of/for playfulness. Having a safe space to play around, to try things which I then possibly bring to the conventional setting, to safely express myself, is something that intrinsically follows mimesis. What do we need in order to have this playful frame protected from mimicry-like

exaltation? What may the individuals within the community contribute to hold this treasure? How can we bring this playfulness to others? Is playfulness a key to strengthen the community itself? And could playfulness be Queer Tango's mimetic characteristic to spread queerness also within conventional tango – and thereby contribute with each step to sociocultural transformation?

Still, there is a long way to go. All of us have to face so many different situations and rejections. Are we welcome? Are we allowed to be, to express and show ourselves? Each one of us knows how valuable it is to have a Queer Tango Community. Let's keep on exchanging what we need to keep up with queerness within and outside the community. Let's keep an eye on those not included. Let's be aware of the things we bring into the Community. Let's stay open for Queer Tango being a perfect example for mimesis - a creative, alienating way of transformation.

To conclude with Jean-Luc Nancy, I think it makes sense to emphasize that we are all “singular plural”: All of us share one space. In order to define this space, we have to consider "all of being" there. It is a different “we” than in identity discourses that is at work here. This “we” consists of all who are there, no matter who or what they are. Only relating to all these beings makes it possible to have an idea of myself. So, having a space for me consists of granting a space for all the others – logically, otherwise there is no space for me.

"From one singular to another, there is contiguity but not continuity. There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up. All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation." (Nancy 2000, 5)

We are, in Nancy's sense, co-inhabiting this world, we are co-providing for our community along touch and separation. Isn't Tango itself a perfect, danced expression of being singular plural?

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### **Arno Plass (he/him)**

Arno Plass is based in Vienna and a village in Lower Austria. He is a Lecturer at different Universities and a PhD researcher at the University of Art & Design, Linz, Austria, taking a closer look on what is appropriated and transposed through movement and meaning while dancing. His project "The Sediments of the Future – The Virtuality of the Body Schema along the Body Practice of Queer Tango" is hopefully traveling soon as it is connected with research workshops – maybe you are interested? Apart from researching, teaching and dancing, he joins his partner in a huge garden, where he eats and preserves Mother Nature's treasures.

# Queer Tango vs queer tango

© Birthe Havmøller

Aarhus, Denmark

*'Milonga' is a tango term with multiple meanings. 'Queer tango' is another familiar homonym: Queer Tango (the Community and its dance spaces) vs. queer tango (the dance style).*

## What are you dancing for?

Why are we dancing? Are we dancing for social change, for survival, for love or for something different? ... Perhaps for the mutual experience of co-creating the dance style of *'queer tango'*? For me, social dancing is both a way to connect with other people and an art form. Not dancing, now during the Covid tango time-out, makes me want even more to go into the deep inner process of dancing for the greater good of all of us, grounding my dreams on the dance floor.

Early in my life with tango, I was often met with the inquisitory question, "why do you lead?" Looking totally cool, I wondered which of my three answers I would give this heteronormative couple: a) I am an ambitious dancer. I have come to tango as a dancer already identifying as a woman dual role dancer; b) I couldn't persuade any of my male friends to learn to dance the tango, so I have taken things in my own hands; c) I am a lesbian. I do whatever it takes to dance with my lovely women peers... I usually told them the first answer, saving the last one for another day...

Every Argentinian tango instructor will tell their ambitious students that advanced dancers each develop their individual dance styles. It almost seems like this IS the essence of the improvised Argentine tango once you master the heart of tango: the *connection* with your dance partner through the tango embrace. But how do you develop your own style, when you find that topics such as 'create your individual tango style', 'improvisation' and 'queer tango' are not included in the general curriculum for intermediate dancers in mainstream tango and thus are not being discussed in class in your city?

## Creating a unique dance style

I embarked on my mission to create my unique dance style with an open mind and no fear of failure. I had visualised my dream. I decided to learn a couple of tango styles. These are the dance styles I perceived would be the best way in which I may channel my take on the essence of tango and express my creativity: the playful *queer tango*; and the open role version of the quieter traditional *tango salon* with the sustained close embrace.

When I am dancing or practising on my own, I subject myself, potentially, to having new insights. There is no way I can fail, as insights (technical, musical or spiritual) will always bring me closer to developing my unique way of dancing. However, what feels “right” and “very tango” for me should also be something that other dancers can relate to, otherwise, we’ll have a hard time improvising together. Individuality as a dancer in tango must always be seen in relation to the community. Co-improvising is a process of giving and taking.

In my part of the world, one often has to travel to practise the less popular dance styles: *tango milonguero*, *tango nuevo*, *queer tango*, etc.. As the supporters of these dance styles are few compared to the number of people who dance the modern *tango salon*. However, dancing a tango dance style labelled with a name which is a household name to all of us can only to a certain extent be described as having an "individual style" even though you are at a milonga, where you are the only dancer on the dance floor who can dance a particular tango style ... It takes more to create your individual style, but what is this "more" besides a friendly dance partner who is happy to improvise and help you grow as a dancer?

### **Individuality, integrity and creativity**

I take it you will be able to notice a kind of individuality in the way dancers use their tools – the figures and moves in tango – in their improvisations and whether they think it is interesting to decorate or not. The way some queer dancers love to dance *intercambio* is an example of how you may shift your tango practice so far away from traditional tango that you are turning the otherwise heteronormative embrace, with its set roles, into an unpredictable embrace, fluid and queer, making *queer tango* danced as *intercambio*, a dance style in its own right.

*Queer tango* is a style with its unique place in dance history as the latest dance style in a long line of tango styles. The tango dance styles are each powered by a dance philosophy, defining the values upon which the written and unwritten rules of how the dance must be danced are created. The old Argentine tango dance styles existed in niches, historical bubbles of time and space. Now, most dancers are dancing a fusion of different dance styles. However, this does not negate the original creative work by the dancers who created a particular dance style in the first place. I feel excited when I think about *queer tango* as a dance style in the making, something we could explore together in the future.

For a dancer, a *dance philosophy* is their individual set of values and a few unwritten rules which work as creative restrictions, forming a focus for their dance practise. Based on a set of homemade rules, you develop your idea of or strategy as to how you want to practice and improvise together with your dance partner(s). Consciously

or unconsciously, I think all dancers create their individual *dance philosophies*, turning them into their practical *dance strategies* for application on the dance floor. A dance philosophy may or may not include social aspects as to how, where and with whom you dance to realise yourself as a dancer. Having “no strategy” is also a premeditated plan.

### **My dance philosophy**

Core values. It is important to me that my *leading* is danceable for dancers at all levels, which it probably would not be if I were still going out onto a tangent leading more and more advanced tango moves and figures... It is also important to me that *queer tango* is something we do spontaneously rather than something which we (dual role dancers) discuss before the tanda starts and then set out to do as a part of our co-improvised social tangos.

### **My dance strategy**

When leading I usually dance with basic steps only. This ‘less is more’-strategy is so I may provide a consistent and harmonious lead for my dance partner. The “extra” I juice up my dancing with is my interpretation of the music. Consequently, I work a lot with my *musicality* as a dancer. For me the most meaningful thing is to go beyond the figures and moves, working with the music, looking for the deep inner place of creative communication where my sense of the music merges with something higher. It is something very intuitive which, within a split second, turns into a series of gracious moves. Developing my *musicality* is the core of where I aim to take my dance practice in the future.

As a queer dual role dancer, I aim to be alert, sensitive and flexible enough to go with the flow, *to take the lead* and a few seconds later *have it taken from me* again by my casual queer tango partner as we dance *intercambio* and ‘queer’ our dancing with a series of interventions from the position of the follower.

In my opinion, the polite way to dance *intercambio* is to create *micro-openings* in your leading, hoping your casual dance partner will read the openings as *invitations* to taking the lead; if they don’t then that is fine too. They might be open role tango enthusiasts or dedicated single role dancers, both preferring a set and predictable division of labour in their tangos. You must never go onto the dance floor with the assumption that you *switch roles* at a queer tango milonga.

### **Queer tango intercambio vs. open role tango**

*Queer tango* (the dance style) is infused with the concept of *fluid roles*. You change roles while co-creating your *queer tangos*. “Open role tango” on the other hand is

danced with *set roles*, thus this is a modern *tango salon* practice for open role couples with the familiar binary division of labour (leader leads, follower follows) in the couple. Some dancers prefer the latter, claiming it is easier than *queer tango*. The ambitious tango student may take their time to learn both dance styles.

## **Dancing with integrity**

Before our pandemic tango time-out, I would do my best to invite people to dance, but for multiple reasons, I often found it hard to get my dances at Queer Tango Festivals as well as at mainstream milongas. I may find some dancers' dance styles incompatible with my dancing, and not wishing to test my comfort zone too much in a milonga, I shy away from them. This is OK. I want to enjoy myself. I am not there as a dancing co-host, volunteer taxi dancer or in any other way engaged with making milonga guests who do not dance much, dance more at these events. I appreciate people who are dedicated to these kinds of 'volunteer activities' and would love to see this happening everywhere but accept that it is not for me. I just don't have what it takes.

Who do I share my dances with? Well, anyone who smiles at me and accepts my invitation. But the first step for me is that I invite my casual tango partners with integrity. I wouldn't dream of pressuring anyone to dance with me. I invite by *mirada-cabeceo* which is the most gentle, non-manipulative way of inviting someone to dance. I use the *mirada-cabeceo* 90% of the time and I am very careful when using a verbal invitation. I have noticed that the nonverbal *mirada-cabeceo* is an Argentinian tradition which some Queer Tango Communities do not like. They find it too heteronormative and leader-centric, thus some queer tango communities are promoting the use of verbal invitations among their members. Other European dancers who know of the *cabeceo* may feel uncomfortable with it because of the gaze. Therefore, I suppose, I often pass below the radar of many intermediate dancers – which is OK.

I try to catch the eyes of my female peers. You could say that they are my 'target group' as I am standing at the edge of the dance floor, hoping to catch the eye of a potential dance partner. Early in my life with tango, I decided to focus on learning what I think it takes to make tangueras of my age want to dance with me. The fact that I sometimes feel as if I am invisible to many of the dancers at the Queer Tango Festivals is an interesting experience. It is an experience not dissimilar to that of dancing at mainstream milongas. One gravitates towards some people and shies away from others... Nobody ever dances with "everybody". That is not how it is done. We each have our individual preferences.

## **We want a caring tango community!**

I hear a genuine wish/dream among queer dancers for more caring tango communities to emerge in the future when we get to dance again after the lockdown around the world. With more awareness and dedication to this dream it may happen. However, as I mentioned before, we do not dance with everybody. This is NOT the way things work in tango, even though the wonderfully loving social concept of *everybody dancing with each other* may work well in other dance communities. Tango is such an emotional space that we'll always automatically gravitate towards some people and shy away from others, driven by our desires to embrace some people and not others, always intuitively seeking the best potential for dancing with integrity. We each have our individual comfort zones as dancers. The practice of (queer) tango often makes us question our comfort zones, and some of us are more vulnerable than others.

I accept that there may exist an age divide in the International Queer Tango Community, though it is probably less explicit and less gendered than in mainstream tango, where 50+ tangueras often realise that they are thought less attractive than the younger female dancers when in competition for the attention of the good tangueros. Regardless of their skills as dancers, these tangueras find themselves involuntarily caught in the emotional field of frustration. With tango as a metaphor for the heterosexual relationship and the competition among the dancers being as it is, this is but one of the many different tango crises straight tangueras have to negotiate in tango. Mainstream Tango has many flaws. Micro-machismo (small scale male chauvinism) being one of them. No wonder some of the tangueras turn into feminists who want to change the tango world! The issues of harassment and micro-machismo in tango are now being addressed by Movimiento Feminista de Tango (MFT) in Buenos Aires. Enough is enough!

## **How do we create a caring and inclusive tango community?**

What I hear LGBTQ+ people say is that they wish all their tango partners and fellow dancers to be supportive, understanding, accepting and friendly regardless of where they go, at queer tango events or mainstream milongas. Queer Tango serves an important role in holding (spiritual) space for queer tango dancers to meet and dance with like-minded people. However, a part of the challenge of the Queer Tango Movement has shifted from one of creating queer tango milongas as *safe spaces* for LGBTQ dancers and their allies, to the dancers individually challenging the mainstream tango world to welcome us as tangueros/as or gender nonconforming tanguer@s. In some places, they are totally abandoning their small Queer Tango Communities (Copenhagen) as they (the persistent dual role dancers) do not want to practise their *open role tango* in a bubble of "queer tango love" / in a "queer ghetto safe space". Instead, they are dancing in plain sight at mainstream milongas.

The number of politically aware feminist tangueras who want to change the world with their dual role dancing in mainstream tango seems to be increasing in Europe with the Open Role Tango Movement emerging as a part of the mainstream tango scene. There is value both socially and commercially in providing opportunities and spaces for women to lead.

### **Queer Tango vs. queer tango – here is where the trouble starts**

I hear queer people defining “open role tango” (same sex dancing of *tango salon*) as “queer tango” when it is being danced in explicitly Queer Tango spaces, thus *open role tango* danced by gender non-conforming or queer tango couples is (still) linked with sexualised roles (lead like a man/follow like a woman). The set division of labour in *open role tango* as it is practiced in the Queer Tango Movement makes the term ‘queer tango’ become a symbol for queer love and queer marriage at these events as well as adding to the confusion of the word being a homonym. In Queer Tango (= the Community and its events) we have not yet succeeded in doing away with sexualized overlay in tango. Tango roles have no genders. *Queer tango* (= the dance style) danced as *intercambio* with *fluid roles* suggests a different future, a different dance (style) where only your creative imagination and tango skills as dual role dancers are the limits of your co-improvisations as you share the labour of leading with your dual role dance partner. I propose that the prospects of our Queer Tango Communities will be better if we raise awareness about the different dance styles in tango and their potential use as tools in our dancing as “Queer Tango Activists” among our members.

It is great to see when *open role tango* is used as a tool in our political work by dancing LGBTQ+ activists and by queer tango teachers. However, it is very confusing when one is joining a “Queer Tango” class only to discover that what is being taught does not feel “queer enough” and in fact is traditional tango for open role couples. Learning to dance *queerly* and having a space for discussing queer tango dance philosophies and dance strategies is important for any dual role dancer. Especially for those who aim to develop their individual way of dancing within the framework of *queer tango* (the dance style). The Queer Tango Community is still by far the best place to learn how to dance *intercambio*. Unfortunately, it differs in how far a dancer/teacher will take their dancing from the traditional tango and thus the extent to which *intercambio* is supported by the different Queer Tango Communities. It is but a minority of the dancers and teachers who’ll go all the way to integrate the dance style of *queer tango* in their dance practice.

You may argue that as the majority of LGBTQ+ tango dancers spend most of their time dancing *open role tango*, the Queer Tango Community is not about exploring the dance style of *queer tango* but about hugging and dancing with a traditional

embrace as gender nonconforming couples. One could say, we are not dancing to change how the Tango World dances by offering them the new dance style of *queer tango* on a platter... though *queer tango* is an amazing dance style. Instead, we are dancing to confirm our queer identity and our love to ourselves, which is also important.

I hear more and more queer dancers arguing the case for the importance of us spending our time in Mainstream Tango dancing *open role tango*, transforming the world one tanda at a time, *queering* the milonga with casual straight tango partners (single role dancers), giving mainstream dancers the opportunity get familiar with the idea of queers being a part of “their” community, slowly making them change, think and feel differently, be more friendly, less homophobic and hopefully at the end of the day see us as trusted members of “their” tango communities. This vision has its merits and its obvious flaws...

### **A Queer Tango home base - yes, please!**

We need all the sensual, loving queer embraces we can get. Let us not forget we need a queer home base, quality time together now and then, in a space where we feel we belong and may dance as we please, on our own terms. We also need our Queer Tango spaces to provide space for consciousness raising debates that support cultural, political and feminist conversations about identity, sensuality and our dancing. We must have spaces and events where we can meet in person and discuss our dancing, our social life and the Queer Tango Culture vs. Mainstream Tango with all its heteronormative hiccups.

Queer Tango Communities must provide space for the debates about contemporary topics related to the LGBT people and their tango practice. Queer dancers are often complaining that people from the traditional tango scene do not understand, why LGBTQ dancers devote their time to learning both roles? Why do people identify the way they do? What it is like to transition? What are gender politics about? Why the world needs *queer tango*? etc.. The vulnerability most queer and straight dancers feel when answering inquisitory questions about their identity and choice of role(s) are issues to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, many mainstream tango teachers do not know how best to support their dual role students, be it feminist tangueras or queer beginners. I would love to see all Queer Tango Communities continue supporting sensitive queer tango beginners of all genders, who do not feel at home in mainstream tango classes with safe queer tango learning spaces.

### **Dance roles have no genders**

Mainstream tango still tends to put one in a box. The phenomenon of assigning labels (man, woman, leader, follower, etc.) expecting the individual to perform in a

particular way, is not popular among queers. I guess we all hope this binary practice will change in a not-too-distant future, as more mainstream teachers are taking their time to learn to dance both roles in tango and hopefully soon will be comfortable dancing both roles socially, becoming “ambidextrous” role models in their tango communities. Dancing the *other* role (than the one designated to you by virtue of your gender) is a big step for most of them. Something I doubt the mainstream tango teachers in Europe would have done had it not been for the queer dancers and teachers who have led the way by dancing as same-gender couples and queer role models in plain sight at mainstream milongas since the mid-1990s and the increasing open-mindedness of the 21st century (here in Northern Europe). The Open Role Tango Movement in Europe (with Totally in Tango’s dance retreats and events by other organisers) is giving feminist tangueras new supportive tango spaces in which to improve their skills as female leaders/dual role dancers. Male dual role dancers are also welcome at these events but turn up in fewer numbers than the female dual role dancers. Feminist tangueras are traditionally first movers! The world is slowly changing... I am happy to see that ‘changing roles’ pops up here and there as a social game among mainstream tango teachers when they are having fun, dancing their teachers’ (exhibition) dances at tango festivals around Europe.

*Queer tango* can be danced by everybody regardless of their gender and identity. It is the Communities and the heteronormative culture which give the dance roles their binary overlay, defining both the dance rules and social rules which are guiding our choice of dance style as we dance with our casual dance partners in Mainstream Tango as well as at Queer Tango events.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not claiming that *queer tango* is better than *open role tango*. In recent years, I have found myself leading 95% of the time in mainstream tango i.e., dancing open role *tango salon*. I appreciate very much the sweet, open-minded tangueras in Mainstream Tango, my loyal acquaintances who were happy to dance with me each time we met before the lockdown happened. Our conversations were always brief followed by a longer non-verbal tango conversation as we embraced and danced our open role tandas. Much of what we do in our co-improvised tangos has to do with how we interpret the music in our dances, as a high level of musicality is at the heart of my dance practice. I and my tango acquaintances enjoy co-creating tangos in harmony with the music. I hope the world will return to “normal” soon so that I may meet them again. My tanguera allies are helping me to change the world one step at a time by hugging and dancing with me. Can anything be sweeter than this? NO! But co-improvising with dual role tangueras may be both sweet and deliciously *queer* at the same time.

Which is better? – I can't tell as we are talking about two totally different experiences. Not just sensual experiences but also as in the technical challenges of the two dance styles.



*Birthe, the queer tanguera paper doll. Cut her out, dress her up as butch or femme, and make her dance any role you like, no matter what you make her wear. Made in Denmark ©havmoeller.info*

### Manifesting dreams...

Manifesting a queer dance style and one's own style takes queer time. As I have mentioned, I go beyond the figures and moves, working with the music in tango, looking for the deep inner place of creative communication where my sense of the music merges with something higher, something very intuitive. This strategy may work for you too. – Why not experiment with the dance style of *queer tango*, challenging your dance practice as a dual role dancer while we are waiting for good things to happen in the greater world? It will definitely make personal change happen... I am also proposing that dancing *queer tango* may hold the potential of being more fulfilling, because of the creative challenge of making small 'queer' interventions all the time while dancing.

We may add our ideas and queer moves to the already existing, nonwritten vocabulary of *queer tango*. Enriching the *queer tango* dance style seems like a challenge well worth pursuing by all dancers in Queer Tango and beyond.

This particular dance style invites you to spend queer time experimenting with your dancing at the cutting edge of social dance. Some dancers claim that the mutual dancing of both roles (as in exchanging roles) is enlivening the dance. Other dancers may be daydreaming about a more equal sharing of the roles; where the leader is obliged to listen to the follower's queer interventions (such as their taking the lead while remaining in the position of the follower). I propose a redefinition of the roles of labour and power within a Queer Tango framework and pedagogy – not just a renaming of them as is happening in Mainstream Tango.

I propose that we create experimental spaces where we may explore our creativity rather than us just dancing in the formal context of a Queer Tango milonga with the adopted set of (heteronormative) social rules for dancers. Experimenting with the *queer tango* dance philosophy of 'no dancer has the right to dance one role more than the other' may create new ways for us to interact with and embrace each other. It is important that we consider sharing the roles among us in a totally fluid way. Even though some people have been working with the idea that this dance style is totally *fluid* and everything is possible as we co-create our *queer tango*, we should create a visible framework, a kind of basic structure for beginners and intermediate dancers to use as a starting point for their own co-creative queer tango practice. Without wanting to step on anyone's toes, I don't see this happening today and I wonder if we could take the basic vocabulary of queer tango from being unwritten to being written and shareable as a knowledge base about how to dance this emerging dance style. This means that we would have to share our insights to a greater extent than we had prior to the Covid tango time-out.

I don't see why we (who identify as queer tango dancers) may not both go exploring *queer tango* as a dance style, as well as doing our regular 'out & proud' open role dancing, engaging in co-creation with mainstream single role dancers, queering the milongas one tanda at a time. Go with your heart and the music; may you enjoy your queer tangos! Don't worry about those who are not 'getting it' yet. It feels great to be a dual role dancer! I hope you'll fall in love with *queer tango* and be generous with your dances when we all get to dance again.

Stay safe and the best of luck to you if you set out to create your individual tango style.

### **Birthe Havmøller (she/her)**

I am a dual role tango dancer, independent editor, visual artist and queer feminist arts activist. I have worked with photography as my creative medium since 1989 with the landscape as my source of inspiration. I came to tango from the local folk-

dance community in 2009, already a dual role dancer so it was natural for me to learn both roles in tango from day one. I have documented a number of queer tango performances, and share my “rough videos” on Youtube. In 2013, I initiated The Queer Tango Project which started as a book project where I co-authored and co-edited our first publication, *The Queer Tango Book* (2015) with Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo. Today, I am the leader of The Queer Tango Project team which works to further debate about queer tango. I have co-edited this self-published anthology together with Ray Batchelor and Mori Plaschinski.

## Quarantine Tango

© Juliet McMains, PhD

University of Washington, Seattle, USA

I am lucky enough to be in quarantine with my tango dance partner. During the first few months of quarantine, we were able to carve out enough time between waiting in line at the grocery store and zoom calls for an hour of dining room tango five days a week. Even though we recognized our great fortune in having each other and a precious few feet of wood floor for our giros, we struggled. Negotiating practice with your romantic partner isn't easy during the best of times, but when your entire social world suddenly shrinks to the size of your apartment for months on end... Let's just say we weren't the model of patience or empathy in our communication. I was cranky when a boleó was mistimed, our balance wavered, or a piano fill slipped by unmarked because we were in the middle of a turn as ghosts of Biagi's fingers skittered through the air. All too often my frustration slipped into blame, triggering a sequence of hurtful exchanges in a familiar script.

"You knocked me off axis.

"I can't feel your supporting leg."

"Are you even listening to the music?"

"I'm dancing to the melody – why are you obsessed with the rhythm?"

The subtext of these exchanges usually boiled down to:

"I don't feel you understand me."

"I am worried I can't satisfy you."

We quickly spiraled into defense and disconnection, both of us fearing loss of the other's love. Most tango couples know some variation of this dance, the irony of tango intimacy triggering insecurities about its loss known to be one of tango's most addictive features.

I am no tango couples therapist, but the story about how we were able to re-choreograph this dance may have implications for that much-needed, but yet to be created, niche. I am a heterosexual woman who flirts with bi-sexuality and enjoys dancing both roles. Before quarantine, I regularly led other women at mainstream milongas, festivals, and queer tango events (including a glorious few months attending Mariana Docampo's Tango Queer Milonga in Buenos Aires on a weekly basis). When COVID reduced my range of tango partners to one – my straight male partner who primarily led – I felt trapped inside tango's heterosexist embrace. Much of the frustration I was unleashing on my partner was actually about losing the creative freedom I had enjoyed in the leader's, or as I prefer to call it, initiator's role.

Once this realization took shape, we embarked on a new practice routine — one in which we exchanged roles every ten minutes.

The first few practices were awkward at best. I was impatient with my partner's slow reaction time, and I wasn't used to guiding someone so much larger than me. He had some experience in the follower's role (what I prefer to call the "interpreter's" role), but it had been many years since he had practiced it regularly. As we both adjusted to our newer roles, gaining strength and sensitivity, we started to argue less and improve more. The most immediate benefit was increased empathy as we danced in each other's footsteps. Intellectually, we had appreciated the skills required for the role specialized in by the other, but struggling to integrate into our own bodies techniques that were so effortless for the other awakened newfound respect and patience. In addition, the initiator's role offered me many more creative and technical challenges than the interpreter's role alone, keeping me focused on my own dancing rather than my partner's shortcomings. Moreover, we were able to engage in collaborative problem solving at new levels as we freely traded roles back and forth, discussing insights we gained from each, our joint pursuit of mastering back sacadas overpowering our egos.

A few weeks into this newfound maturity in our dancing relationship, I was leading my partner in a particularly luscious de Angelis, when he started to melt in my arms. His chest softened as he nestled into my embrace, lingering for a moment as he playfully brushed his calf against my thigh while concluding a parada. "What happened?" I asked incredulously as the final chum-chum of the bandoneon faded, "You felt like a woman."

"I started to enjoy it," he replied with a shy smile. His body had finally acclimated enough to the sensation of not knowing where he was going next to release fear of losing control and surrender to the pleasure of being taken inside the music.

Role exchange is hardly a new idea. It figures prominently in histories of early tango, is something I was asked to do in some of my first tango classes, and is fundamental to many conceptions of queer tango. It was not even something new to me. I have been role swapping with female friends, and some men, for years. The new discovery for me was that this sinewy pliable physicality I relish when dancing with advanced female tangueras is attainable for anyone who practices long enough in the interpreter's role to be able to surrender to it. I had always believed this theoretically, but up until this moment, it was only when leading men my size or shorter that I had enjoyed an experience that approached what it felt like to lead an advanced female tanguera. Larger men had always felt boxy and sluggish, causing me to falsely conclude that most men were handicapped in the interpreter's role

due to their size and weight. I now believe this assumption to be wrong. Granted, some relative height and girth combinations make dancing tango with certain partners more comfortable in one role, but these size differentials can be overcome with practice.



© Juliet McMains

And practice is the crucial point. Most advanced straight male tango dancers don't practice interpreting in improvisational dance settings often enough to develop the skills required to follow/interpret at a high level. Nor do they have much incentive to do so in the majority of straight tango communities, where role and gender imbalance gives advanced male dancers their pick of partners at any milonga. Inside quarantine, however, incentive structures shifted to motivate my male partner to practice interpreting long enough for him to surrender to its pleasures. He discovered first-hand the kinesthetic thrills of completing an impulse from your partner's chest with a twist of your pelvis and a throw of your foot at a moment you didn't expect, but now recognize how delightfully it completed the phrase.

What does this story of my straight, male tango partner discovering his bliss in the historically female role have to do with post-pandemic queer tango? When tango starts its slow recovery from this pandemic that exposed human interdependence on a colossal global scale, all tango dancers – queer and not – are going to need each other more than ever. Venues and schools have closed, networks that sustained local communities and international tours have dissolved, teachers who lost most of their income have pivoted to new careers, social dancers have taken up alternative hobbies, and no new dancers are training to take their place. Tango will survive, but the speed of recovery will depend on innovation and alliance-building. If mainstream tango communities can recognize the benefits of teaching and incentivizing everyone to learn and dance both roles – regardless of gender or sexuality identity – I believe we have a much better chance of attracting new dancers whose experience of gender is more fluid than tango binaries allow. New dancers are essential to tango's sustainability. If tango is taught as an open-role practice where everyone regularly alternates roles, queer and so-called mainstream tango communities would have a lot more in common – opening the door for more collaborations. Can queer and straight teachers partner together to offer open-role classes and milongas? Might these alliances draw together a critical mass of tango dancers to facilitate revival of tango communities?

As I have argued elsewhere, I believe we still need specifically designated queer tango spaces for many reasons, including protection from discrimination and isolation LGBTQ dancers experience in mainstream tango as well as fostering queer community.[1] However, at this post-pandemic juncture, we also have an opportunity for new alliances between queer tango dancers and tango dancers who don't necessarily identify as queer, but reject tango's heterosexist framework. Maybe this is the moment to queer all of tango. I don't mean that we are going to convert all tango dancers to queer sexual identities but that we might activate "queer" as a verb. Following queer dance scholars such as Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, we might understand the act of "queering" to refer to "active processes of questioning, challenging normativity, and counteracting naturalization,"[2] in the domains of gender and sexuality, and possibly beyond. In other words, to queer tango is to challenge and dismantle its heteronormative binaries.

In the fall of 2019, I began teaching open-role tango – requiring every student to learn and practice both roles – on day one of my introductory-level university tango classes. Previously, I had been reluctant to do so because tango is so difficult that I thought asking them to learn twice as much would be unmanageable. I was pleasantly surprised to discover I was wrong. In fact, students in my open-role classes learned faster than similar groups of students who were studying only one

role. Learning both sides of the dance helped them understand each role better. For example, feeling how much easier it was to lead a partner who gave weight rather than someone who leaned away helped them develop a consistent connection when walking backwards in the interpreter's role. Experiencing how uncomfortable it was to be held in a tense embrace increased their sensitivity to a partner's comfort when initiating. In addition to their faster technical progress, students appeared to develop a deeper engagement with the dance because it reflected more closely their experiences of gender in their daily social life, especially in Seattle where awareness and acceptance of gender fluidity and sensitivity to LGBTQ needs shapes the college landscape. My previous strategy of dividing the students into nonoverlapping groups, even when I encouraged them to choose their own roles and used the progressive terminology "initiator" and "interpreter," had created dissonance between tango's choreography of gender and their experience of gender in the rest of their lives. I wasn't able to track the impact of open-role tango classes on retention of students over longer than a single quarter because lockdown shut down tango worldwide. I don't yet know how well students would have been integrated into the broader tango community, but now we have a chance to rebuild more tango communities with an open-role model.

The benefits of open-role tango extend to all identity groups, including straight men. Open-role tango can be an antidote to toxic masculinity – a popular term for American cultural messaging that teaches boys and men that expressing emotional vulnerability is unmanly.[3] A straight male student in my winter 2020 tango class, explained:

While growing up, we are always told what is and is not manly. We are told not to cry and to suck it up, we are taught not to express any negative emotions other than anger and we are forced to become just another man. This brainwashing of sorts leaves us emotionally distant from each other because we are taught that showing any sign of intimacy, especially with other men, is unacceptable. So when class began, I tried to dance with all of the girls and only the girls because growing up I had been taught that being intimate with another man was not manly and therefore not acceptable. Thanks to the rules of the class, I was not able to do this forever. Since everyone in class learns both roles of the initiator and the interpreter, I eventually started dancing with other men. At first it was awkward and felt kind of wrong. But as the quarter went on, I began to discover that there is nothing fundamentally awkward or wrong about two men dancing the tango together. I even began to discover that I danced better with some men than I did with any of the women in the class. I ended up enjoying dancing with guys more than I enjoyed dancing with girls. I began to internally accept that intimacy between two men is completely valid and okay. I

don't think that this tango class is changing the world, but I can assure you that it definitely changed mine because I am now able to accept myself and the things I like to do without having to justify them to convince myself that I am still a man. – Rockett Perrin, University of Washington undergraduate

Tango alone cannot normalize expression of emotions for American men, but at least this student's experience suggests that open-role tango can help some men unlearn harmful lessons they absorbed that masculinity is defined exclusively by toughness and aggression. The benefits of open-role tango are also profound for queer and non-binary students who, when we eliminate gender as the dominant organizing structure of tango, no longer risk feeling singled out if they don't appear to conform to heteronormative gender binaries in its open-role expression. For female students, or anyone who might choose to specialize in the interpreter's role, learning both roles early in tango education sets them up to have access to all of tango's creative possibilities as they advance in their dancing, reducing burnout and boredom several years into their tango journeys. My hope for post-pandemic tango is that we can both revive queer tango spaces that center the experiences of queer-identifying dancers and simultaneously engage in collaborative queering of mainstream tango spaces. To invoke the closing words of José Esteban Muñoz's celebrated book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, "From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality."<sup>[4]</sup> I can taste the potentiality of tango's future from my dining room dance floor, and invite anyone dissatisfied with tango's mono-role gendered culture to join me in queering tango futures.

## Notes

1. Juliet McMains, "Queer Tango Space: Minority Stress, Sexual Potentiality, and Gender Utopias," *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018): 59–77.
2. Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, "'Our Love was Not Enough:': Queering Gender, Cultural Belonging, and Desire in Contemporary Abhinaya," in *Queer Dance: Meanings & Makings*, edited by Clare Croft, 45–65 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47.
3. Maya Salam, "What Is Toxic Masculinity?" *The New York Times*, Jan. 22 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/us/toxic-masculinity.html>; Jared Yates Sexton, *The Man They Wanted me to be: Toxic Masculinity and a Crisis of our Own Making* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2019).
4. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 189.

## **Juliet McMains (she/her)**

Juliet McMains, PhD is a recovering ballroom dancer who traveled armed with a case of rhinestones and tanning creams before checking into Glamour Rehab and converting her addiction to social dance, especially tango and salsa. Juliet researches social dance practices of the Americas with particular emphasis on Latin American and Afro-diasporic traditions. She is author of *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (Oxford UP, 2015) and *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry* (Wesleyan UP, 2006), as well as numerous articles on salsa, rumba, ballroom, swing, and tango. Her work examines how commodification and globalization alter dance traditions and shape public (mis)perceptions about Latinness. Juliet is a Professor in the Department of Dance at the University of Washington. [www.julietmcmains.com](http://www.julietmcmains.com).

# The Erotic and the Future of Queer Tango

© Stan Holman

Vancouver, Canada

Since childhood I have been intrigued by the challenge of how best to physically express, that is (agreed) dance, my feelings of the music. What movement is 'the best' expression of the music? Without any dance training, this fascination lay more or less dormant in my life. Occasionally, while watching dance theatre, I would be touched by the 'perfection' of the choreographer's/dancer's translation of the musical to the physical. I've realized tango provides a physical language and given its improvisational nature, it has incredible potential and freedom for expression. Further, tango is about connection with one's partner through careful 'listening' and 'response'.

Tango provides all the elements for a dialogue:

- participants / the dancers,
- a common language / the technique of tango,
- a topic / the music,
- considerations for discussion / each dancer's reactions to the music and to the context.

It is a perfectly elegant combination, rich with possibilities.

And, no small matter, tango music makes me want to move. I'm hooked.

I dance then to share my feelings of the music with my partner – to open myself as much as possible to an unguarded and vulnerable self that dances as authentically and honestly as possible. (Of course, this also requires mastery of technique which is another story.) A large part of my authenticity is my sexual orientation – a cis-gender man attracted to other men – and my degree of openness to 'masculine' and 'feminine' and 'other' physical expressions.

As Ray Batchelor concludes in his unpublished paper "Tango, Connection, Intimacy and the Erotic: a Queer Perspective" presented at the *Queer Tango Salon*, Paris in 2016: "... the erotic is *not* a prerequisite for a satisfying dance...". I agree and expect no serious tango dancer would disagree. However, I would like to address the importance of erotic potential to queer dancers and therefore the importance of queer tango spaces that include such erotic potential.

There is no queer tango community where I live (a large Canadian city). I am the (gay) man at the mainstream milonga who dances both roles. My friends know I am gay, but not all of the attendees do. Apart from dancing with one of the other two gay male tango dancers in the city, if they attend, my opportunities to follow are limited to one or two straight men and a handful of women who are mostly learning to lead. Make no mistake, I don't set out to have a bad time. I know what I am confronting and I work with it. I experience many wonderful and satisfying dances with many of these women.

But, I do not want to be seen simply as a man who dances both roles.

I want to dance queer tango. I want to be seen, accepted and understood as a gay male who dances both roles and has the opportunity to dance with:

- other queer folk with whom the commonality of our queerness increases the potential for connection, and
- other gay men with whom there is possible attraction and erotic potential.

I want this authenticity of recognition and the potential for expression along with the inclusion of the erotic. Considerations of the future of queer tango need to address the importance of erotic potential to queer tango dancers. Heterosexuals take for granted the inclusion of the erotic potential at a milonga. They access it as they choose. Our queer tango future must not lose track of this important freedom.

Some of my early memories of experiencing the erotic potential were at milongas of the Festival Internacional de Tango Queer en Buenos Aires. I danced only as a follower at the time. The first was a tanda with a mature Uruguayan gay man. He was an experienced dancer and held me securely in his close embrace. We embarked on what seemed to me an ocean voyage moving rhythmically and constantly across the ocean swells – rising and falling. At the end of the tanda, I was completely disoriented in the room as I had been so deep into the dance.

Another memory that same year was a tanda with a young German gay man. His leading was a delightful chase of hide-and-seek through the forest. It seemed like he moved from tree to tree waiting for me to catch-up and find him.

I knew they were gay men as I was sure they also knew I was gay. I had no thought of 'editing' my behaviour to avoid being 'too gay' or 'inappropriate' as I would have done if dancing with a straight man. There is no doubt in my mind the inherent erotic potential allowed me to relax and fully enter into the dance feeling safe and secure to do so.

When I returned home, I described these two tandas to many of my friends as highlights of my trip. I used these metaphors which had come to me as I was dancing. And I spoke of how wonderful and magical these tandas were. In retrospect, I think I was also trying to acknowledge that dancing forthrightly as a gay man was so freeing, so empowering.

In 2018, I made my first trip to Europe for the summer tango festivals. While I knew a number of people from visits to Buenos Aires, I was largely unknown.

At the first festival, I'm invited to dance by a man I've just been introduced to. He leads. We adjust to each other and then settle into something so smooth, so connected, I think: "How did this profound connection, this understanding between us come to be?" Feeling connected, comfortable, in a very secure assertive embrace, we dance with energy, direction, musicality and confidence. I am remarkably blissful and awed with the intimacy and openness. What is going on? I couldn't think, I could only dance. We leave the floor, exchange polite and rather formal thank-you's and continue separately for the rest of the evening.

I don't recall any outwardly erotic or sensual 'passes' in the tanda but the draw was there. What had happened? I had never experienced this before – the connection, the attraction, the sense of arrival.

It is highly unlikely this tanda, charged and profound as it was, could have happened for me in any other circumstance but in a queer tango space with an explicit potential for erotic connection.

Later in the same trip, I travelled to another European capital. It was near the end of my trip and I was 'high' from all the queer tango I had danced. I joined some queer dancers at a mainstream milonga they regularly attended. Feeling so confident, I'm almost oblivious to the fact it is a mainstream milonga. I was dancing as both leader and follower.

I spot this good-looking man, who is clearly a very good dancer. My friends confirm he is gay. He invites me to dance and I accept as follower. We approach the floor, and, almost while forming the embrace, he gives me a very flattering comment, excusing himself that he just "had to get it off his chest". Whatever his intentions, the compliment clearly identifies his attraction. This is a new experience to have the erotic so explicitly and precipitously acknowledged. However, I'm in a confident mood and not put off. We dance. I love the music (it is a modern piece, very rhythmic and dramatic) and although it is unknown to me, I can feel it well and his leading is very musical. I hold nothing back and thoroughly enjoy myself, feeling

exhilarated. The tanda finishes and as we leave the floor he asks, “Do you always dance like that?” I know very well the answer but reply: “Like what?” He says: “So passionately”.

Of course, I do not usually dance like that – so passionately, so uninhibitedly, so free to be myself. I see these as desirable attributes of a tango, but aligning the stars so all the necessary factors are in place to enable their possibility is not easy. Clearly, the fundamental element allowing for the success of this dance was his declaration of the erotic potential between us. I felt acknowledged, validated, safe and fully able and willing to dance in these circumstances.

I share this example of how inclusion of the erotic can lead to more intensity, more freedom and abandon, resulting in a very exhilarating dance.

Turning now to dancing at mainstream milongas in my home city, I dance almost exclusively with women – mostly leading and sometimes following. Unlike the straight male dancers who have nothing to hide as their sexual attraction to women is presumed and accepted, I do not have or do not accord myself that luxury of presumption and acceptance of my sexuality.

Generally, my better tandas are with women who know, accept and even appreciate my gayness. The more comfort they display with my sexual orientation/erotic preferences the better for our dancing. With these women there is the possibility of very intimate, connected tandas, sometimes playful, sometimes very serious, and sometimes very sensual and exploratory. I have no recall of an erotic charge in these circumstances and attribute the lack of inhibition and the depth of the connection to the understanding that there is no erotic potential between us.

Alternatively, women who treat me in subtle or overt ways as a straight man generally make me uncomfortable. I feel I’m expected to behave (again) as if trying to ‘pass’ as a straight man, which distances me from my tango focus, my appreciation of the music, the dance and the connection. I do not want to dance with these women.

Dancing with women at a queer tango event is almost always a good experience. Here I am presumed to be gay or queer as I presume also the woman to be lesbian or queer. Of course, this is not always the case, but it is the presumption that I, and I expect most, start with at a queer tango. My experience is that the erotic can be present and knowing there is no desire for sex between us, we can dance as erotically as we want without a misunderstanding. We might dance in an exploratory manner, explicitly playing with the roles, attitudes and mannerisms of

male/female/other while often exchanging the roles of leader and follower. On occasion, this playful approach might appear as caricature or satire, but not always. We might also dance in a serious and direct manner where the erotic is present and enfolded into the intensity of the dance. In all cases, there is respect and reciprocity.

I have many fine, serious, connected tangos full of 'tango bliss' while dancing both as follower and leader with women. These dances are often deeply satisfying.

And finally, what happens when the erotic potential is rebuffed or rejected, or the mere premise of same-sex attraction is threatening? This is my usual experience at my 'home' mainstream milonga when/if asked to dance by a straight man. Here are a few examples of what I can expect:

- Taken out for a 'test drive'. The leader wants to see how well I can follow. He only invites me once.
- Taken out for a tanda of tango sparring. The tanda is marked by aggressively energetic and forceful moves to see if I can 'keep up' and to ensure no one observes anything slow or possibly sensual.
- The male tango teacher who dances with his female students at the milonga but not the male student.
- An advanced male dancer who wants to learn to follow and so asks me to lead him but never to follow.

These experiences motivate me to travel afar to queer tango events where the erotic premise of same-sex attraction is welcomed not rejected.

As we consider the future of queer tango, let us not forget the importance of the erotic and its value to queer tango dancers. If, as I propose at the beginning, tango is a dialogue, then we as queer people, labelled as such by our erotic desires, would surely want to keep the erotic within the 'discourse' of queer tango. But could future queer tango somehow not include erotic potential? Perhaps not, and I certainly hope not. However, there is no guarantee of a sustainable future for queer tango. Possible threats to the longevity of queer tango include:

- Its popularity ebbing as can happen with any dance or activity.
- As in all social groups, there is the need to maintain and recruit members.
- This is complicated by the fact that learning tango is not a quick, simple process but one that requires patience and dedication. Also, many queer people do not have access to queer or queer-friendly tango classes.
- Queer tango events are often animated by just a few dedicated organizers, often volunteers. Queer tango's future is very reliant on these few people.

What happens if they are unable or unwilling to continue? Who will succeed them?

- Circumstances beyond our control can have a huge impact on the accessibility to queer tango spaces. In the spring of 2019, the economic situation in Buenos Aires precipitated the closures by Mariana Docampo of her weekly milonga Tango Queer and by Augusto Balizano of his weekly milonga La Marshall, which he reopened about 6 months later as a monthly milonga in a much smaller and less central hall.
- The growth of open role milongas has the potential of a very negative impact on queer tango. For example, an open role milonga may provide opportunities for queer tango dancers, seeking a higher level of dancing, pulling queer dancers away from queer tango events. An open role format might provide queer tango organizers with a more economically viable option if the queer tango model was no longer feasible.
- Straight people are more and more interested in dancing both roles and open to dancing with same-sex partners. While the participation of straight people in queer tango spaces might have some valuable benefits there is a risk that, at some point, their numbers could have a negative impact on the nature of the space.

From my experiences, I have learned the importance and value of the erotic in queer tango and I advocate for a future of queer tango that preserves queer tango spaces that provide erotic potential for queer dancers. I certainly do not speak for all and understand I have only addressed these matters from a gay male's point of view. There are many other viewpoints and desires present within queer tango spaces. Perhaps my discussion here will resonate with others as something they too have experienced and value and also want to include in the future of queer tango.

My experience of the erotic in tango has shown me:

- the benefit of relaxing and fully entering into the dance, dancing forthrightly as a gay man,
- the possibility of a highly charged and deeply connected dance of compatibility and attraction,
- the richness available when dancing with passion and abandon.

All are valuable to informing and enriching all of my dancing, with or without the erotic and inspire me to continue to improve my dance competency and to dance with as much authenticity as possible.

I continue to think about possible answers and responses to the challenges of queer tango's future and hope it includes, for many years to come, queer tango spaces where erotic potential is present for the queer dancers.

### **Stan Holman (he/him)**

I'm a cis-gender gay male, living in Vancouver, Canada where there are about twelve queer tango dancers. At about age 60, 9 years ago, I began classes with a queer ballroom club offering Argentine tango. Without much thought, I decided to learn to follow, which seemed like a radical choice for my personality.

The ballroom club soon disintegrated and I began attending mainstream classes and milongas as a follower. Supportive teachers integrated me into their classes, and at the milongas, I sat a lot. Several years in, I began annual trips to Buenos Aires for intensive private classes and the queer tango festival. The first two trips, I studied following and after that, I studied more intensely the leader role. Leading at my 'home' milongas, I now dance more or less as much as I want. My opportunities to follow, outside of classes, are very limited.

### 3. Visualising Future Dances

#### **Sueño oriental**

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Buenos Aires, Argentina



Sigo un sueño dentro mío, fue una noche de esos días en los que hace tanta falta soñar, me propuse, o quizás me programé diciendo: dame un sueño que pueda llevar al taller de escritura.

Me dormí en el minúsculo rayo de luz que forma la lámpara de sal, me inserto en lo subliminal del minuto sin tiempo, flashes indivisibles, colores, murmullos y ruidos.

Las calles de Montevideo vestían de colores, luces, bengalas, artificios encuadran un festín. Camino sin rumbo mientras huelo el gusto del río, cuenca del Plata, flotamos en algunas orillas que se muestran marrones.

Muchas personas se aglomeran en la puerta de un estadio, yo espero.

Hinchas de todos los equipos bajan de micros, entre bombos, carnaval con espuma, desfilan, como los reyes momos que con cabezas gigantes transitan San José. Hay batuque, hay Zitarrosas que se escurren por las ventanas. Todo es colores, una mezcla de sentido popular y festejo desmedido.

Me siento en el cordón de una vereda, miro todo desde abajo, desde acá se magnifican los seres, o se deforman en espectros sobre una perspectiva diferente. Llevo una lata de cerveza, no se quien la puso en mis manos, disfruto de la frescura, es una noche de esas que el verano nos pone en enero para festejar que somos personas y vivimos en un mundo cálido y amoroso.

Llevo carnet en la mano, está sin estrenar, mi foto es de una mujer bellísima, me sorprende saber que soy yo. Converso con un hombre joven que se sienta conmigo a mirar desde abajo.

Le pregunto si habría un lugar para nosotros entre la muchedumbre, nos miramos como si nos conociéramos, se parece a Artigas. Viste un colonialismo de ocasión, no sé si es disfraz o es Artigas realmente, no pregunto ¿para qué entrar en grietas históricas? Pienso en que si no estuviera en este sueño lo conocería del barrio, del club o de la cancha. ¿Será de Racing Artigas?

Mientras, algunas mujeres con niños salen de una caravana que desciende por las calles contiguas. La fiesta está también en los bronces, resuena en las trompetas, que desprenden notas y las hacen viajar al cielo, esfumándose entre los pisos altos.

Yo espero, parezco una niña a la que le están por regalar un cachorro. Me siento observadora de las serpentinas que se van desparramando sobre los adoquines y desaparecen en las claraboyas.

Un coro de voces alegra la avenida principal de la ciudad, una poeta vestida de flor recita versos de abejas, relatando sus temblores cuando encuentran un amor. Me río con un pibe que mezcla un baile, entre pasos de tango y cumbia, me sonrío, se sorprende cuando busco su mano para saludarlo.

El cordón se convierte en sillón, me termino la cerveza. Siento una presencia cercana, me sube un perfume conocido. Dos manos me toman por detrás la cara, me acarician todo el rostro, en un ir y venir de ternuras que se van amalgamando en el transcurrir de la piel. Sé quién es, aún sin verla, siento su ser, podría adivinar su sonrisa, sigue en mi piel, me toma del cuello, mi espalda se estremece en su abrazo oriental. Al levantarme, se pone frente mío, *sus ojos azules bien grandes se abrieron*, como dice el tango, esa música que une nuestros barrios.

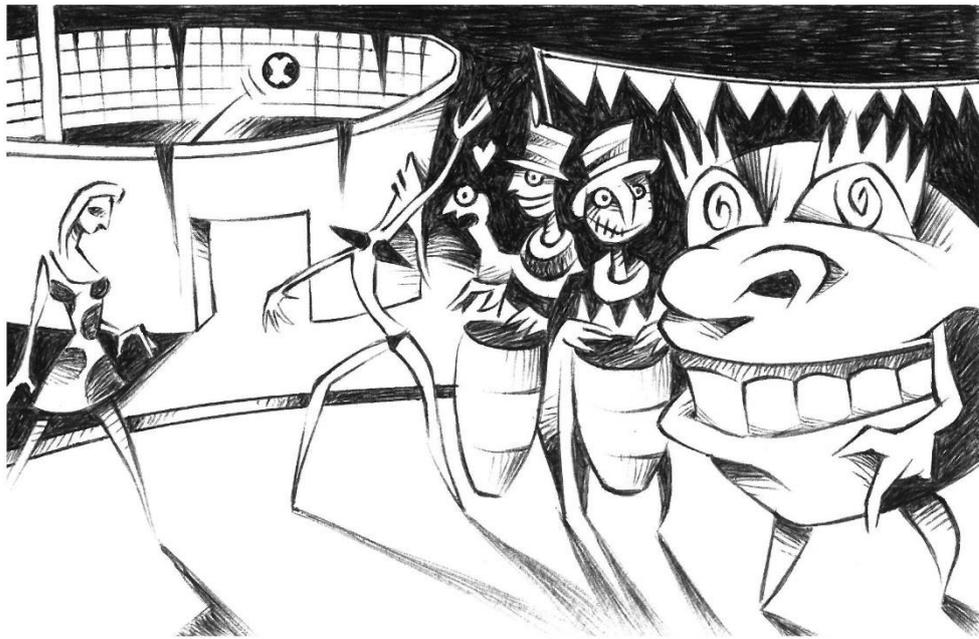
Ella agarra mi cara, mis mejillas son dos frutillas que se ensanchan, me mira a los ojos y sonrío. Por fin la veo, una emoción nace sobre un pequeño gesto de la comisura de sus labios, dibujando dos arruguitas ascendentes, que la hacen madura y tierna a la vez, me siento escalando la cumbre de la belleza, no me quiero retirar de su mirada, yo quiero que nazcan minutos eternos.

Nos besamos, con ese beso que nace entre mujeres, en cada línea que nos surca, se emparejan las bocas cuando tocan entre labios. Y así las dos, ya no pueden separarse nuestras pieles. Nos quedamos, nos dijimos, nos amamos, nos vivimos.

Miramos desde la arena, las calles envolvían alegría. El río nos brilla y en su plata nos descubrimos invencibles.

Me despierto, una milonga a media soledad se escurre por el filo de mi ventana que da al patio. Me quedo risueña, quiero volver a ser soñante, me niego a la realidad diurna.

Miro el fondo y descubro que nacieron flores nuevas en mi jazmín del país.

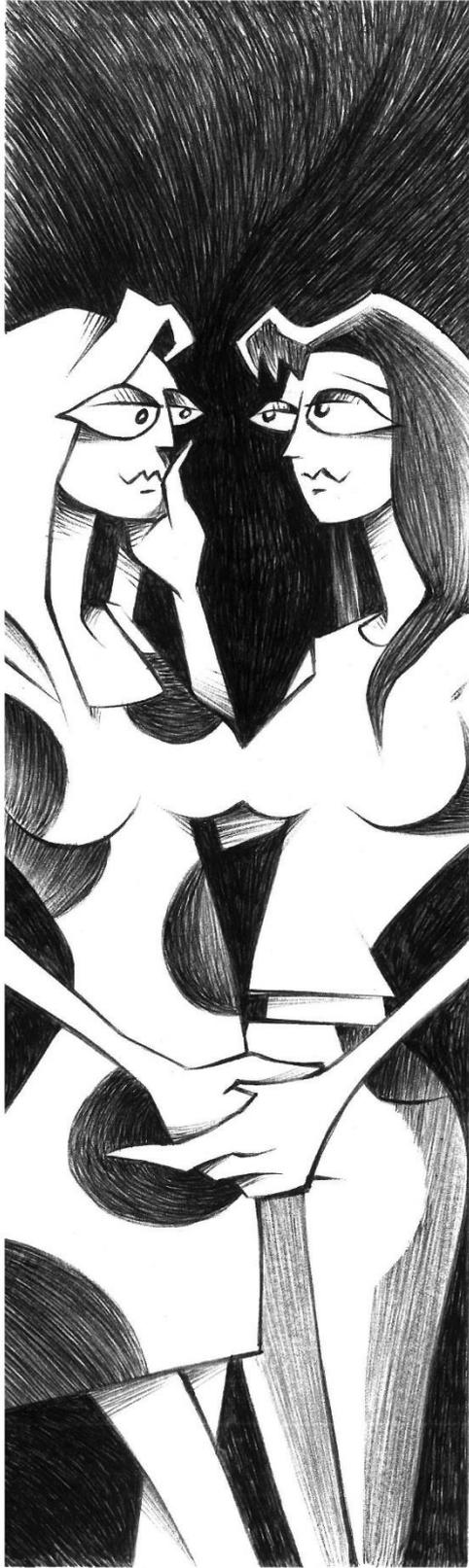


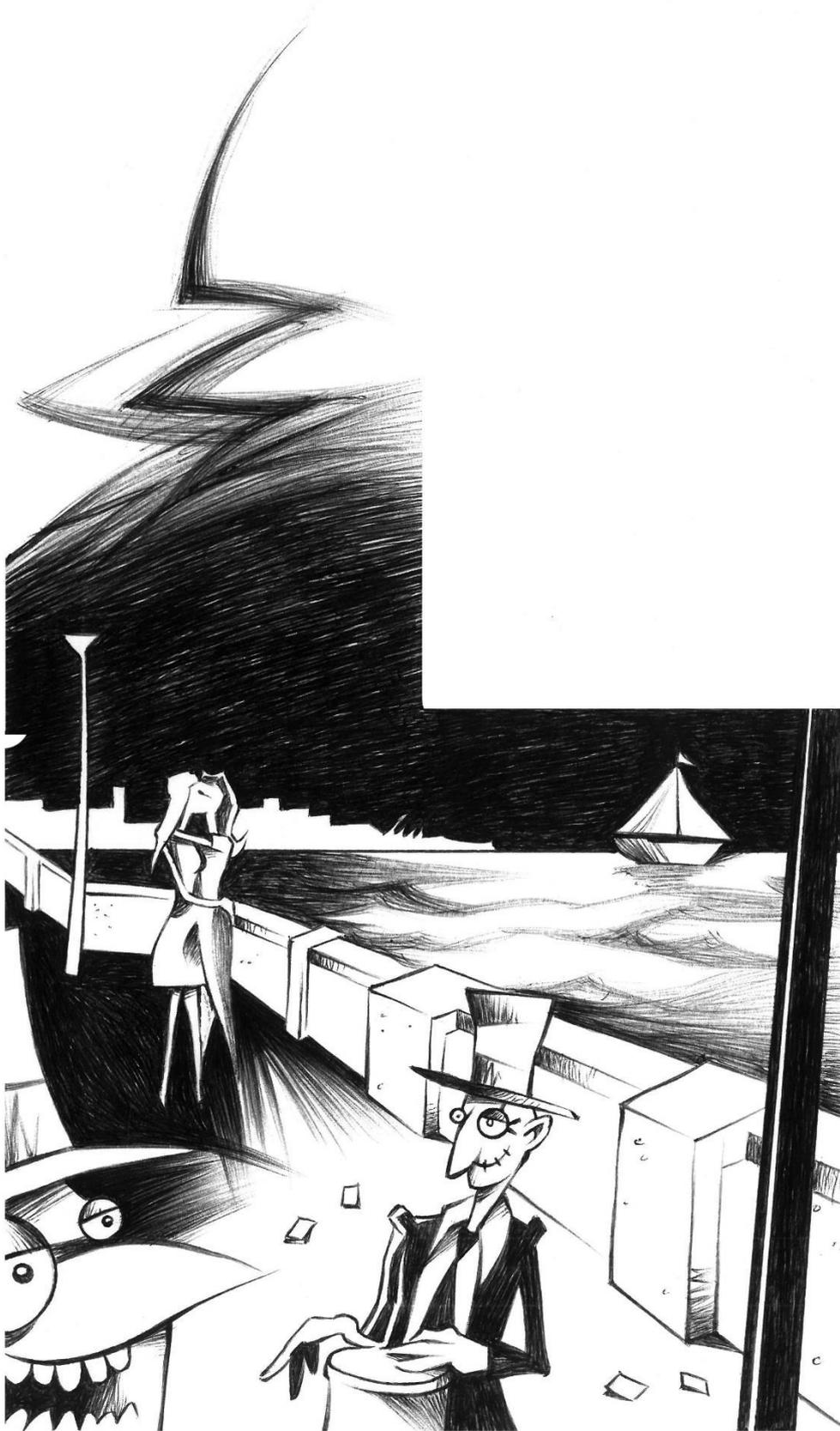
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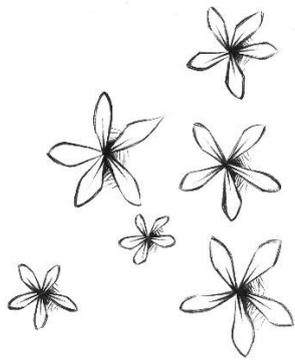
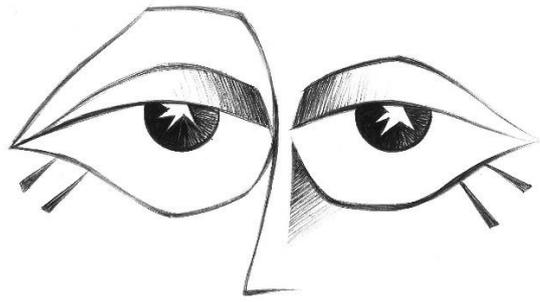












## **Bárbara Grabinski (ella)**

Nacida en Lomas del Mirador, conurbano de la Provincia de Buenos Aires. Cantora de Tango y otros folklores. Bárbara Grabinski combina estas actividades en su vida artística de una manera apasionante y decidida. Participó de varios festivales importantes, FACAFF, Festival de Buenos Aires, ECUNHi, Festival de Tango Marechal en Balvanera, entre otros. Grabó su primer disco "Bien Oeste", en 2013, donde recorre un repertorio tradicional criollo mezclado con Tango del S XXI, poniendo en valor las composiciones de esta nueva década, de otros artistas y propias. Se dedica a la docencia y a la militancia cultural tanguera y de género.

## **Gabriel Cagnune (el)**

Nacido en Buenos Aires, Argentina el 11 de julio de 1969. Cumplido el ciclo básico secundario se pasa a Bellas Artes cursando durante 4 años dibujo, pintura, grabado y escultura. Previamente estudió dibujo de historietas en la Escuela "Garaycochea", con el Maestro Osvaldo Viola (Oswal). En los años 90 publicó con continuidad en las revistas Humor y Sex-humor de Ediciones de la Urraca (humor gráfico). Colaboró en diferentes medios gráficos historietas.

## **Adriana Pegorer: Artwork**

London, United Kingdom

### **Adriana Pegorer (she/her)**

Adriana Pegorer is an Italian interdisciplinary dance artist living in London. In her work she investigates socio-cultural aspects of dance partly informed by intersectional approaches. She is one of the founders of Contact Tango, a fusion of Contact Improvisation and Tango Argentino, a practice she has cultivated since the late 90s. Her interests span from Ideokinesis and other release techniques to dance films, basketry, fascial anatomy and growing vegetables. Currently, her research is focused on Female Tango Leaders as part of her MA in Dance Anthropology at Roehampton University.

[www.adrianapegorer.com](http://www.adrianapegorer.com)

Note by the author: an eddy is a circular, whirling movement found in nature that is caused by an oppositional, yet somehow complementary, movement. Occurring deep in the oceans or high in the sky and anywhere in between, eddies mostly go unnoticed, unless you are caught in a big one, like a tornado! I like to imagine the milongas as places where many playful circular energies are forming continuously!

*Artwork: eddies. © Adriana Pegorer*

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*in the dance*

*we meet*

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*Adriana Pegorer*

## **Marc Vanzwoll: Daniel & Reto**

Zürich, Switzerland

### **Marc Vanzwoll (he/his)**

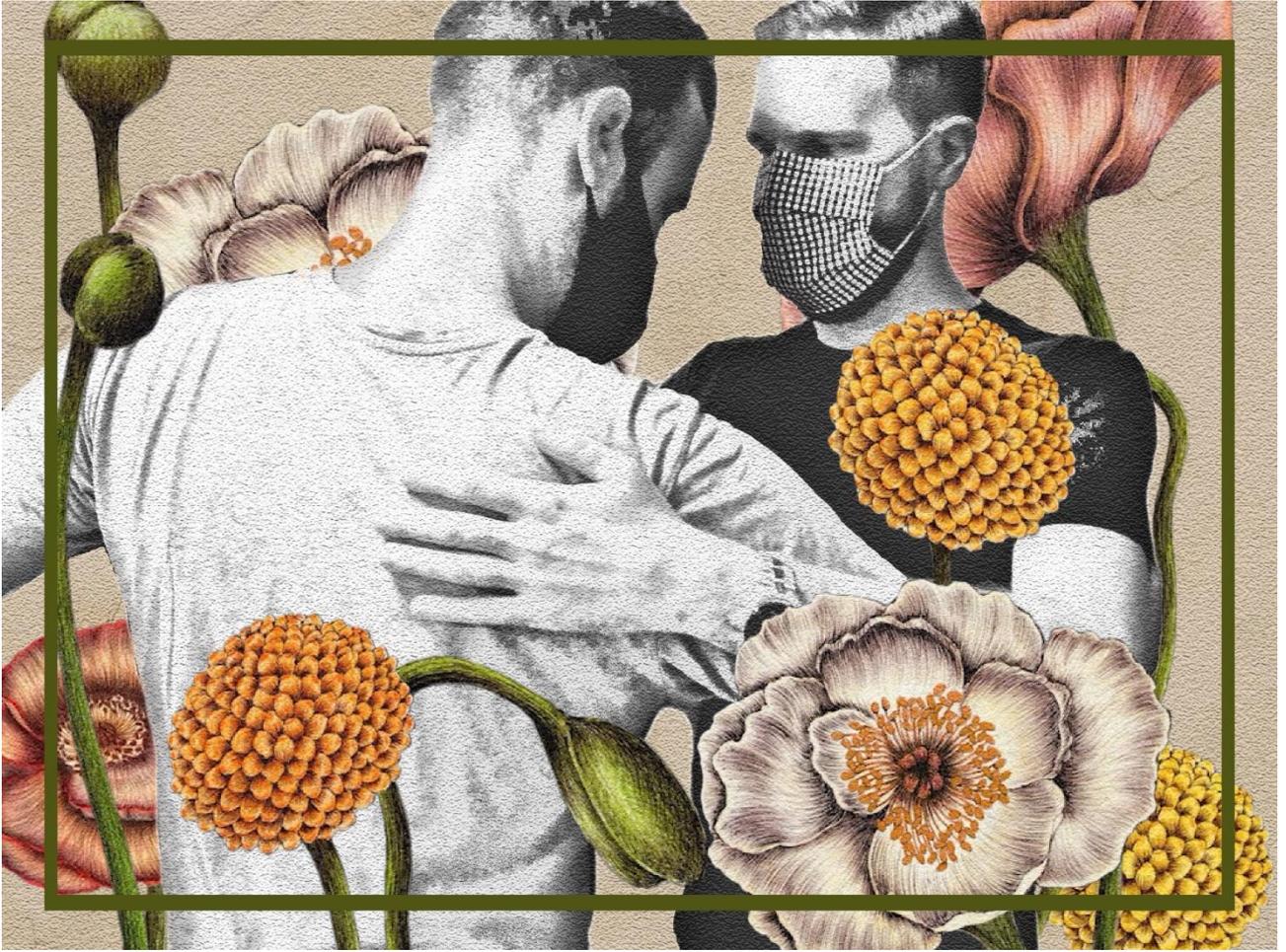
Marc Vanzwoll, “Tango has the power to change Self and Relation to Other.” In San Francisco Marc co-created the Gay Men’s Argentine Tango Classes and Sweet Inspiration Tango. In Boston he developed and co-hosted the “Letras de Tango” series focused on the poetry and meaning of tango lyrics, Lady Leaders workshops, and Men’s Following Technique workshops. In Zürich, since 2017, Marc created and teaches a tango curriculum centered on “Connection and Movement from Within” at Chante Clair, including classes in cooperation with QueerTango Zürich. His work reflects that tango roles have no gender, the Tango experience begins from within, embraces the partner, connects to the music, and is a conversation with the dancers in the room. Inheriting QueerTango Zürich as an organizer in 2020, and editor of the newsletter since, Marc pursued his goal of sustainable community by becoming the co-Founder and co-President of the new QueerTango Zürich Association.

### **Artist’s Statement**

“The future is already here — it’s just not very evenly distributed.” - William Gibson

Marc says, “Between lockdowns there was a short period in Switzerland when we were able to dance tango. In this window of opportunity, we realized the gravity of the pandemic, and at the same time society was inundated with a range of COVID-19 precautions and safety information. While we did not have ultraviolet light emitting dildos, or bleach poppers to pass around and snort, or COVID-19 vaccines, we did have masks. People were still not accustomed to wearing these, however most gracefully accepted my tango class “mask only” policy. And if they did not have one, I provided masks free of charge. Some grumbled. Those who refused to wear a mask in class were asked to leave. One student showed up with a non-filter black lace mask...

The original image was taken from class, and the initial intention was to use a cropped version to send a clear message of support for safety in tango in the first QueerTango Zürich newsletter under my direction. In creating the style, four separate digital editing programs were utilized. The most visible outcome is from the Flora Mural filter found in the Adobe Photoshop Camera Filters app that effortlessly provides any selfie or photo with these illustrated flowers. It’s a mobile app that runs on iOS or Android smart devices – which in this world are not very evenly distributed.”



*Daniel & Reto. © Marc Vanzwoll*

# **Nicole Roberts: A Tango with Her**

Buenos Aires, Argentina

## **Nicole Roberts (she/her)**

is an illustrator and designer professionally but has explored many art forms: photography, fine arts, digital arts and Argentine tango. After 20 years of web and logo design she now runs Nicole Roberts Illustrated Brands which offers custom art and illustration services globally.

Nicole discovered the tango in 2005 and was fascinated with the connection and communication of synergistic movement. It was an instant obsession. She joined dance groups, competitions (silver medals at Gay Games 2014, 2018 and several ribbons at April Follies) and studied with instructors in the US, Germany, France, and of course Argentina where she worked on both roles with Mariana Docampo.

Always in love with the human form she sees the energy of a subject and naturally wants to deconstruct and articulate its beauty. Over time Nicole has consistently turned to queer tango as a subject in her art. You can see her work at her portfolio [nicolerobertsart.com](http://nicolerobertsart.com) and follow her on Instagram @nicolerobertsart.



*A Tango with Her. Digital illustration, 2020 © Nicole Roberts*

## **Birthe Havmøller: Tango Portraits**

Aarhus, Denmark

### **Birthe Havmøller (she/her)**

I am an independent editor, visual artist, queer feminist arts activist and dual role tango dancer. I have worked with photography as my creative medium since 1989 with the landscape as my source of inspiration. When I work with my camera, I turn the viewfinder into a 'magic mirror' in which I look for reflections of my inner landscapes. When looking at my photography, you must relate to it as a poem. In 2003, I launched Feminine Moments – Queer Feminist Art Worldwide, an international resource site and art blog about fine art made by lesbian, bisexual and queer feminist artists. In 2013 I initiated The Queer Tango Project which started as a book project and now is much more. I co-edited our first publication, *The Queer Tango Book* (2015) with Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo. Now I am the editor of The Queer Tango Project website, and I co-moderate our group, The Queer Tango Conversation on Facebook. I am currently living and working from home in a village near Aarhus in Denmark. [www.havmoeller.info](http://www.havmoeller.info)

As I started dancing tango, I also started photographing dancers at the International Queer Tango Festivals I attended. *Tango Portraits* is a series of digital collages with queer tango couples in new "safer" spaces (see below). They show bubbles of love as the couples connect and dance, each in their own safe space.



© Birthe Havmøller



© Birthe Havmøller



© Birthe Havmøller

## 4. Radical Queer Inclusivity

### **Dancing the Image of Our Imagination: one approach to Queer Tango pedagogy**

© Marc Vanzwoll  
Zürich, Switzerland

*“When you become the image of your own imagination, it’s the most powerful thing you could ever do.” – Ru Paul*

Queer Tango is an opportunity for dancers to reinvent their experience and self imagination. This relates to mental and emotional states, and also to concrete actions in class and on the social dance floor. Along with standard tango learning (which includes, among other things: tango technique, sequences, the embrace, floor craft, musicality, movement, etc.) I have found the following to be valuable in the Queer Tango learning experience. These are my reflections based on experiences both as a student and as a teacher.

#### **Imaging and Self**

To inspire images of self in Queer Tango, it is important to create and post graphics and photos one can relate to and show examples of dance partnerships that define Queer Tango: same-sex, women leading men, men leading women, and non-binary/genderqueer.

Queer Tango students come in every rainbow color and deserve to be respected as individuals. Be sensitive to pronouns and how students present themselves emotionally, mentally, and physically. Do not assume.

As Ru Paul has said, “we’re all born naked, and the rest is drag”. Acknowledge the presence of drag in Tango, where drag can even include common images of a macho man leaning over a woman in a red slit dress. It helps to be aware of how such images influence both Mainstream and Queer Tango, and that this affects our perception of “Lead” and “Follow”. Expand the definitions of “Leader” and “Follower” (for example, a Leader creates space, and the Follower actively flows into the space). Tango drag can be playful and theatrical without interfering with the dance or the physical/emotional connection, experience, and pleasure of the tango couple. Performing tango drag does not excuse nor support toxic partnerships.

## **Self and Partner**

Teaching and learning both roles must be given equal time in the learning environment as each role contributes equally to creating the dance. It provides vital learning opportunities for Leaders wishing to learn how to follow, and Followers wishing to learn how to lead. It is important to encourage students to learn both roles; however, it is also important to respect Queer Tango students who wish to learn only one role. It is a myth that queer tango dancers must be able to dance both roles. Another myth is that good leaders who have no education in following are automatically good followers.

Furthermore, intercambio (exchanging roles) needs to be an integral part of any Queer Tango curriculum. Not only is it strongly associated with Queer Tango, exchanging roles within the dance supports the understanding of each role. It has the opportunity for discovery and liberating what is physical and mental – to shift the mind to unbind gender, embrace, and roles.

Most importantly, intercambio creates an environment of possibility that nurtures the flow of dialog between follower and leader towards a deeper connection.

## **Invitation and Handling Rejection**

To support dancers to navigate social tango etiquette, it is important to introduce and practice the cabeceo, the non-verbal art of inviting a partner to dance, and also to refine it for Queer Tango sensibilities. After the cabeceo, and because one cannot rely on visual cues concerning dance roles in Queer Tango, one may verbally ask the other's role preference before agreeing to dance.

The (Gentle) Art of Rejection goes hand-in-hand with the cabeceo. If avoiding eye contact in the cabeceo, or taking off your shoes, doesn't work, and they are face-to-face with you, then the word "no" is appropriate. If one is on the receiving end of the "no", don't take it personally. Whoever one might be, nobody is required to dance with another person. "No" means no, and no reason or excuse needs to be given.

## **Music and the Learning Environment**

Intentional choices of music can support creating a queer learning environment. Examples of LGBTQ+ anthems that can be fun and enriching to use in class, in alternative tandas or as cortinas include: "Y.M.C.A.", "It's Raining Men", "True Colors", "She Keeps Me Warm", "Beautiful", etc. Use local LGBTQ+ culture and regional language as reference when searching for these anthems.

Also, use music to expand social awareness by acknowledging and identifying misogynist tango songs like the following examples: “La Bruja”, “Chau Pinela”, “Tortazos” (and many more!)\*. There are many other beautiful tango songs to choose from to use in a lesson or milonga setting.

## **Diverse Communities and Sustainable Learning Environments**

Queer Tango learning also includes the history and development of Queer Tango in that particular community, recognizing the efforts of the pioneers/trail blazers who were crucial to building the local Queer Tango community. And it helps the students understand and appreciate the local community as part of the global Queer Tango network.

In Queer Tango, diversity and inclusivity are essential values. This includes not only the full spectrum of LGBTQ+, but also diverse socio-economic groups. For this reason, learning opportunities and participation must be available to dancers with limited resources. And at the same time, the Queer Tango learning environment must also be organized in a manner that allows funding for educational outreach.

A Queer Tango learning environment is also welcoming to Non-LGBTQ+ students, and they are given the same respect as any student. In a learning environment wherein everyone is encouraged to both lead and follow, this includes respecting that the straight student/s may wish to remain as a heteronormative couple, not change roles, and may not even exchange partners.

To preserve a welcoming, diverse, inclusive Queer Tango learning environment, it is essential to recognize any person, regardless of status, who is a disruptive force to the values of community. These persons need to be addressed individually, told why their specific behavior is disruptive, removed from the environment, and encouraged to find their learning opportunities elsewhere. It is not a right, a Queer Tango learning environment is a privilege.

## **Queer and Non-Queer Tango Resources**

It benefits Queer Tango dancers to expose them to a variety of inspiring teachers, whether they are Queer or not. In inviting non-LGBTQ+ and non-Queer Tango resources to teach in a Queer Tango environment, it is the responsibility of the organizer, teacher, or community to vet non-Queer Tango resources. The heteronormative tango teacher, or even the straight same-sex tango teacher pair, invited into a Queer Tango environment must take the initiative to understand the Queer Tango experience and teach respectfully. It is expected that these teachers adapt, and that they support Queer Tango partnerships through verbal and visual example in class demonstrations.

In addition, a Queer Tango teacher also encourages students to explore a wide range of Tango experiences, both Queer Tango and Mainstream Tango, as well as informing the students how to navigate different dancing environments. And at the same time, the Queer Tango teacher must respect that the LGBTQ+ dancer may prefer one environment over the other.

Queer Tango dancers should be encouraged to learn with many different teachers, as long as these teachers are supportive of LGBTQ+ students and the Queer Tango experience. A Queer Tango teacher who holds on to a student will stunt the student's learning process.

No one teacher knows everything about Queer Tango or Mainstream Tango. Teachers are the ultimate students and must be open to continued learning.

Above all else, as teachers, students, and dancers, in any learning environment, and whenever we tango, we reach for humanity.

### **Note**

\* I'm grateful to the following DJs and dancers for pointing out misogynist tango songs: Theresa Faus, Leslie T. Fernandez, Irma Gross, Adriana Pinto.

I am also grateful to the Queer Tango Futures Editorial Team, and the valuable feedback and editing suggestions from Brigitta Winkler and my husband, Bernd Kasemir.

### **Marc Vanzwoll (he/his)**

Marc Vanzwoll, "Tango has the power to change Self and Relation to Other." In San Francisco Marc co-created the Gay Men's Argentine Tango Classes and Sweet Inspiration Tango. In Boston he developed and co-hosted the "Letras de Tango" series focused on the poetry and meaning of tango lyrics, Lady Leaders workshops, and Men's Following Technique workshops. In Zürich, since 2017, Marc had created and teaches a tango curriculum centered on "Connection and Movement from Within" at Chante Clair, including classes in cooperation with QueerTango Zürich. His work reflects that tango roles have no gender, the Tango experience begins from within, embraces the partner, connects to the music, and is a conversation with the dancers in the room. Inheriting QueerTango Zürich as an organizer in 2020, and editor of the newsletter since then, Marc has pursued his goal of sustainable community by becoming the co-Founder and co-President of the new QueerTango Zürich Association.

# Neurodiversity and the Future of (Queer) Tango

Ces

United Kingdom

Over the past few months, I have seen online talks and discussions aiming to find routes to greater inclusivity in the future of tango; for example, how best to tackle the issues of racism and misogyny. I applaud those who instigate these discussions! One topic I have not come across, however, is the need for greater sensitivity and accessibility for those in the tango community who identify as neurodivergent (ND). Types of neurodivergence include (but are not limited to) autism, ADHD, dyspraxia and dyslexia.

## Why is the discussion of neurodiversity in tango relevant here?

Before I continue, however, I hear the question being asked: “why is the discussion of neurodiversity and tango especially relevant in a space exploring the future of queer tango?” I understand the challenges facing queer tango as we rebuild post-COVID – these challenges range from making decisions about reopening queer tango spaces with responsible COVID guidelines, to (in queer tango’s role as a body politic) making the most of the momentum gained by anti-racist movements over the last year to tackle racism in our communities, through to working to understand how queer tango is defined, bringing together different voices while also being mindful of queer tango’s history and continually evolving significance. I also recognise the difficulty of making and maintaining a space for queer tango of any kind in a world which is not always welcoming. However, it is my firm belief that a space cannot be truly inclusive and welcoming unless it is also a safe place for all the marginalised groups: unless it is anti-racist, pro-feminist, and accessible for disabled (including neurodivergent) people. And queer tango in its “overt, political agenda” (to quote the Queer Tango Project website) to challenge and drive forward the future of tango, and to be an “environment in which people can express themselves in the way they truly feel”, [1] must therefore be a trailblazer and lead the way with its inclusive values.

But queer tango spaces have a more particular need to become accessible for neurodivergent dancers: compared to neurotypical people, a greater proportion of neurodivergent people identify as LGBTQ+. [2, 3] Neurodivergence already exists outside of the mainstream, which ties in with non-conformity with normative ideas of gender and relationship dynamics. Many ND people have a gender identity other than cis, and in a 2018 study nearly 70% of autistic respondents identified as non-heterosexual; [4] non-normative sexualities (including asexuality), gender identities (such as gender non-conforming, non-binary and trans) and relationship styles (such

as non-monogamy) are not uncommon. [5, 6] Therefore, queer spaces have a special responsibility to ensure that they are inclusive to ND people; queer tango is one such space.

### **How likely is it for neurodivergent people to dance tango?**

But are neurodivergent people likely to dance tango? Tango does not appear at first glance to be a particularly appealing hobby for ND people. Why would the stereotypical autistic person (for example) – disruptive, robotic, socially uncaring and incapable of enjoying sensory inputs such as touch – ever want to engage with tango which requires close and prolonged embraces with other people and a great depth of empathy and emotional connection?

But this stereotype is just that – a stereotype, and an extremely damaging one, as it makes things harder for the many ND people who do not fit this description. [7] As the saying goes, if you have met one neurodivergent person, you have met one neurodivergent person. Assumptions about particular spaces or activities being incompatible with neurodivergence may mean that those spaces never become welcoming for those among us who are both ND and keen to become involved. While some dance projects specifically for disabled people do exist, they are not widespread, and disabled people should not feel as though these projects are their only option. Hence the aim of this article: to reject the idea that (queer) tango and neurodivergence are incompatible, to counter stereotypes and assumptions about neurodivergent people, so that the queer tango community can welcome us with greater understanding, and to offer suggestions on how best to make future (queer) tango spaces more accessible.

I am by no means claiming that tango will be a preferred or possible hobby for many ND people – sensory processing difficulties, which commonly accompany neurodivergence, may indeed mean that some or all of the close and prolonged touching, proximity to other people (with the accompanying smells of bodies, food and perfume, for example) and often loud music would be a nightmare of overstimulation. [8] However, for some, certain types of sensory input, like that offered by a consensual firm embrace (in a similar manner to a weighted blanket), may in fact be soothing, or help to drown out other external unpleasant stimuli. [9, 10] Furthermore, some ND people have hypo-sensitivities (i.e. low responses to some sensory stimuli) [11, 9] and so the deep and intense touch of the tango embrace can be particularly pleasant. [12, 13] Listening to music – which is necessary when dancing tango – can not only be calming, and highly enjoyable, to autistic people or those with ADHD [14, 15] but also can help with focus. [16] Moving to music, i.e. dancing, can be an enjoyable way to communicate and connect with others, for ND as much as neurotypical (NT, i.e. non-neurodivergent)

people. [17, 9, 18] Although some ND people may struggle with focus and memorising set sequences, [19] or may have proprioceptive or motor difficulties (e.g. dyspraxia) which make any form of dancing unappealing, tango, for those who wish to dance, may in particular be enjoyable (more so than e.g. choreographed dances, as in my experience), due to its improvised nature and close physical contact.

Many of us who love tango find it particularly fulfilling due to the strong emotional – in some cases, almost spiritual – connection felt while in the embrace. Both ND and NT people are capable of the empathy and emotional intimacy required! It is painful for me and many other ND people to hear the assumption that autistic people (for example) do not experience “proper” emotions and cannot have empathy, when they may simply express it differently or find the typically accepted language and methods of communication insufficient or impossible; [20, 21, 22, 23] many of us have an extremely rich emotional life [24] and a great capability for empathy and imagination, [25, 26] including identifying emotions portrayed in music (which is key for a particularly enjoyable dance). [9] In fact, arguably ND people could reach even greater levels of the “tango connection” than NT people, resulting from the combination of sensory hyperawareness and empathetic hypersensitivity – I certainly believe that I would not have my particular immersive experience of tango without my neurodivergent traits.

Tango has the potential also to be a particularly safe space for ND people. Autistic people, for example, especially Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB) women, often act as if they were not neurodivergent (termed “masking”) in order to fit inside society’s box of what is considered normative and acceptable (often at a great energy cost). [27, 28] This experience of concealing one’s true self in order to avoid stigma and rejection will not be unfamiliar to many who inhabit queer spaces! Without masking, ND people are often criticised for having an unsmiling face, despite the fact that this does not necessarily mean a lack of emotion/enjoyment, but instead a difference between the internal feeling and the external display; [29] in tango, however, it is well-known and accepted that tanguer@s do not necessarily smile or look happy, even if they are enjoying themselves, due to the depth of focus on the feelings and emotions of the moment. [30] Tango can therefore be a time where ND people do not feel the need to “mask” with their facial expressions. Moreover, many NT tanguer@s are able and happy to talk for hours about tango, even to non-dancers – not so dissimilar from ND people with their ability to hyperfocus on particular topics and special interests, about which they often try to learn as much as possible! [31, 32]

## **The special strength of queer tango**

These characteristics of the tango community can help to make it a space where ND people can express themselves without feeling ostracised or conspicuous. However, I believe that queer tango can be an especially welcoming environment. As I previously mentioned, ND people often struggle to conform with the “mainstream” (often because the “rules” of the mainstream are illogical and founded more on convention and conformity than on logic), and also are more likely to be part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum and/or gender non-conforming, and thus may not fit in well with the social conventions and heteronormative stereotypes found in more “traditional” tango communities (such as the expectation of “opposite-sex” couples, and the gender divide and clothing choices for followers and leaders). Queer tango, which rejects the mainstream and conformative, provides an opportunity for those who work outside these conventions, either because they do not fit within a modern, queer setting or because the conventions have no logical or egalitarian basis and so are hard to understand. In tango, (all too often) we see certain movements being advertised and introduced with sexual coding (e.g. gancho/enganche), and it is so easy for the lines to be blurred between an intense tango embrace and a nonverbal romantic/sexual suggestion. This can make it difficult both for NT beginner dancers and for ND people (who can struggle with identifying non-verbal cues including body language and flirting) to realise when a tango move is inappropriate, or when there is a romantic/sexual intention on the part of their dance partner. For me, queer tango, where no assumption is made about dancers’ intentions (sexual or otherwise) with their dance partners, beyond dancing together, [33] provides freedom from the anxiety and distress that comes with the constant struggle to work out the meaning behind a dance partner’s nonverbal cues, and the fear that my own body language may be misinterpreted.

## **Suggestions for making future queer tango more accessible**

I hope by this point I will have convinced many of you that neurodiversity and tango are not mutually exclusive concepts, and that queer tango has a particularly special role in making neurodivergent people included and welcome. However, the Queer Tango Project asks the question “what should the future of queer tango be like?”, and so I would like to give some further specific suggestions on how queer tango can become even more inclusive and accessible in the future.

First and foremost, please do not assume that no-one in your tango class or milonga is neurodivergent! Many of us (and especially AFAB women) do not display all of the stereotypical neurodivergent traits, and will have learned to “act normal” in order to avoid rejection and suspicion. On the other hand, please don’t exclude people who do display more “obvious” traits, or struggle with social situations, facial expressions

and making eye contact (this could also include finding alternatives to the cabeceo/mirada).

Please continue to work outside of heteronormative, socially conforming boundaries and outdated stereotypes! Please try to reduce opportunities for confusion, including the unnecessary hypersexualisation of some parts of tango. Please don't assume that we have picked up on non-verbal clues – making your intentions clear verbally, and asking us if you aren't sure you've interpreted our expression or body language correctly, will help avoid distress and pain (especially if you are interested in more than dancing!). Please try to avoid unexpected touch, and to reduce unnecessary bright lights, noises, smells (no overpowering cologne!) and distractions as far as possible – if you can, make sure there's a quiet and calm area for people to go if they need a break.

Please explain why the movements or steps you teach are important, even if it seems obvious: neurodivergent people often have difficulty in understanding or performing a task without clear, unambiguous communication of why it is necessary. Please be patient if we seem to take a long time to learn something new – maintaining focus/executive function can be difficult, [34] and for those of us who struggle with proprioception, regulating and coordinating the movement of our bodies can be very challenging [35] – and try to avoid giving too many instructions at once or long choreographies, as this can be very overwhelming. Please give warning before you switch to a new thing in class, because quick task-switching can be stressful and shocking. [36]

Finally, please don't hesitate to ask individuals for what they need to make tango a better experience! In writing this article, I acknowledge that I am only one person, with one experience of tango and neurodiversity – while I can do research, I will undoubtedly have missed something, and nothing can replace the lived experience of each individual.

Queer tango already has provided a safe and welcoming space for so many people, and has pushed tango to explore and develop so many new possibilities. As this project shows, queer tango is not willing to rest in its efforts, but rather continues to strive to make itself an environment for innovation and freedom of expression. I would like to thank you all, and in particular the founders of the Queer Tango Project who set out to make this ebook an exploration of the future of queer tango, for seeking to understand how to make queer tango spaces even more welcoming to diversity, including neurodivergent people, in the future.

## How to find out more about neurodiversity

Note: if you wish to research further about neurodiversity, I have included below some of the resources I used for this article – you will note that I often turn to the experiences discussed between individuals, rather than more “academic” research which is often out-of-date or inaccurate. Please don’t use anything by the organisation Autism Speaks or from ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) therapy, as these frequently advocate practices and theories which are considered harmful by many neurodivergent people. Thank you!

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## **Ces (she/they/no pronouns)**

Ces has been dancing tango for a few years in the East of England and London (UK). She identifies as queer and neurodivergent. Before she found tango she believed she would always struggle with being ungraceful and awkward. Tango has given her a space to meet and be accepted by other people who don't hide their passion. However, Ces has not yet felt comfortable enough to be "out" (as both queer and neurodivergent) in her local tango community and is increasingly frustrated by the stereotypes and traditional gender roles found in conventional tango. In response, she started learning dual role dancing, then discovered queer tango from visitors, friends and her own research (interrupted by the pandemic). Ces loves to explore the possibilities of her physical, emotional and spiritual response to dancing and the wonderful tango embrace, and she looks forward to exploring more queer tango spaces in the future.

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

© Ray Batchelor

London, United Kingdom

*Tuesday 19th January 2021*

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

A dance partner from Normal Times – remember those? – a very nice, friendly, straight lady recently sent me a video clip of my Birthday Vals in November 2018. It was at my favourite weekly London tango venue, Tango Terra run by Alfredo Martín Espindola. To see it again now, in January 2021, in deepest lockdown, felt like peering into a lost world. Look at us! We are all so relaxed, so joyful, so easy with one another in this warm, welcoming, crowded place, with bodies everywhere, at the bar, on the dance floor as dancers, women, men, queer, straight, and others, presented themselves to me as leaders, as followers, or both if we flashed a bit of *intercambio* in for effect. All that and superb, live music from the Tango Terra Quartet led by Tim Sharp working its customary magic on us, dancing, or not. I have been going there for several years (“have”, rather than “had” because I want it that this story is not over). Sometimes I am struck by the sheer fragility of “normal,” ordinary life, on the streets, say, with traffic moving and people wandering up and down the pavements going about their business and I think one day, some terrorist activity, or some war might, as it has in the past, bring all this to a halt. Similarly, sometimes when I was there at Terra, I could just about imagine a future, older version of me at some later date, looking back to this heaven of a place and time when, for whatever reasons, it too had vanished.

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

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

There are two, unequal processes by which queer tango effects social and political change: the dancing; and the discourses. Normally, although the dancing is by far the most important, the two are intertwined. They critique, inform and so develop one another as the whole evolves. Those of us at Queer Tango London were working

hard on our constructive contributions to queer dancing. These happened both within queer tango, such as at our weekly prácticas, or when any of us, as at Terra, took our queer bodies out onto the London tango scene to dance and to be danced with. Or, on other occasions, presented ourselves at events we co-organised such as our hugely successful Summer open-air milonga at the Southbank Centre, run jointly with Tango on the Thames in 2019 attended by some 200 or so dancers.

Discourses, by which I mean everything which *is* queer tango, but *is not* the dancing, include informal, functional matters such as, in Queer Tango London's case as with other queer tango organisations, the words and imagery with which we choose to represent ourselves. More formally, the Queer Tango Project through our website, our Queer Tango Conversation group on Facebook and our publications (including this) is devoted to supporting queer tango discourses. Queer Tango London had been trying to integrate these two processes – the dancing and the discourses – in single events, not least in our contributions to LGBT History Month which happens in February each year. Last year, we were especially pleased with our event, *The Nightlife of Queer Tango*, which we ran at Colours, a queer nightclub in Hoxton, east London. Our DJs played exquisite, historical tango music from Buenos Aires, Paris, and Berlin for people to dance to, while the evening was punctuated with a few, rapid-fire, 5-minute illustrated historical “Lecturettes” about queer tango in those places at historical times.

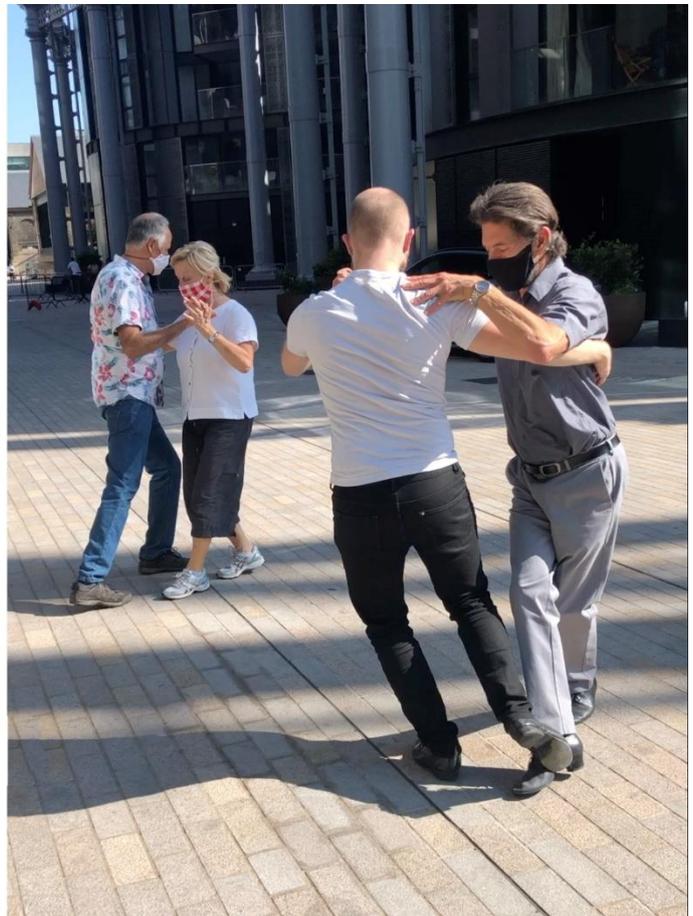
Barely had we savoured the praise elicited at the time and at a few subsequent Queer Tango London prácticas when, over what seemed like only a few days, so rapid was the succession of changes in understanding of what was actually happening, the Covid Pandemic kicked in. All tango dancing, straight and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

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

### **Queer Tango Dancing during Covid**

I write “effectively”, because, of course, as in mainstream tango, there *was* still some dancing, though very, very little, and very different. It has yet fully to be documented and written about. My heart goes out to those teachers or managers of

venues and other professionals in tango (queer or straight, neither or both) who depended on the dancing for a living. By contrast, a great many of us in the queer tango community are in it for reasons of conviction or pleasure, or both. No one can be but impressed with the professionals' creative transformations into online offers, as they became the only sort possible. And there was, I think, a little-trumpeted boom in "domestic tango" (see *Fig 1*). Having folded up the dining table – no one was coming to dinner – and furnished that room with easily moved chairs and folding tables, my husband, Jerome Farrell and I danced in our wooden-floored garden room to historical tangos on 78s played on our 1911 Parlophon gramophone. I sense, where both parties were dancers, this was a pattern broadly repeated by couples across the tango world.



*Fig 1 and Fig 2*

*Fig 1 Political Bodies at Home: Domestic Queer Tango. Like countless others whose usual outlets for dancing were closed by Covid, from time to time my husband, Jerome Farrell and I dance at home. Image credits: courtesy the author.*

*Fig 2 Political Bodies Outdoors: by adhering to some Covid Guidelines and subverting others, some of us from Queer Tango London were able to dance queer tango outdoors at some stages of the Pandemic, weather permitting. Image credits: courtesy the author.*

And there was more. We may love each other, but we do not always want only to dance exclusively with the other. My husband, missing his ballroom and latin dancing, which I cannot do, nonetheless found outdoor outlets for one of his (but not my) other preferred dance practices – line dancing. Fine! As the weeks became months and levels of Covid Lockdown rose and fell and rose again, formal and informal groups of tango dancers, queer and /or straight (as elsewhere, I think) contrived to dance with each other by creative interpretations of, selective adherence to, or the breaking of “The Rules” (see *Fig 2*). Keeping track of “The Rules” in the UK became ever more confusing. They shifted constantly. The morals of our dancing, even in retrospect, are up for debate, but we did not dance thoughtlessly. Covid-driven variations in our practices included any or all of the following: dancing outdoors (invariably); staying with one partner throughout; dancing with a limited number of couples on the “dancefloor” (wooden, in a bandstand, but also concrete and sometimes just grass); dancing in groups of six; wearing masks; staying in couples who were socially distanced from one another – and so on. Each configuration of Covid tango required a corresponding moral calculation weighing the pitifully scarce, undisputed joy of dancing tango (and its concomitant benefits to our mental health) against the risks of infection to ourselves, to our dance partners, to our life partners and others we mixed with in our lives, and to wider society. As the pandemic grinds on, I expect these calculations to be revisited.

### **Discourses during Covid**

In queer tango, while the dancefloors cleared, the queer tango discourses continued to be pursued, in part, through a number of successful, international online events. Undoubtedly, these were effective, affirmative initiatives which ensured that the queer tango community continued to operate and, indeed, to develop. Debates continued too. I am glad they were there. I could be persuaded that one unlooked for queer tango dividend of the Covid Pandemic has, paradoxically, been to strengthen rather than weaken this international dimension of our community. I admire these initiatives greatly and have contributed to them from the edges, but I have to confess, I am personally not much drawn to them. Historically, my contributions to the discourse dimensions of queer tango have tended to take the form of a more or less literary output, ranging from informal posts on Facebook with imagery, to various academic papers, presented or published, or contributions to books on contemporary or historical aspects of dance. It was a great privilege to turn my unlooked-for spare time to account by working with Birthe Havmøller, leader of the Queer Tango Project, in preparing an anthology of some of my historical queer tango papers, *Queer Tango Histories*, which The Queer Tango Project published in July 2020.

*Wednesday 20th January 2021*

1820 people died from Covid today.

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

Biden inaugurated as President.

*Thursday 21st January 2021*

## **The Inauguration of President Biden and Queer Tango**

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

I have never watched a presidential inauguration before – a little too much transatlantic-style "Pomp & Circumstance", I had always imagined – but we watched this one. How could we not: four years of the progressive licensing and defence of hatreds as political currency, with homophobia, transphobia and sexism thrown in there among the usual mix of racism and other habitual populist tropes; "America First" seeing the international moral power of the country as a force for good being thrown away by the systematic withdrawal from international organisations; the routine trashing of many of America's cultural, social and political institutions culminating in a President who, when legally and legitimately defeated in a free and fair election by a sane, rational man and America's first woman, and woman of colour ever to stand for and be elected to the national office of Vice-President, would not admit defeat. A man who, having failed in his legal challenges to the election result because of a lack of evidence and impeached for a second time – the first President in US history to whom that has happened – belatedly deserted by some of his staunchest supporters, this child-man who, to the end, seemed to think if he could control the story, he could control the country, incited a mob to march on and attack the Capitol Hill in support of his transparently false claims to the post of President of the United States.

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



*Fig 3 Political Bodies Run Riot: at President Trump's urging a mob stormed the Capitol Building in an attempt to thwart the orderly transfer of Power to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. 6th January 2021 will haunt American politics, though it is not yet [31st January] clear how. Image credits: courtesy Carlos M. Vazquez II; OCJCS.*

Queer tango, the dancing, works through our political dancing bodies and is at its most powerful when it does. The people who stormed the Capitol on January 6th also had political bodies and they used them (see *Fig 3*). They are a vivid reminder to us that bodies being political is no guarantee that they will also be responsible, just, moral, humane, rational, or beautiful. Contrast those bodies with the sober, orderly bodies of those in exactly the same space during the inauguration (see *Fig 4*). They actually did very little – some walking, some processing, a great many simply being still, with overt, physical expressiveness reserved for the singers and some speakers – but they moved according to a prior, shared choreography towards a shared objective: the Embodiment of the Orderly Transfer of Power, one of the key symbols of American Democracy and one which normally sustains the Nation's sense of its identity. No wonder Trump absented his shabby little self. In this context, a no-body in every sense.

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

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

I think I saw a tear in her eye. Jennifer Lopez sang too, speaking Spanish from time to time, the language of the people ex-President Trump (it gives me such pleasure just to type those words) sought to exclude by means of his infamous wall. And no one who saw and heard the first Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman (see *Fig 4*) – whose words and physical presence were at once, beautiful and dignified, urgent and passionate – will ever forget her:

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

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

While anyone can see the political advantages, for events of its kind, this ceremony was pathologically *diverse*, *inclusive* and *respectful*. These qualities cannot simply be added but require reciprocation from those to whom respect is shown, if they are to be real. Garth Brooks, resplendent in Stetson and cowboy boots – and a Republican – chose to come and sing at the inauguration of *this* Democrat President, on *this* occasion. With his own profound sense of its significance, Biden brought to the proceedings a sophistication and mature, moral authority unthinkable in his predecessor. His speech set recent events, as well as his own and the country's futures into a wider historical perspective. To say he would be President for all Americans may sound like something of a start-of-term cliché, but one senses that Biden, who is no fool, has a proper sense of the fragility of his position. He rules in a

country where more Americans voted for Trump than had for any other Republican presidential candidate in the nation's history. He is right to reach out. Arguably, if he is to deliver on the promises made in the run up to assuming power, he has no choice. He cannot deliver if he remains "pure" and partisan.



*Fig 4 Political Bodies Choreographed: in contrast to the rioting by Trump supporters in exactly the same spot earlier in the month, and despite fears it might be disrupted, the Inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as President and Vice-President respectively was orderly, but also charged with high emotion. Image credit: courtesy Wikimedia Commons.*

## **Post-Covid Queer Tango – the Case for Renewal**

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

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

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

Queer tango *is* tango, but with an overt social and political agenda. Perhaps we need to start with what we value in tango itself. We do not need a wholesale reinvention of the dance. We do, I think, need to reacquaint ourselves with some of the “truths” tango embodies. The first and fundamental truth (and this is the only dimension of my life where I will allow that I am a “fundamentalist”) is that the real, physical and corporeal dancing of tango, the embrace, the intimate, respectful touch, the smell of the other’s body (hopefully agreeable), the sense of the whole of another’s body – experienced moment to moment in musical time, through one’s own dancing, in a space shared by others doing the same – is what delivers “real” tango. Those who dance it know, and usually fail to convey to those who don’t, that if we are lucky, from time to time, our dancing delivers an experience at once joyous and transcendent. The borderline absurdity of the language is symptomatic of the difficulty of expressing this quality in words. It is best understood physically, knowing it by sharing it through the experience. As an accomplished dancer near the start of his tango journey once said to me as we drifted off a Paris dancefloor after one such tanda, “What was *that???*”. Critically, no one has an absolutely reliable check list of how “that” is to be achieved. If they did, we would all follow it and do nothing else.

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

### **How might we have changed?**

Perhaps it is easiest to start with the personal. After all, as noted, our primary reason for dancing tango at all is the personal, physical and emotional pleasure it delivers. “Attitudes” is a wonderful word in a dance context, for while it makes most people immediately think of states of mind, it can and does relate to states of the body. Bluntly, as for some others, Covid has changed my dancing body. It is what

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

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

### **Renewing Queer Tango’s Inclusivity Mission**

As a set of practices and beliefs, queer tango has come a long way from its origins which almost exclusively addressed issues of gender and sexuality, for while those remain central, aligning itself with other oppressed social groups such as racial minorities, the elderly and those with disabilities is a logical and welcome development. I need not re-rehearse the justly-celebrated hard work of Edgardo Fernández Sesma (see *Fig 5*) in this regard but applaud his persistence during Covid not only to sustain queer tango through Facebook, but also to continue to support his now isolated *adultos mayores* dancers through regular telephone calls. Queer Tango London’s widely anticipated plans for a *Jewish Tango Meets Queer Tango* milonga in London was scheduled for May 2020, but the Covid Pandemic summarily consigned it to the dustbin of Lost Good Ideas. What I will say is that the forces

which made such things relevant before Covid have not gone away but have ground on, accelerating in some places, and meeting opposition in others. A climate of fear and exasperation brought on by the joint threats of death and protracted lockdown restrictions is ripe for the incubation of “fake news” and populist grievances. When we can, queer tango dancers, as never before, must dance with others at risk of social oppression, and dance often.



*Fig 5 Political Bodies Re-energised: As well as wholly new ideas, Post-Covid Queer Tango will include Pre-Covid era practices repurposed. Edgardo Fernández Sesma’s queer tango inclusivity will prove durable. He is seen here in 2018 with Brenda Holtz, his sometime wheelchair dancing partner and adultos mayores dancers from his long-established campaign against the abandonment or maltreatment of the elderly. Image credits: courtesy Stan Holman*

## **The Case for Leaving our Comfort Zones**

I admired the willingness of the Biden inauguration to reach out to those conventionally cast as “enemies”. Queer politics, of which queer tango is a practical branch, has often defined itself by what it is opposed to as much as, if not more than, what it is in favour of. Historically, in the face of gross injustices, this has been understandable and entirely defensible. Regrettably, in some contexts it remains so

even today. The last four years of American history have vividly illustrated the ease with which the pleasures of a righteous sense of indignation – so much more potent than some limp desire for Good Things – can be manipulated by the unscrupulous for reasons of power, personal gain and aggrandisement. In striking a note of caution about queer tango as “opposition”, I would draw your attention to the attendant risks of such a stance. Usually, this stance has been developed when such attitudes were needed, but they can sometimes linger on as incantations when the “enemy” – say, the tango mainstream being characterised as “heteronormative” – in some places has changed, and those changes need to be acknowledged. That process is well in hand in nice, liberal London and elsewhere, but it is not a universal condition. And if we consider “enemies” more widely than those conventionally found on the dance floor, I wonder how far queer tango can go with reaching out? I honestly don’t know. But I have been thinking about it. Hard.

### **I Danced Tango with a Trump Supporter**

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

“Is this your first trip to Chicago?”

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

“You’re being polite, aren’t you?”

She fixed me with her eye.

“I support him.”

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

The dances were good. Very good.

I have had a long time to think about that odd encounter. We were never going to persuade each other of the rightness of our diametrically opposed positions, but we each gave the other space to articulate them. And then, knowing it would be for once only, we found one very narrow, wordless strip of life, tango, which, between us, briefly, we could inhabit. Successfully. It was very good, rather than transcendent tango, but it worked. And then it was over. And we never spoke again. I cannot say what, if any, the after-effects were for her. For myself, in describing this encounter to friends, eyes have rolled. There are people, they say, you just can’t engage with. Ever. I hesitate to generalise much from this vanishingly slight particular, but as I reconsider it now, in the light of the style and content of Biden’s Inauguration, I will risk this much: I have an as yet, ill-formed aspiration that Post-Covid Queer Tango might routinely move beyond condemning others from the comfort of our “echo chambers”, where all we hear are opinions like our own. Arguably, not listening to the opposition led to Brexit in the UK. Perhaps not listening to the opposition led, in

part, to Trump in the States. The peaceful (6th January 2021, very much noted) coexistence of those holding diametrically opposed beliefs is one definition of a functioning, liberal society. A dancefloor is society. As queer tango dancers in a renewed, Post-Covid climate working through dancing, rather than discourse towards that desirable state of affairs, perhaps we will need to get out more.

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

Just ideas...

### **The Case for “Opportunistic Queer Tango Dancing”**

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

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

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

Dance, no matter who our partner.

Dance, no matter what the music.

Dance, no matter what the venue.

Dance, no matter how we are.

Rather than rehearse with you all the permutations of each of these injunctions (I invite you to do this for yourself, in your own time), I will leave you with these thoughts: even in queer tango, we dance primarily to make ourselves happy with all else as side-effects of greater or lesser utility and value, sometimes by design, sometimes by accident. As noted, no checklist will ever unfailingly deliver superb

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

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

### **Ray Batchelor (he/him/his)**

Part of Queer Tango London since 2011, because of Covid-19, Ray Batchelor does very little actual queer tango dancing at the moment, no teaching, and his queer tango activism is now (February 2021) confined to his writings including as an historian of queer tango and his work with Birthe Havmøller on The Queer Tango Project. In 2020, the Project published his eBook, *Queer Tango Histories: Making a Start*. He co-edits Project publications, curates the Queer Tango Image Archive, and contributes to and co-moderates The Queer Tango Conversation discussion forum on Facebook. With Birthe Havmøller and Mori Plaschinsky, he is a co-editor of *Queer Tango Futures: Dancing for Change in a Post-Covid World*. He is very much looking forward to the Post-Covid Era of Queer Tango.

## 5. What We Want!



Watercolour by Sophie Karadjoff. Courtesy of the artist and Vincent Hodin.

## How should we dance post-Covid queer tango?

© Vincent Hodin

Paris, France

I will start by defining what queer tango is to me before going further in elaborating an answer to the question posed by this volume.

My attendance at queer milongas in Buenos Aires began in 2013 shortly after taking my first so-called “traditional” tango lessons in the Villa Crespo neighborhood. My sensitivity and my past as a contemporary dancer led me, thanks to these meetings, to pay a visit to El Beso, a tango venue where the queer milonga organized by Augusto Balizano took place every Friday. This fired my imagination and inspired further visits. My coming to the queer milonga quickly turned into a meeting of friends and, furthermore, the feeling of belonging to a community. For the first time in my life, as a twenty-five year old, I felt the deep sexual component of my identity. It had obviously existed before, but it never really emerged consciously until then.

I realized that queer tango could release the “heteronormal” dance of Argentine tango, to the point of being able to dance with whoever you want, and to respect that individual. The freedom of the concept of queer tango was still too much for me at that time. It was dizzying but I was able, through this community, to broaden my perspectives and at the same time to become aware of obstacles within myself which I couldn't easily define. The initiatives I took with queer tango were the seeds of ideas which continue to evolve, and the people who embody the universality inherent in the art of dancing in this way are my heroes.

Covid affects everyone in their life. No aspect of our social life is spared, and couple dancing was one of the first social activities to stop. Beyond precluding very necessary practicing, the pandemic has meant the ceasing of a way of life which is an essential means of expression, a warm reminder of belonging to a community to which I feel I belong, both through its values and through its actions.

When it comes to the post-Covid world, it's been almost a year since I've been able to participate in a queer tango event.

I have drawn up a list of what I can't do. It's what we all have experienced regarding what used to be the best of our various social relationships today. Briefly it's an impediment to loving, to universal loving. It's a suppression of the senses and of physical presences, it prevents us from attaining the plenitude of Love:

I can't dance anymore.

I can no longer campaign peacefully through this art to defend inclusion, no matter where in the world we are.

I can no longer hug people, I can no longer interact in proximity with the body of another person, friend or stranger.

I can no longer express myself artistically.

I can no longer create my dance.

I can no longer taste the meeting with the other.

I can no longer travel to an event where I will be gathering a large number of friends from all over the world.

I can no longer recruit people to dance this art.

Challenges? As a teacher, transmitter, and organizer of queer tango events, it is difficult not to be able to offer physical lessons to our students. It is impossible to be able to spread through dance the well-being, the inclusion, the comfort, the sense of belonging to a community without our weekly meetings to dance.

Each year a new group of beginners of Tango Queer is normally created, coming to increase the ranks of our family. We have in our collective a lot of gratitude from our students who thank us for making them discover this magnificent and wonderful dance, as well as testimonies of recognition as to a feeling of belonging to a group, an identity, a loving family. It is personally difficult for me today to realize that a new wave of recruits this year has not seen the light of day because it is impossible to organize courses.

What will be the psychological consequences of this disease? Will some of us give up this activity, this perhaps forgotten way of life for a while? Or permanently?

A fear exists in me of an after Covid world where people feel an aversion to any form of tango because of the physical contact involved, and we'll never see them in milongas again.

What I'm sure after COVID is that our beautiful queer tango community will have to be visible to everyone.

Despite my pessimistic thoughts, a more positive vision asserts from within me:

Our tango community, our organization is a model of peace. Now, we are in a world where meetings are impossible, where activist actions for inclusion are diluted for fear of contamination, but it is possible that we will forget all the discrimination, the acts of violence done to minorities, in varying degrees all over the world.

So, as a result of knowing it's absence, the post-Covid queer tango world will, be more colorful, bigger, more diffused, more a part of city culture, and bring softness, values of inclusion, and engendering a spirit of integrity in the world. Through queer tango, we will remember everything we have built and what remains to be built, without fear, claiming our desires for inclusive tango, a tango which is for couples of every orientation, each to be considered the equal of any other – "a dance for all" to put it simply.

Queer tango is a direct player that has its place in the new world where you have to turn the page on fear, on exclusions, on crimes against humanity.

Queer Tango will remain an 'infectious' expression of love.

### **Vincent Hodin (he/him)**

Vincent Hodin lives and teaches queer and traditional tango in Paris, France. He discovered tango and queer tango in Buenos Aires where he lived from 2013 to 2016. Contemporary dancer, he discovers this dance and sees its limitless potential. He finally found his peaceful way of advocating for the LGBTQIA+ community in which he feels he belongs. He is co-organizer of the international queer tango festival LA VIE EN ROSE which is held every year in Paris (artistic director: San Fede). He has been invited to dance and teach at several queer tango festivals, and especially twice in Russia where the climate of tolerance towards minorities is not in good shape. For him, queer tango is liberating the "heteronormal" dance that is Argentine tango to the point of everyone being able to dance with whomever they wish, with respect for each individual. The freedom of the concept of queer tango allows it to broaden its own prism of tolerance and inclusion. Vincent says, "as a follower, I try to be inviting and smiling in conservative and traditional places. It's my peaceful way of being an activist, maybe a trailblazer, and of allowing others to feel legitimate to try, to test a new concept."

# Queer, Activism & Tango

© Loris Coen

Rome, Italy

Everything seems to have stopped in this pandemic climate, but not the passion for tango!!! If tango is also used as a therapy, tango-queer is for me the most complete medicine because it explores every angle in 360 degrees.

The word "queer" alone has a very important meaning for LGBT+ people, especially in a world that is becoming more and more homophobic and in which making our voices heard seems so difficult.

There are many ways to combat discriminatory plagues and tango-queer is one of the most beautiful and concrete ways to do it, because it uses all our senses because it speaks to others while not speaking. This is why I believe that this art cannot be questioned as it would mean questioning the very essence of life.

Tango-queer has made great progress in recent years and has also entered the lives of those people who were previously afraid to face their own prejudices, too tied down by the risk of being labelled "wrong" with respect to their sexual identity.

Prejudices are the hardest thing to break down, but tango-queer is somehow succeeding. I could see it on my skin, finding myself dancing with people I never even imagined before.

Now, due to the pandemic caused by the "Covid-19" virus, everything has stopped and even the world of tango has frozen in place, waiting to be reborn, to regain its original vigour. But it has only stopped outside because inside of us it is more alive than ever and this forced pause can (and must) help us conduct a more accurate introspective analysis of what tango really is for us, and on what we want to continue to give, or to have, once we get out of this situation.

It is not easy to describe what should be kept, removed or added – especially if we are talking about tango-queer which, despite the enormous progress made, is still too constrained by what others might think and the fear of giving a "wrong" image of one's own sexuality.

Rather than holding events or not holding events, I think we should think about restoring what, over time, some have ruined in tango, denaturalizing it and depriving it of its fundamental components such as the embrace, a true symbol of a spontaneous dance.

The pandemic we are going through (at the time of writing) has inevitably made us more detached and cold, has taken away the hugs and many other forms and expressions that characterize tango as a human relationship, but perhaps it is precisely this forced abstinence that has made us tremendously eager to have back what we previously took for granted. We should take advantage of this pause to reflect and re-find a new approach with our dance partners (and not only with them) when we are free to do so.

In tango, we often see dance couples totally empty in their embrace, although sometimes not lacking in technical quality. But I believe that the embrace is the fundamental component that must be taken care of first – because it is from there that you can see if one dances to give meaning to what one is doing, or if one does it for pure exhibitionism.

It doesn't matter who is watching us at that moment. Only the feeling we want to express counts, and our body will know how to do it without problems and without external interference, because it too has a “voice”.

I don't have to be the one to say which are the elements to keep, remove or add, because everyone has their own way of living and expressing their feelings within themselves which come to life the moment you start dancing – but I sincerely hope that everything we are going through will give us a new-found strength!!!

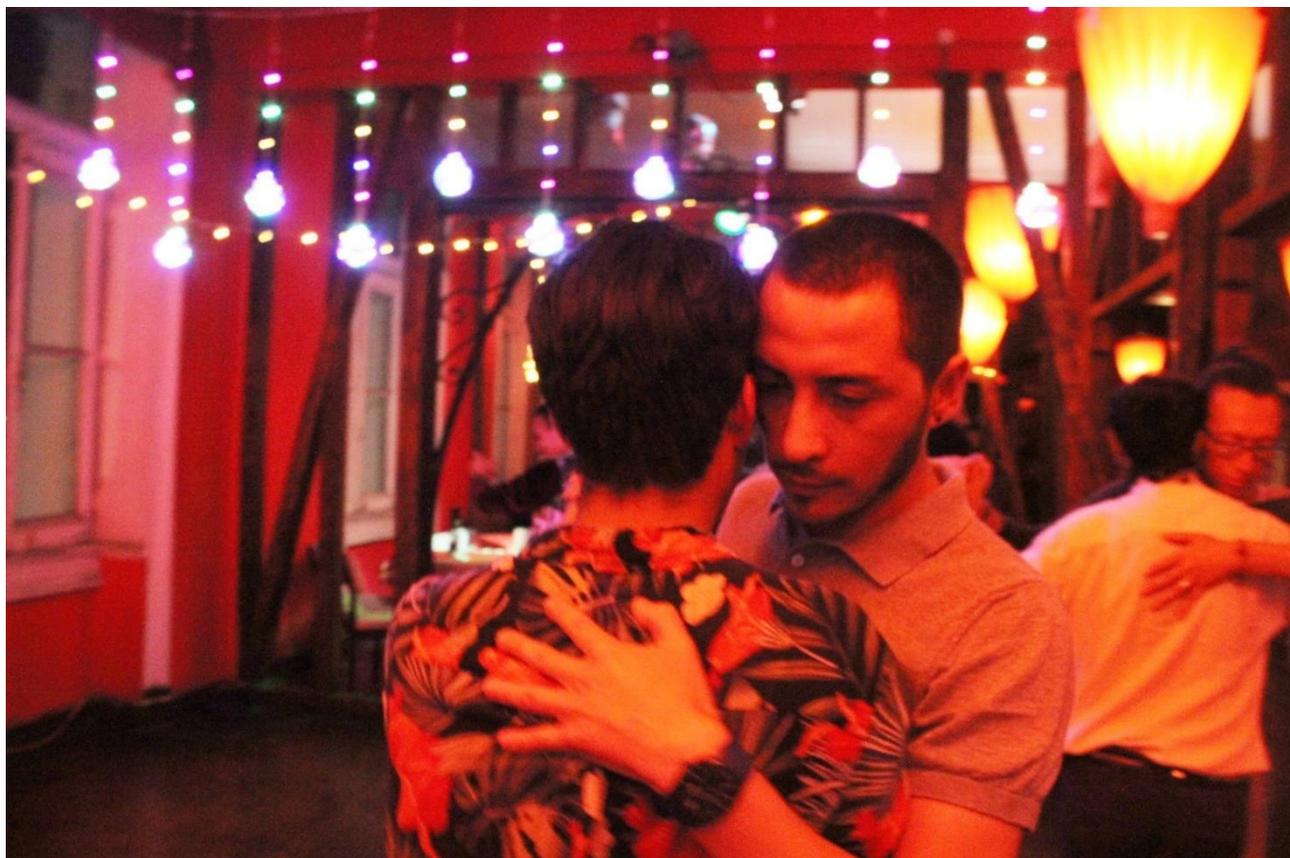
### **Loris Coen (he/his)**

I was born in Rome in 1971 and music has always been my passion, but I have never focused on a specific style, rather I let myself be carried away by the senses, by what causes me an immediate thrill to the skin. I have always enjoyed tango, albeit from a distance, until I discovered tango-queer more than 10 years ago and it literally made me fall in love with it for its infinite expressions and possibilities. The tango then spontaneously connected with my role as an LGBT+ activist, seeing in it a great power of inclusion of races and cultures, which, as they danced, respected their various peculiarities and ways of living. I was curious as a child and I will never lose this feature because discovering new things – enriches – always!!!

## Tango Naturalmente Queer

© Patricio Arquero

Valparaíso, Chile



*Milonga Queer Valparaíso en bar "La Piedra Feliz", Febrero 2020. Fotografía de Patricio Arquero.*

La pregunta de título, me hizo pensar justo en una conversación que tuve con Carmen Hergos, ella es una tanguera que organiza una movida llamada Tango Natural!. Precisamente creo que la palabra NATURAL me hace mucho sentido sobre cómo me gustaría que fuese el "Tango Queer" del futuro, y si lo reflexiono, me gustaría que fuese ... natural. Llegar a un punto en donde dejemos de precisar del término Queer, para avanzar hacia espacios de abrazos naturalizados que generen un ambiente realmente seguro, para todxs lxs que disfrutamos del tango.

Creo que para que la palabra NATURAL realmente pueda tomar un lugar importante en la escena del tango, es importante DESNATURALIZAR diferentes acciones como la violencia de género, la jerarquía patriarcal, el machismo tanto femenino como masculino, la homofobia, el clasismo, entre un montón de otras situaciones que generan que tengamos que crear una comunidad propia y segura como siento que es EL TANGO QUEER.

Si bien no tengo muchas referencias respecto de espacios de TANGO QUEER en Europa, si las tengo sobre Latinoamérica, y creo que existe una gran conciencia social y un reflexionar constante respecto a cómo queremos transmitir el tango. NO SOLAMENTE bailamos, disfrutamos y aprendemos, también estamos consciente de por qué estamos aquí, de por qué existen los espacios de tango queer y que si bien es un espacio seguro y confortable, debemos repensarnos en abrir este panorama... debemos invitar a reflexionar que tampoco es natural que tengamos que generar nuestros espacios de tango queer para poder bailar, disfrutar y sentirnos segurxs, que LO NATURAL debería ser la libertad absoluta en cualquier espacio.

Siento que algo que puede aportar a generar estos cambios, precisamente es encontrándonos, conociéndonos... no solamente desde el abrazo ... sino que desde la conversación, desde la mirada ... desde el compartir como seres humanos que somos todxs. El desconocimiento suele generar miedos y prejuicios, y según mi poca experiencia en el tango, siento que cuando me han conocido como persona, se han abierto también desde la danza, ya no les importa que baile los dos roles, o mi preferencia sexual ... se genera inclusive un cariño o afecto, porque al final... a todxs nos gusta el tango sea queer o no.

### **Patricio Arquero (el)**

Patricio Arquero es profesor de Artes Plásticas, Licenciado en Educación de la Universidad de Playa Ancha, con estudios de Arteterapia en la Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires. Desde el 2007 organiza Milonga Queer Valparaíso en Chile. Espacio independiente, autogestionado y sin fines de lucro donde se realizan Clases, Prácticas, Intervenciones y Milongas Semanales. El 2019, organiza el 1er Encuentro Formativo de Tango Queer Valparaíso y actualmente organiza y dirige el 2do Encuentro de Tango Queer Valparaíso 2021.

# Queer Tango Alphabet

© Alessandro Tampieri

Bologna, Italy

*“What I am always looking for is a story.*

*Something I have never heard from anyone else”* – Brandon Stanton

As I read the call, I decided that I would share some considerations. But the more I thought about it, the more confused I got. How to draw a through-line? Where to start from? In my work I am used to playing with words, with letters. So, this is what I found useful to begin with. The abc.

**A *action***, to take action, to be in action, active, activism. As an actor I have always been fascinated by all these words that start with ‘act’. How we shift from the stage or a dance floor into real life, especially when much more than a technique or a style is at stake, well this is something that we should be aware of and keep focused.

**B** I picked up ***bridges*** because no matter how distant we are now, we are given the chance to be connected as has never happened before. The network that has been developing during the past few months is so precious and valuable. Definitely something to carry on with, even when the emergency will be over.

**C** how great is the word ***community*** which shares the same Latin root as common or communicate? It reminds us of what we have been sharing so far. And it makes claims for future engagement and care. From any of us.

**D** I like to think of Queer Tango as an open ***door*** to a safe and friendly space where everyone is welcomed and accepted. This is what it has been in my experience, this is what I would like to find again after the pandemic.

**E** no doubt that E stands for ***embrace*** and no need to say how much we all miss and desire it. If a lesson can be learned for the future, let’s not take that embrace for granted.

**F** stands for ***fun*** and ***freedom***. Always to be kept t-o-g-e-t-h-e-r!

**G *global*** versus local. That might be one of the challenges for the future. Involve communities, but think with a worldwide vision.

**H** is for *heritage*. Knowing the history of Queer Tango, looking at how groups first originated, following their paths, sharing good practices - such a vital tradition to refer to. Especially for all the newcomers.

**I** *inclusion, identity, intersectionality, impact, independence, integrity*... I really cannot choose between so many words. They all seem so relevant. Pillars from the past, horizons for the future.

**J** *judgment* or *judgmental* attitude. I do believe that a group is the result of many singular behaviors. Personally, this is what I would like to leave outside, like clothes or shoes in the changing room.

**K** the image that I recall when I went to a Queer Tango Festival for the very first time, was a *kaleidoscope*. A dynamic and vibrant, multicolored and multifaceted toy. But never underestimate how playing can make us better persons!

**L** *label* came to my mind immediately. I was about to change my chosen word but that made me think. What do we need labels for? Ourselves or others? Are labels a cover, a protection, or a trap we get caught in? And mostly, which labels shall we still need in future and which ones can we get rid of?

**M** is Queer Tango already a *meteor*? Let me explain my provocation with an example that focuses on the specific case of Bologna, which is where I am based in Italy. Not a metropolis for sure, but a city with a vivid cultural life and a very important university. And yet, attracting the younger generations as well LGBTQIA+ communities seems to be so hard. How to avoid the risk of Queer Tango being ephemeral, like a falling star?

**N** and that leads to *now* which I think is what Queer Tango should stick to: being concrete, contemporary. Talk to present times.

**O** allow me a second (and last) provocation. What if Queer Tango became mainstream? Let us say the '*Official* Tango. What it would it lose and what would it gain, moving from outsider to ordinary?

**P** I think that *people* are what make the difference. Queer Tango is really all the single faces and names, all the individual stories that compose its community. Where personal and political merge together. With *pride*.

**Q** I hope that queer tango always remains a space open to *questions* where doubt can meet dialogue.

**R** *revolutionary* but gentle, *risk taking* with *respect*. I think that Queer Tango should keep taking positions. Avoid being neutral, impartial, indifferent. But always show the courage of kindness.

**S** is for both *skin* and *smell*. No smart technology can return us the power of human touch, at least so far. These are the two most instinctual senses and they bring us back to the fact that we are still animals. In the noblest way.... dancing animals.

**T** reminds me of *tokenism* which I would couple with *self-pity*. My wish is that Queer Tango can always stay far from either of them. We don't need any of the two.

**U** *unpredictable* like an improvisation. Or a pandemic. Interesting how this time has something to share with tango. Let's consider it a suspension in music. A pause in which feet don't move but mind, heart and breath are organizing the whole body for the next movement.

**V** if I go back to the notes that I wrote during some of the online meetings that I joined, *vulnerability* is quite a recurrent word. A great resource to me. We should learn not to be scared by or ashamed of it.

**W** like the sense of *wonder*, that is what I would like to bring with me into any future class or Milonga. The curiosity about those around me, the capacity to become involved. Quoting Fred Rogers "*there isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love, once you have heard their stories*".

**X** difficult to find a word with X, but the ancient Greek *xeno* was a way to define foreigners, strangers to be kept aside. I am sure that is what we don't want. No need to raise other walls of separation in the world.

**Y** is for *yes, yes I do, yes I will!* A promise of commitment that we renovate each time we put on our dancing shoes.

**Z** I could have written *zoom* which is where we have been living in the past ten months, but I prefer to leave it blank. As if Z were the unexpected element that breaks our plan and asks us for a change of direction. Which is what I love in tango.

I wrote my list trying to follow the impulse, as far as writing in another language allowed me. None of the choices are ultimate statements. Some are the result of random associations, others came from more grounded personal beliefs. Many are just open questions, reflections meant to be replied, argued, integrated, translated,

turned upside down or even rejected. Nothing but an invitation. A proposal. Let's say... a mirada.

### **Alessandro Tampieri (he/him)**

Alessandro graduated in Philosophy and studied Drama, Musical Theater and Performing Arts between Italy, Ireland and the United States. He is currently an actor, director, dramaturg and coach. He strongly believes in theatre that tells different stories, inclusive and accessible, where anyone can find a space, even when it is sold out. His most recent project, *Confino*, is a play based upon historical research on how homosexuality was forced into silence and denied during Fascism. He is quite new to the world of tango, but he started with both role classes from the beginning. And it was love at first sight. He is helping the small Queer Tango community in Bologna to develop and grow up.

# The Joy of Argentine Tango

© Jennie Lindon

London, United Kingdom

For me, dancing is a very personal endeavour which has brought me into such a positive network of relationships with individuals whom I value and whose company I enjoy. I have been a dancer for 12 years. Within that uninterrupted run, I have also been a ballroom dancer for 9 years and danced Argentine Tango for 6 years. In normal (non-Covid) times most of my dancing is in LGBTQ+ venues and clubs in London.

My queer tango experiences have been with Queer Tango London (QTL). I have felt consistently welcomed and put at my ease. I have been supported throughout my journey from a tango beginner to someone who feels more confident, but will never stop learning and hopefully improving. To put me in context, I fall into the group that is sometimes described on LGBTQ+ dance websites as 'and friends'. I also dance ballroom and tango in more traditional venues – again in London – and have felt very welcomed in many of those. However, if I recall the relatively few times that I have experienced attempts to 'put me in my place' as a woman on the dance floor, or sitting patiently at the side, it has been in those traditional/straight venues.

So, when I contemplate your questions about the future of queer tango, I inevitably draw on the personal. In this context, personal and political intertwine. They are also interlinked because I spent a lot of my professional life on theory and practice over issues of equality and diversity. For me, the political should also be practical, otherwise it is just so much hot air and posturing. It cannot be exclusively about principles or a theoretical stance – however deeply felt and enthusiastically argued. How are principles put into action, how might they be made visible? What difference will people experience if principles are not translated into observable actions, interpersonal behaviour, the experienced context in which a venue, a club, a session is run? In my view, it has to be possible for people to describe something of, 'How will it look when this principle comes alive in the relevant context?' and, if we are to be systematic, 'What will I/we deem to be a success, even a small one, as the result of our efforts?'

It is definitely not sufficient to harangue people or write papers – especially if the main aim is to induce generalised guilt in others, based on unchecked assumptions about them because of their group identity. It is a self-indulgent enterprise, if there is minimal motivation to discover how these activities could make life observably better. There is nothing the matter with writing papers – I did a lot of writing. However, the key points are to know, or find out to the best of one's ability, answers

to questions like: 'Who is reading this material?', 'Who is not reading it and why?' and 'What difference is the written word making to observable events and social interactions?'



*Jennie Lindon, left, at a class at Queer Tango London given by guest teachers, "Los Ocampo" - Monica Romero and Omar Ocampo - 1st May 2019. Image credits: courtesy Ray Batchelor.*

At its best, Argentine tango offers a visible, physical template for a respectful relationship on the dance floor during those jointly shared moments of dancing.

There is an interpersonal dance of invitation and acceptance which rests upon mutual trust and continuous bodily awareness. When everything comes together between dance partners, the experience is breathtaking. These fine moments can definitely happen without both partners having high levels of technique and virtuosity. Part of a respectful dance relationship is that neither leader nor follower pushes their current partner on the dance floor into steps or sequences that are well out of their comfort zone.

In my experience and dancing preference, queer tango creates a positive environment in which the leader and follower roles are equally respected. The approach works through lifting the tyranny of males lead-females follow and encouraging everyone to experience their initially less preferred role. Dancers can come to understand that both leading and following have their own challenges – neither is necessarily ‘easier’.

I have also found the QTL atmosphere to be especially welcoming to learners. Time and energy is spent encouraging beginners onto the dance floor at the *práctica* following the class, when it is very tempting to dance only within a class lesson. Across other styles of dancing I have found individuals who are very supportive to beginners on the dance floor, but there is a more pervading atmosphere in QTL that sets this pattern of behaviour as the norm. This difference may arise because in QTL it is not unusual that experienced dancers are working on their skills in a less familiar role.

This open and inclusive approach has been taken out to other London venues by QTL, with what certainly looked like a very positive reception. I also wish QTL to continue in their approach to invite mainstream tango guest teachers, who are sometimes, but not always, alert to a more flexible pattern. Friendly, yet clear, guidance has been given to teachers who would benefit from adjusting their language about leading and following or who currently do not deviate at all from a traditional male-female dancing pattern. Some experienced dancers have been receptive to building flexible roles into their demonstration dances – again to a very positive audience reaction.

I am hard pressed to say what Queer Tango should do differently or stop doing. My earlier paragraphs are, I hope, clear about how I would not wish queer tango to evolve in terms of the political. First and foremost, for me, the meeting ground between the political and the personal is on the dance floor. Respect for each other, a serious attempt to avoid stereotypical assumptions based on group identity – sometimes presumed rather than fully understood – and that nobody has a get-out-of-basic-courtesy card. I wish us to be forgiving – on the dance floor as elsewhere –

of mistakes and misunderstandings. If people persist in their mis-steps, they should, as before, be guided in a clear and firm way, with information about what is unacceptable and why. I wish us to find common ground in our current experiences and to meet on the dance floor as individuals with all the opportunities that offers.

### **Jennie Lindon (she/her/hers)**

I have always loved to dance, but I came late to creating time for dancing. I had a busy professional life: I was a Chartered Psychologist, specialising in the years of childhood and adolescence. I am married with a son and daughter, now fully grown-up. In the year that I was going to reach 60, I experienced an 'if not now, then when!' moment. I started with line dancing, because I did not need a partner. I had the good fortune to make friends who invited me to join their ballroom dancing – mainly within the London LGBTQ+ scene. I gained confidence over time and decided that I wanted to learn Argentine Tango, which took me to Queer Tango London. From my line dancing club onwards, I have experienced a truly inclusive welcome. I fall into the group described on some LGBTQ+ dance websites as 'and friends'.

## Imagine a more inclusive tango future

© Liz Sabatiuk

Estella, Spain

*Picture yourself front to front with another, one facing the future, the other the past. An aura of time surrounds your shared, mobile present. Backs to the world, you dance among others, negotiating direction, dynamic, and intensity through the circuit your bodies form. Meaning flows between you and ripples outward.*

There's something universal about tango. The elemental focus on connection. The space for reflection and discovery. The capacity to hold the rich collage of human experience. Tango is life; life is tango. Yet if human experience is a vast and varied collage, tango is too often portrayed as a single snapshot: man and woman, locked in a passionate embrace.

That embrace can be beautiful, but it's just one snapshot. There's so much more to appreciate about the collage. The passionate embraces of two men, two women, and people who identify all across the spectrums of gender and sexuality, for starters. Changing attractions. Epic friendships. Platonic obsessions. Ecstatic, melancholy solitude. The cozy embraces of people bonded by love but not necessarily passion. The tender embraces of people exquisitely conscious of the fleeting moment they share.

In a post-pandemic world, may tango reflect the collage.

The Queer tango movement has already done so much to expand tango beyond the heteronormative snapshot. From organizing queer events to queering our dance at traditional milongas, from dancing in public to posting videos online, dancers across the globe have dedicated years to nurturing and showcasing a more inclusive tango.

Now, more than a year into a global crisis that has touched the lives of everyone I know, I find myself contemplating a strange question: When we finally head back to the dance floor, can we make tango more inclusive by including more of *ourselves* in our tango?

Can we use this time away from social dancing to explore our own inner collages and cultivate presence? Better understanding and embodying ourselves enriches our capacity to express and connect with others. By focusing inward, we have the power to turn this period of collective isolation into fertile ground for a more genuine, inclusive tango.



*Watercolour courtesy of Liz Sabatiuk*

We can also look outward, exploring the boundaries of this dance of connection by communing with our environment. We can fuel our little tango pilot lights with a walk through city streets or nature, favorite tango playing in our ears or in our minds. (Most people won't even notice you practicing your tango walk.) We can keep tango alive in our bodies by mingling memory, hope, and movement with our surroundings – no role or partner needed.

Imagine a future where each of us returns to the milonga with a deeper appreciation for communion in all its forms. Imagine transmitting the diverse, interconnected threads of our histories and futures to every partner. Imagine seeing potential dance partners through the rich prism of our lived experiences rather than comparing them to our mental tango snapshot. Imagine bringing more presence and authenticity to every tanda.

Could such presence and authenticity have the power to convey tango's magic to people who previously wrote it off as too machista, showy, archaic, or just not for them? Can we please show the world that tango is about humans, not roses?

Imagine a future where tango reflects the depth and diversity of real life. Imagine a future when we appreciate holding another human in our arms more than we ever could have dreamed pre-pandemic. Our communion can be that much simpler and that much more complex as we start to move.

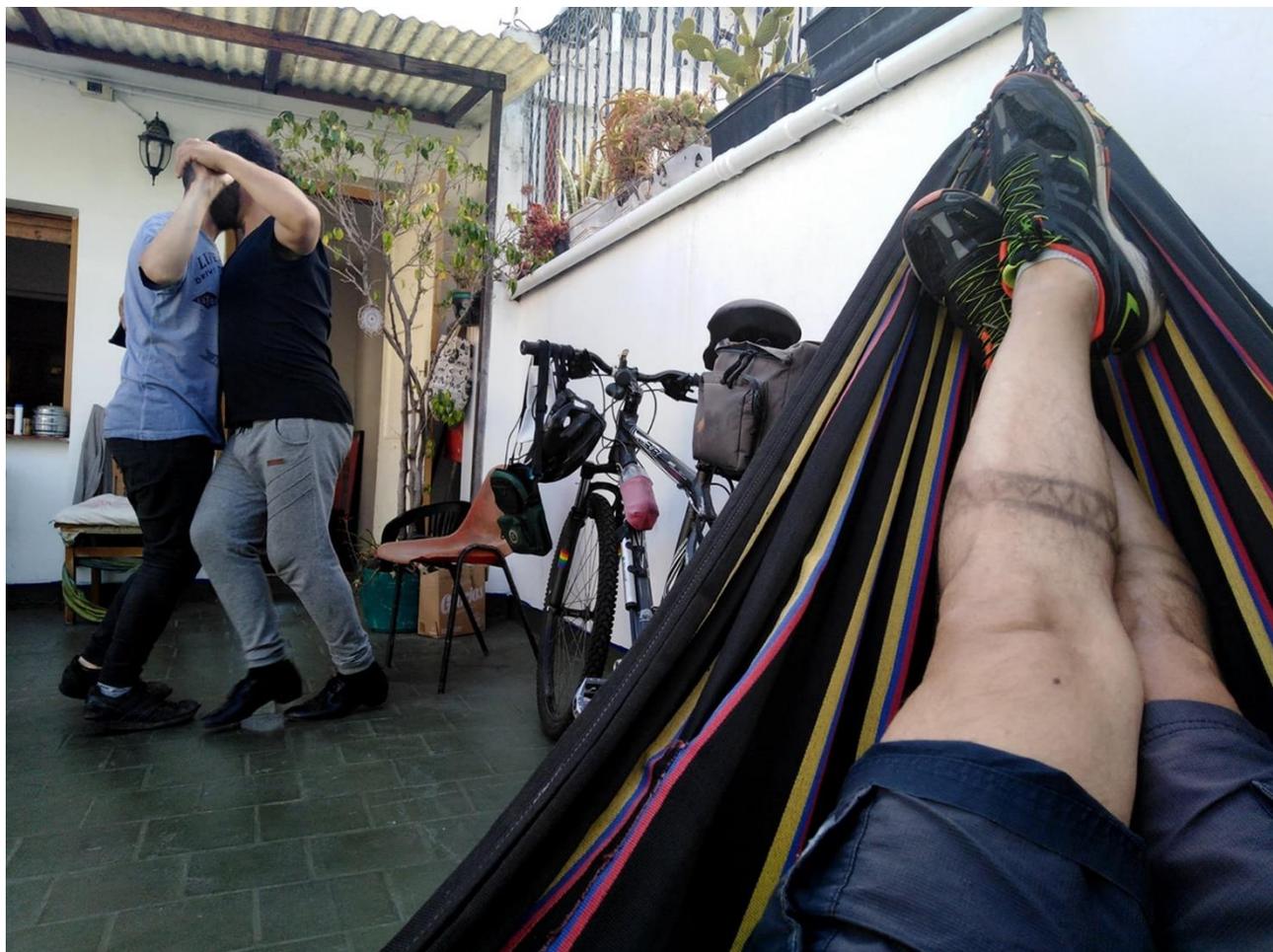
### **Liz Sabatiuk (she/her)**

Liz Sabatiuk began her tango journey in 2005 in Montevideo, Uruguay – the lesser-known co-birthplace of tango across the river from Buenos Aires, where she studied with Aníbal Domínguez, Mauricio Borgarello, Regina Chiappara and Martín Borteiro, Eduardo Ferrer and Gabriela Farías. After moving to Washington, DC, in 2008, she continued to dance and began teaching somewhere around 2013. Influences on her dance and teaching style include Aja Fenn, Jake Spatz, Sharna Fabiano, and various Argentine maestr@s. In 2018, Liz started the Queer Tango program at Tango Mercurio, a non-profit organization based in Washington. She currently lives in Spain with her spouse and two children.

## El futuro del tango queer en Buenos Aires

© Edgardo Fernández Sesma

Buenos Aires, Argentina



*Clase de Tango Post Cuarentena, un descanso. © Edgardo Fernández Sesma.*

Pienso por un lado desde los 5 espacios de clases de Tango Queer en los que estoy involucrado, desde nuestra Milonga y nuestros “Reencuentros” tangueros, y también desde la mirada de otras milongas queer de Buenos Aires que frecuento. La primera inquietud que me surge, es cuántos de estos Espacios y Milongas podrán sobrevivir toda esta larga etapa sin actividades. La segunda, tiene que ver específicamente con el Tango Queer y sus contextos.

En estos dos sentidos pienso que después de la pandemia, el Tango Queer (en Argentina al menos), tendrá al principio dificultades para reponerse en todos los Espacios, pero superada esa etapa creo que logrará un florecimiento diferente pero mayor del que existió antes de la pandemia: su futuro será de mayor desarrollo, de mayor apertura y de más debate sobre lo que queremos y necesitamos ir cambiando, ampliando, mejorando hacia un camino de mayor inclusión. Porque así como el Tango en general ha venido siendo objeto de todos los cambios sociales, el

Tango Queer deberá también ir cambiando para seguir un camino de continuo desarrollo, de lo contrario quedaría en un lugar de anquilosamiento como el Tango Tradicional. Por mi parte, soy optimista de que eso no va a ocurrir, porque seguiremos trabajando para contribuir a los cambios necesarios que enriquezcan nuestro Tango Queer.

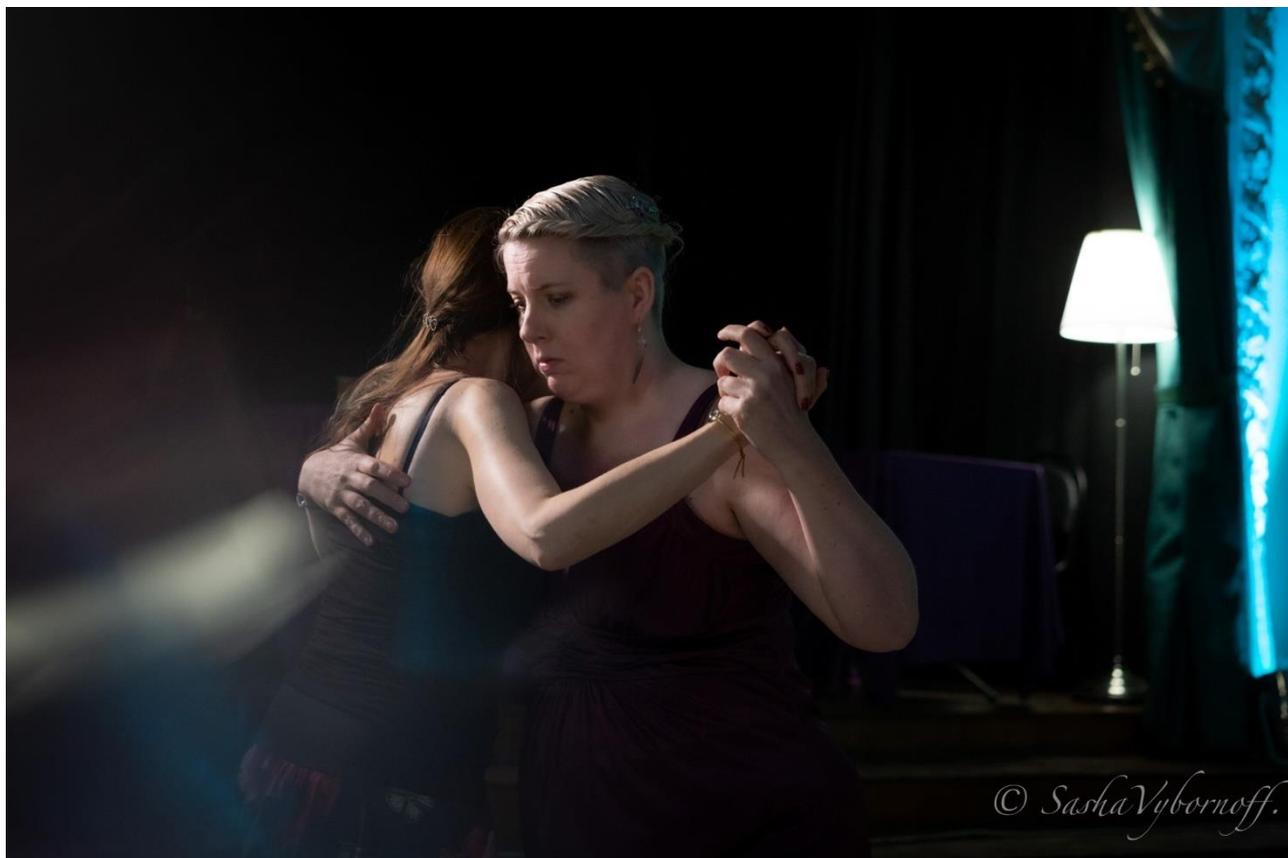
### **Edgardo Fernández Sesma (el)**

Edgardo Fernández Sesma, Buenos Aires (Co-organizador de la Milonga “Despelote Tango” 6to. año; Organizador del Espacio “Reencuentro” baile e integración para Personas Mayores y Amigues 7° año; Maestro en “Clases de Tango entre Muchachos – LGBA-25° año; Clases de Tango Diqueras (Recoleta) 14° año, Clases de Trans-Tango (Asamblea), 6° año; Clases de Roles Libres – EDT, La Paz Arriba- 6° año; y “Clases de Tango y Folklore Diversas” – SIGLA-10° año; Organizador de Diversos Flashmobs Solidarios de Tango Queer).

# The Future of QueerTango is Bright and Unlimited

© Jamie Roberts

St. Petersburg, Russia



*Image credits: Sasha Vybornoff*

I believe we can reach for it, even in these dark times. Whether dancing it, making a safe space for it, believing in it, or integrating it. In limiting times or conditions, we have to nurture our small candles and hearths, and continue to dream limitless dreams.

The Future of QueerTango is Action.

It is not enough to say there is a place for queertango, to allow it, condone it, support it. You really have to act. Action may start within yourself, asking your questions, identifying your picture of your inner and outer being, your expectations, your hangups. You then bring yourself into your world. What is dance – connection, movement, expression? How does the music embrace you? Is there a place for your dynamic, your partner – is there dialogue? How do we act, towards ourselves and others? Is there room for both critical thinking and kindness/warmth? How do we continue our improvement, encourage development of our talents and those of others? How do we keep choosing actions to get better, alone and together?

The Future of QueerTango is Community.

Tango is at its heart a collective experience, a gathering of people. We are not dancing alone – we are mixed in a pair, which is enmeshed in the fabric of the *ronda*. The organism of tango's health is a part of the functioning of all of its parts as a whole. Segmentation of the community into separate parts, schools, ideas may be a natural state of the group, but unless these fragments work in harmony with each other, the space, the music, then the body of the tango community is broken. Each segment may thrive alone – but I believe the greater shared goal is to thrive together and not in silos by style, creed, or perception of any single 'correct.' Hostility and hate kills the tango community.

The Future of QueerTango is Radically Inclusive.

There can be space for every gender expression, every orientation, every person. My vision of the future of queertango requires everyone to be welcome and represented, assuming they can all participate in a safe and respectful space. Sometimes, or often, the picture becomes skewed when someone is not well or equally represented. In my communities, dual role/queertango men are outnumbered maybe by a factor of 5:1 in queertango spaces, maybe as much as 15-25 to 1 in common tango spaces. It is my ambition to make a welcoming and safe space to improve all balances, to make this not an exclusive sport for women who lead sometimes or exclusively. In a queernormative community, maybe accepting heterosexual people is radical. In a heteronormative community, accepting men following, men dancing together, and women leading men could be seen as radical – and that's before even beginning to talk about radical inclusion of nonbinary and trans dancers. We can enjoy what we have, but not forget who might be missing in our space. Balance brings a greater perception of queertango/dual role as normative – this is essential for our future to be fully inclusive.

The Future of Queertango is Integrated.

We need alliances between people, countries, and continents. We need to weave our stories together. We need to see all shades of possibility, whether related to skin tone, nationality, or religion. All body types and all variations of abilities – no one needs exotic fetishism, to be the strange or different peacock, to be admired and separated for their differences. Minority representation in tango needs to become brighter, and we can begin to respect myriad differences and samenesses, and learn from one another. It is safe to be fully mixed together, while being fully unique.

The Future of QueerTango is Not Semantic.

While many embrace QueerTango as their group identity, some places, and people may need different words – “dual role” or “open role” or “nontraditional role” may give more freedom to dance in any or all roles in any or all places, including ones where 'queer' may be less identified with, accepted or safe. We respect the right of each person to choose the roles, or labels, where they feel most comfortable – or to move away from labels altogether if they do not serve a positive function. We are dancers.

The Future of QueerTango is Not Silent.

Speak up, for yourself and for others. We need a chorus of voices, the sound of many feet moving together.

The Future of QueerTango is Right Now.

You have a place at this feast. Even in pandemic times. Don't wait for the ideal moment – it may never come.

We know this could be a long road, and we must weather it, and we will lose people along the way: to illness, or despondency, or apathy. Don't forget the long game. Whether you are dancing alone, with your partner, online, or with a group of people – stay safe, communicate, self-quarantine if needed, and respect others' choices. Keep your tango flame burning – move, dream, deepen relationships with tango friends beyond cabeceo chat, work on yourself, and nurture your community, so they are not ashes when you are ready to rise from the flames.

The Future of QueerTango is You.



*Image credits: Sasha Vybornoff*

### **Jamie Roberts (she/her/hers)**

Jamie 'La Tangoista' Roberts, began her tango journey in 2008 in Baltimore/DC, where she also worked professionally as a stage director, professor, and nonprofit arts manager. In 2012, she came to Europe, teaching English, doing voiceover/copyediting, and building a personal European tango network. Living in Tallinn briefly, then Riga and Berlin, she finally landed in Russia, where she enjoys the growing queertango community in St. Petersburg and Moscow. She dances regularly on the European marathon circuit, and contributes as an organizer and teacher. Her current focus is building up the Russian and Baltic region queertango communities, and she has also enjoyed organizing tango workshops/festivals, and embracing Argentine tango as a musician in the US, before coming to Europe and starting to DJ. She brings her musical sensibility and rich artistic experience to every milonga, proudly weaving enchanting blends of less familiar melodies with well known, beloved favorites.



***Queer Tango Futures – Dancing for Change in a Post-Covid World***

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