

# Queer Tango Space

Minority Stress, Sexual Potentiality, and Gender Utopias

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## Tango Queer, San Telmo, Buenos Aires

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It is nearing 11:00 p.m., still early by tango time, when I duck into the dark entryway at 571 Perú in San Telmo, Buenos Aires's oldest neighborhood. Once home to Argentina's wealthy elite, by the early 1900s San Telmo housed the city's diverse immigrant community. Italians, Russians, English, Spaniards, and Germans were crammed into its many *conventillos* (tenement houses). Whether it was the poverty, the homesickness, or the shared language of an evolving new music that drew the immigrants together, San Telmo became a crucible for the development of tango. It was a temporary means of staving off loneliness and despair by throwing oneself into a stranger's arms as the wail of the *bandoneón* pressed the pair into motion. By 1912, San Telmo was teeming with tango in its streets, bars, dance halls, and brothels. By 2012, most *milongas* (tango dances) had moved closer to tourist-oriented venues in the fashionable neighborhood of Palermo. However, a few stalwarts remain in San Telmo, including Tango Queer, a

*Figure 1. Dancers at Tango Queer, Buenos Aires, 2012. (Photo by Léa Hamoinon)*

weekly milonga held since 2007 where the roles of leader and follower are not assigned based on gender. According to founder Mariana Docampo's manifesto, published in Spanish and English on the Tango Queer website, "we take for granted neither your sexual orientation nor your choice of one role or the other. What is 'normal' here is the 'difference,' and when you dance you do it with whomever you want, taking whichever role you prefer" (2009). How fitting that tango, practiced 100 years ago in San Telmo, often by men dancing with other men because men outnumbered women by such a large margin (Salessi 1997:159), is once again a center for same-sex tango dancing. Granted, tango in the early 20th century was not considered a homosexual activity even when men were dancing together because it was assumed that they were practicing in preparation for the ultimate goal of dancing with a woman.<sup>1</sup> Queer tango, on the other hand, is consciously aligned with an international movement to increase social, cultural, and legal rights for gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender people.

Relieved to have escaped the spring rains, I scurry up the stairs and pause upon opening the door, giving my eyes time to adjust to the red walls and warm light illuminating a once-rich wooden floor. Wood dance floors are a rare luxury in Buenos Aires, and this one has been caressed by so many feet that deep grooves threaten to swallow dancers' feet whole, three-inch splinters taunting errant toes. A lush 1940s di Sarli set is billowing from the speakers, but the familiarity of the melancholy music is tampered by bright cheerful banter bouncing across tables. Despite having attended hundreds of milongas, I feel slightly disoriented, almost dizzy from the blend of anxiety and excitement at attending my first queer milonga in the cradle of tango. I pay my 25 peso entry fee and slide back to the bar, buying myself a glass of wine and a few more minutes to survey the room before selecting a seat.

As a feminist who has been challenging heteronormative gender roles in social dancing for decades, I was intrigued when I started to hear chatter about queer tango. It's hard to recall my own initial motivations for breaking with expected gender roles in partner dancing by taking on the "man's" role and leading other women when I began social partner dancing in 1991. Given that this was at about the same time that I declared women's studies as my college major, I suspect a political agenda to challenge male patriarchy and the need to ease my own cognitive dissonance about participating in an activity that I experienced as sexist and heterosexist topped the list. Over the next 25 years, as I continued to lead other women in the many social dance communities I joined, my motivations for participating in same-sex dancing expanded to include: the intimacy I enjoyed dancing with women, more freedom to interpret the music, a greater range in choice of dance partners, and increased professional opportunities as a teacher and choreographer. Thus, when I began dancing Argentine tango in 2006, it seemed logical to begin studying the leader's role shortly after I began to follow. By 2010 when queer tango began to gain traction in my home base of Seattle, I had been publicly dancing tango with other women for several years. I didn't really understand the fuss about queer tango. Why did we need a specially designated space to break with established gender roles when dancing tango? Wasn't this something we could do whenever we felt like it? Seattle was progressive enough

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1. Some scholars such as Jorge Salessi and Jeffrey Tobin have argued that this male-male tango dancing was not only preparation for the "real" dancing with women but also allowed for homoerotic and homosexual pleasures between men (Salessi 1997; Tobin 1998).

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on issues of gender and sexuality that one male tango dancer regularly wore high heels and a T-shirt that said, “ask me to follow” at tango events. It was only later that I realized the fact that he had to wear such a shirt was evidence of how difficult it was for a man to be taken seriously in the follower’s (i.e., the woman’s) role. At the time, however, it seemed to me that the Seattle tango community was open to such a wide range of gender identity and expression that we didn’t need a designated queer tango space.

“But it’s different,” my friends assured me with wry smiles after attending queer milongas. When they were unable to pinpoint exactly how queer tango was different, except to insist that it was more fun, my curiosity began to grow, as did my utopic fantasy of queer tango. Occasionally, when dancing with another experienced female dancer who is also versed in both roles, we will freely trade off roles, fluidly moving between leader and follower, the distinction between the roles blurring until we lose track of who is initiating movement. I imagined that queer tango might be equal to that blissful sensation where ego is surrendered in service of the dance. By the time I made my first pilgrimage to Buenos Aires, the birthplace of tango and the capital of the first Latin American country to legalize gay marriage in 2010, my expectations for encountering a queer tango utopia were dangerously close to Icarus’s sun.

Most people at Tango Queer appear to be sitting in groups at tables lining the dance floor, laughter and smiles easily lighting up the space. Despite the dim lighting, the mood seems less somber than other milongas where the weight of *codigos* (codes of behavior) keeps lightheartedness and mirth at bay. Although the popularity of *tango nuevo* music in the 2000s undoubtedly helped to nurture the queer tango movement in Buenos Aires—its fusion of tango’s classic bandoneón and violin with electronic percussion encouraging dancers to likewise modernize dance traditions (Liska 2017)—orchestras of tango’s golden age dominated the soundscape by the 2010s. Like elsewhere in Buenos Aires, electronic tango bands such as Tanghetto, Bajofondo, and Gotan Project have fallen out of fashion with dancers. However, there is a key sonic difference from mainstream milongas that contributes to a more cheerful ambiance. Instead of



Figure 2. Organizer Mariana Docampo leading Liliana Chenlo at Tango Queer, Buenos Aires, 2015. (Photo by Rodrigo Morales)

playing only a few seconds of non-tango music during the *cortinas* (breaks that mark the transitions between *tandas*, or sets, of tango music), the DJ plays an entire song of cumbia, bolero, jazz, mambo, or samba as a *cortina*, during which patrons indulge in laughing their way through an attempt to dance one of these more upbeat rhythms.

Glass of wine in hand, I make my way to the back of the room and select a small table with a clear view of the dance floor, waiting for a *tanda* before changing into my flats. As I sink into my generous pour of red wine, I begin to relax. Twelve couples are on the dance floor, but only one appears to be adhering to the common gender dynamic of man leading/woman following. Two middle-aged men in matching black shoes and collared shirts float around the room with their bellies pressed together, careful and slightly stiff in their execution of *giros* (tango's quintessential turns). A petite woman in her 20s is guiding a man twice her height around the dance floor, his serene expression confirming the clarity of her stride. A woman in flowing striped pants and silver heels is cradling a younger woman in a gentle embrace.

Despite the presence of several skilled dancers, my initial reaction is disappointment. The average skill level is decidedly lower than at most other milongas in Buenos Aires, and aside from the unusual pairings, the dancing itself is remarkable chiefly in its ordinariness. I had been envisioning queer tango as some sort of panacea where, in the words of tango scholar Marta Savigliano, "all the elements that queer tango patrons identify as unpleasant and limiting in regular milongas associated with *machismo*" (2010:142) are eliminated, leaving the pure shining art form developed to its full potential without the weight of gendered social structures. What I see before me, however, looks very much like tango as practiced at any other milonga in Buenos Aires. There is the obvious difference that gender roles are shuffled, realigned, and at times discarded. But the practice of tinkering with gender roles in social dancing hardly seems revolutionary.

As I attempt to temper the sting of my disillusion by slowly sipping my way towards inebriation, I realize that even before the malbec has taken effect, there is less tension in my body than is typical when seated at other milongas. At mainstream milongas (also referred to as straight milongas, hetero milongas, or *milongas comunes* by queer tango enthusiasts), my body braces upon entry as I strive to shield myself from the relentless gaze of men bearing down on me. Like prey on the open savannah, I must maintain awareness of the location and movements of my predators at all times, ready to dodge and hide from their approach lest I am caught off-guard by an unwelcome invitation to dance, which could, if I am not deft with my escape, result not only in one unpleasant *tanda*, but could ruin the whole night. In the culture of Buenos Aires milongas, once a woman is caught by a man low down on the tango "food chain," those at the top won't give her a second look, and the rest of the bottom feeders will take it as an open invitation for feasting (Savigliano 2003:182–86). For women, the politics of negotiating which invitations to accept and reject, of choosing dance partners so that they appear to be choosing her, requires strategy, vigilance, patience, and humility. Most invitations and rejections to dance are negotiated through *miradas* and *cabeceos*—a system whereby a woman can look in the direction of a man with whom she wishes to dance (the *mirada*) and if he holds her gaze and nods his head towards the dance floor (the *cabeceo*), she can choose to nod in the affirmative, and the contract to dance the *tanda* has been made. This system evolved to save face—so that invitations to dance could be rejected without public humiliation. Some claim that it also empowers women by giving them the ability to initiate the interaction through the *mirada*, even if it is only the men who are expected to perform the actual *cabeceo*. While I will admit to a few cases where my successful *mirada* granted me a fleeting sensation of triumph, I am hard-pressed to celebrate as a feminist practice any system that denies women the right to verbally refuse requests from men to touch their bodies. Why should any 21st-century society object to women saying "no" when a man asks for permission to press his chest against her breasts and caress her bare back for 12 minutes? Although there are certainly cases in which a woman might verbally invite a male friend to dance tango, most verbal invitations initiated by women are regarded as crass, naïve, or even offensive at the majority of milongas in Buenos Aires.

At Tango Queer, however, my role in the ritual of the cabeceo departs sharply from what I have come to expect. As I sit alone on the edge of the dance floor, I don't feel any eyes on me at all. No one appears to be checking me out or sizing me up. No one seems to have noticed my arrival at all. Of course, I remind myself, men come to dance primarily with other men, so they take little notice when a woman enters. Women are more focused on socializing with their friends than on scanning the room for potential dance partners. After soothing a bruised ego due to my apparent invisibility, I begin to relish the newfound freedom to let my eyes wander and rest throughout the room without fear that I will inadvertently catch the gaze of a man on the hunt. I feel as if I had been trapped inside one of the 1970s films Laura Mulvey analyzed to develop her theory of the male gaze (1975). Only now that I have stepped out of the film script do I recognize how limited my role as object of the male gaze had been. My body seems to expand with my gaze, my limbs unconsciously sliding apart to take up more space, settling into what psychologist Amy Cuddy calls a "high-power pose," a broad physical stance that, she initially argues, stimulates release of testosterone (2015). Patrons at Tango Queer have not actually dispensed with the cabeceo, I realize, as I continue to observe silent contracts to dance brokered all around me. It's just that no assumptions are made about what role anyone will dance because of gender or dress, or even if they are here to dance at all. If I want to dance, it becomes clear, I am going to have to initiate the cabeceo. This proves to be much harder than I had anticipated. The best dancers are seated together at tables up against the stage, so that it is difficult to situate oneself with their sightline. I take note of this strategy to protect myself from unwanted cabeceos in the future. After several unsuccessful attempts to catch the eyes of women across the room, I see two women at a table in the far corner get up to dance together, leaving a third woman seated alone. I quickly make my way around the outside of the room and hover near her table, holding my gaze steady until she turns to look at me. I nod towards the dance floor. She smiles and stands.

As we approach the dance floor together, I have difficulty suppressing internal back flips and congratulatory fist pumps at this minor victory in the application of tactics usually practiced by men. A single woman is an easier target than a woman in a group. It's classic wisdom, practiced by men at bars as well as milongas, but the crudeness of my approach doesn't dampen my joy at its success. "¿Querés guiar?" (Do you want to lead?) my partner asks as I begin sliding my right arm around her back. "Podemos cambiar si querés" (We can switch if you'd like), I reply as I close my left hand around the fingers of her right hand. Our dancing is clunky at first as I struggle to read the range of her vocabulary, but by the end of the song I have adjusted to her style. I offer to let her lead the next song, which she does, and I finish the set in the role of leader. At the end of the tanda, my partner enthusiastically takes me back to her table and introduces me to her friends, something that has never happened to me after dancing with a stranger at a straight milonga.

I invite each one of the women at the table to dance a tanda, finding the most affinity dancing with a petite and supple Argentine woman in her early 20s named Valentina, her finely tuned sensitivity to subtle shifts in tone and direction allowing her to react to my lead with minimal delay. She is an excellent follower, who, although somewhat hesitant to take the role of leader, interprets her role as follower quite liberally. Instead of always waiting to react to moves I initiate as leader (which is the commonly agreed upon role of the follower), she frequently reverses the direction of a *barrida* (foot sweep) or steals a *gancho* (leg hook). All leaders are accustomed to having to follow the follower when cues are misread, but Valentina clearly understands my lead, and deliberately contests it. She absorbs my lead and redirects it back at me in altered form, momentarily hijacking the lead and reversing our roles without reversing the embrace or the footwork. Her periodic challenge of my authority reminds me that her following is always an active choice. She is not required to follow my lead, even though most women dutifully follow dull, brutish, unmusical, or physically painful leads once they have accepted a cabeceo. Not Valentina, who with a mischievous smile arrests my momentum mid-giro and reverses our turn, my acceptance of her suggestion also signaling my consent to the game, one that has turned a



monologue into a playful dialogue. Granted, I still speak for the majority of the dance, but her interjections into the conversation significantly shape its direction.

Admittedly, this style of “active following” as it is sometimes called is not unfamiliar to me. In fact, my tango mentor in Seattle encouraged me to dance in this way with him, but I had rarely found the confidence to suggest more than one or two ideas in any given song. It is hard to separate out how much of my own hesitation to initiate action when dancing with him was related to the gender dynamic, the teacher/student dynamic, or the undeniable fact that his command of tango vocabulary and musicality so far exceeded mine that I was content to listen when he spoke. Despite having experimented with backseat driving in my own dancing, this is actually my first experience leading a woman who practiced it so skillfully, and I am thrilled by the ride.

By the time the evening ends, I have danced with most of the women at the milonga, generally alternating who leads every other song so that we give each other equal opportunity to enjoy each role. Before the second-to-last tanda of the night, I finally catch the eye of Soledad Nani, the most well-respected female leader in the Argentine queer tango scene. Her lead is playful, clear without being overbearing, filled with unexpected changes of direction and astute musical interpretation. Soledad is also an exceptional follower, but even more unruly than Valentina. Soledad is so skilled at redirecting my lead that it unnerves me. Almost nothing I initiate concludes as planned, and I am not able to adapt to such rapid-fire exchange of roles. For Soledad, however, slipping between the roles of leader and follower, or *conductora* (driver) and *conducida* (driven), the terms Soledad prefers, comes as easily as Spanglish does to a bilingual speaker. She offers me a glimpse of what I have always imagined tango could be—a fluid exchange of energy and creativity where both partners take equal responsibility for shaping the conversation.

I leave the milonga just before it closes at 2:00 a.m., glistening with sweat and giddy with excitement. Although I am dancing the same steps and technique to the same music as I would at any other milonga in Buenos Aires, I leave Tango Queer feeling lighter, more cheerful, and more hopeful than I am at the end of a night at Salon Canning, Villa Malcolm, la Viruta, or any of the other mainstream tango hotspots. It is only after tasting queer tango in Buenos Aires, the only city in the world with a large enough tango scene to sustain queer-specific milongas several times a week, that I recognize how essential a queer-designated tango space is for the manifestation of queer tango’s potential.

## Background and Methods

Although same-sex tango dancing in Argentina dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when men “practiced” together (Tobin 1998:80; Denniston 2007:11–23), queer tango is a relatively recent development. Borrowing the word “queer” from American intellectuals and social activists who reappropriated the gay slur to describe individuals and acts challenging normative categories of gender and sexuality, in 2001 German dancers organized the first queer tango festival in Hamburg (Havmoeller 2015b:23). This inaugural event united Argentine tango and queer theory to give birth to an international queer tango movement. The phrase “queer tango” is now used internationally to describe both a way of dancing tango that challenges a male/female gender role dichotomy and tango dancing practiced in a community of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). There is no consensus on whether or not both these conditions (i.e., *who* is dancing and *how* they are dancing) must be satisfied for tango to be considered queer. As a social and political movement, however, queer tango fosters both a way of dancing tango decoupled from gender *and* a community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer tango dancers.

In its so-called traditional form, tango is structured around a male/female dyad that demands and produces unequal responsibilities, skills, and experiences. In the classic tango gender binary, *he* initiates action, chooses the vocabulary, interprets the music, and is responsible for naviga-

tion; *she* receives cues from his body about where and when to move. She interprets his lead, expresses his ideas through a body that must be highly sensitive and skilled to maintain balance and power in the face of unpredictability. Each role requires intensive training and practice to master, and both partners are rewarded with the deep intimacy that tango's connection fosters. Each role, however, promises distinct pleasures. For the man, or the leader as the role has been renamed in most English-speaking contexts, enjoyment of tango is derived from: creativity in interpreting the music by choosing and ordering movements, camaraderie of navigating the space in cooperation with other leaders, and satisfaction in reading the follower's strengths and preferences. Pleasures that are specific to the classic woman's or follower's role include: the freedom to enter a meditative state free from pressure to make decisions, the kinesthetic thrill of role-specific movements that wring the body out in spiraling play, the surprise of experiencing one's body execute unexpected combinations, enjoyment in feeling how someone else hears the music, and the opportunity to be the center of a visual spectacle.

The proposal of queer tango is to delink these two roles from gender, making either role available to any man, woman, or nonbinary person. While I agree with this commonly recognized tenant of queer tango, I argue that queer tango is not merely the practice of tango in non-traditional gender roles (e.g., men leading other men, women leading other women, women leading men, transgender men leading men). It is the intentional creation of a space in which the disruption of gender roles in the dance itself can influence the social structures surrounding the dance. Thus, even more important than *who* is dancing or *how* they are dancing, queer tango depends on a *where*. Queer tango is enabled through the designation and naming of a queer space that creates possibilities for alternate social interactions, relationships, and experiences to come into being, even if only temporarily, for the duration of a single milonga, festival, or class.

Although queer tango is recognized even by its Argentine promoters as originating in Europe and North America (Fitch 2015:92; Balizano and Docampo 2011:4125), Buenos Aires has become a world mecca for queer tango due to the confluence of the city's successful efforts to promote both gay tourism (Kanai 2015) and tango tourism (Fitch 2015:60–62, 92–93). I attended Tango Queer, a Buenos Aires milonga organized by Mariana Docampo, weekly for two months in 2012 and again for two months in 2014. I have also participated in hundreds of other tango classes, milongas, and festivals in the United States and Buenos Aires, including the International Queer Tango Festival in Buenos Aires in 2012 and 2014. I've interviewed 48 women who regularly dance tango with other women, including amateur, semiprofessional, and professional tango dancers from Argentina, Europe, and North America who range in age from their 20s to their 70s. Slightly over half of my interviewees self-identified as straight or heterosexual while the rest identified as lesbian, gay, queer, or bisexual. Except when surnames are included, I have selected pseudonyms when quoting from informants. Most interviews were conducted in Buenos Aires, but because so many of the women were foreigners, our conversations invoked their experiences dancing in Europe and North America as well. So even though my research was centered in Buenos Aires, it addresses the international tango community and commerce, as well as the local scene in Seattle, where I have danced tango for 10 years.

While queer tango encourages partnering in any gender combination, same-sex couplings are the overwhelming majority of partner combinations at a queer tango event. Male-male partnerships are roughly equal to female-female partnerships in Buenos Aires, but elsewhere in the queer tango world, women comprise the vast majority of queer tango dancers. Thus, in an effort to delimit the scope of my research to a manageable size, I chose to focus specifically on understanding the experiences of the largest population of queer tango dancers—women who dance with other women, although I conceive of “women” rather broadly to include transgender and nonbinary people. As a woman who practices both roles myself, it was more practical for me to meet and gain the trust of other women. Perhaps more importantly, I focus on women's experiences to give voice to women who, in the *machista* world of tango, are all too often denied agency as they wait for men to invite them to dance, and to signal where and when they can move.

## Reprieve from Minority Stress

The vast majority of Argentine women I met at Tango Queer never ventured to mainstream heterosexual milongas. “No siento cómoda” (I don’t feel comfortable), they explained. Similarly, non-Argentine women who identified as gay or queer almost always used the word “comfortable” to describe queer-specific tango.<sup>2</sup> The frequency with which this word was invoked in



Figure 3. A typical scene at Tango Queer, Buenos Aires, 2012, where women dancing together frequently chose to dance in flat shoes. (Photo by Léa Hamoignon)

both Spanish and English to describe queer tango spaces points to the discomfort many queer individuals experience in mainstream tango spaces due to “minority stress,” a concept developed by psychologists to describe the cumulative effects of alienation and anxiety members of any minority group (e.g., racial, ethnic, sexual) endure in a world where they are continually facing microaggressions, harassment, and isolation (Meyer 2003). One of the key functions of queer tango events is to offer queer individuals a reprieve from the minority stress they experience not only in their daily lives but also in most straight tango contexts.

Queer tango spaces offer a judgment-free zone around gender, sexuality, and role preference. Jo, an American transgender dancer, explained that in queer tango contexts, “I don’t have to be on guard that someone’s going to call me a name, or look me up and down and make some snide comment, which happens unfortunately. I’ve used the word already, but it’s just so much more *comfortable*, not having to worry about that.” Interviewees all recounted microaggressions they had endured in mainstream tango classes and milongas. For example, when it came time to rotate partners in classes, female leaders described the humiliation of being skipped over or avoided by other female classmates. Many women recalled being stared at when dancing at milongas or being told by men that women couldn’t or shouldn’t lead. Although such instances are rare, the potential threat, coupled with the fact that many queer women often endure hostile comments or stares in their daily lives, kept many from feeling entirely at ease in hetero tango contexts. In queer tango, dancers feel more secure that they won’t be judged, criticized, or singled out due to their gender or sexual orientation. As American lesbian tango dancer Anna explained, the queer label can be just as or more important for creating that safe environment as the sexual identity of the participants: “Queer festivals and queer classes and queer teachers make us comfortable. If straight people come to a queer event—you can even have an overwhelming number of straight people, but if you label it queer, you know that they’ve come with the mindset that will allow you to be alright.”

Beyond safety from ridicule or rejection, queer tango offers a respite from worrying about making *straight* people *uncomfortable* as explained by two American amateur dancers who identify as queer.

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2. The frequency with which lesbian women feel uncomfortable in straight social dance environments was also noted by scholar Stefanie Boulila in her research with lesbian salsa dancers (2015).



JO: One of my concerns when I dance with straight women is—I don't do very much open embrace and I really prefer close. And when you get that close to someone, there is the fear that they are going to interpret it differently. When with a queer woman, I don't have any of those worries. People that I think are cute or people that I don't think are cute and I'm just dancing with them, I hold them in the same way and I just go. I don't have to worry that they're going to misinterpret it.

TANYA: Or that, "Oooh my breasts are touching her breasts and that's uncomfortable for me."

JO: Or you do some kind of lungy thing and your thigh is up on their thigh and whooa!

TANYA: Right, there is always this need to make sure they don't think that I'm pursuing them or something, that you don't want to be that person [...] I think it's all because there has been this sort of prejudice or stereotype throughout time that gay people are trying to convert straight people. Or that we make people uncomfortable. I think that's the thing. We all grew up feeling like we make people uncomfortable. It's a really deep wound in you to feel like your attraction makes people uncomfortable. And so for me, I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable.

Even though it shouldn't be the job of queers to protect straights from facing their own latent homosexual desires or whatever else makes them squirm around gay people, many assume this burden. Thus, comfort for many queer women means freedom from the stress caused by managing the comfort of straight people.

For many, it was not only the absence of judgment but the solidarity they enjoyed being in community with other queers that made them feel more comfortable. Tanya was reveling in the bliss she felt after her first night at the Queer Tango Festival in Buenos Aires where several hundred people, mostly gay or queer, were in attendance.

TANYA: There is no way to explain what it's like to be in a room full of queer people, for us. Just to not feel different all the time. We walk around every day feeling different. Every second you're very aware of being gay. It's the same way that women are much more aware of being a woman or black people are much more aware of being black, it's that same kind of thing. And to be in a place where you're totally normal...

Just as gay bars and community centers offer people who feel marginalized in heterosexual environments a place to feel ordinary, queer tango spaces normalize queerness, temporarily marginalizing heterosexuality and cisgender identity. As Jo explained, the sense of community in queer tango extends across genders.

JO: There is a camaraderie especially within a small group of [queer] dancers between the men and the women. You can have that same kind of feeling with someone that you're not interested in sexually. You can do that with a guy. There is almost this unity that happens. It's almost as if you're doing something counter-cultural, well it *is* counter-cultural, but revolutionary.

Although both these queer dancers frequent mainstream milongas, they emphasize that they experience a unique sense of freedom and comfort in a room in which they are in the majority.

The population of queer tango dancers in most cities in North America and Europe is not large enough to sustain more than one queer milonga a month. However, the success of tango commerce in Buenos Aires supports four queer and gay milongas a week,<sup>3</sup> inciting queer dancers

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3. Regular occurring milongas in Buenos Aires in 2014 frequented by a significant LGBTQ population included: Tango Queer (Tuesdays in San Telmo), La Marshall (Fridays at el Beso near Microcentro), Los Laureles (Saturdays in Barracas), and La Domilonga (Sundays in San Telmo).

from around the world to visit or move to Argentina's tango hub so that they can enjoy sustained relief from minority stress. For example, Sofia, an amateur European dancer, arranged to work remotely in Buenos Aires for an extended period after visiting for three months in 2013.

SOFIA: Last year was amazing. I lived three months exclusively in a queer tango environment, tango-wise. It was just extraordinary [...] For me it's just so much more relaxing. I think at times even though I have never had any bad experiences [in mainstream milongas] in M\_\_\_\_, and quite a few women like to dance with me and I have friends in the tango community, it does something with my body. It is a little bit more tense being in this heterosexual context. And especially...now it doesn't happen so often, but it happened a year ago that I went to a milonga and at the end of the night, I felt a little bit tense, a little bit sad. And I thought, "why is this? I had a wonderful night, I had good dances." And then I realized, "tonight I was the only woman leading." And it does something to me. And here [Buenos Aires's queer tango venues] I don't think about those things. It's much more relaxed and enjoyable.

Even though Sofia felt accepted and supported as a female leader at hetero milongas in her home city, the stress of being the sole female leader at a milonga manifested in bodily tension.

For queer dancers who cannot relocate to Argentina, even the knowledge that there is a global network of queer tango dancers helps protect them from the isolating effects of being in the minority. Maya, another European amateur dancer, felt limited as the only female leader in her tango community. She explained, "I realized there was an international queer tango community and I started being a part of that, and it really helped me a lot by feeling that I was a part of something bigger." Maya began traveling to queer tango festivals around the world in order to enjoy physical immersion in this community, but the ability to engage in a virtual tango community through queer tango Facebook groups and blogs also has been a key means of alleviating alienation.

## Sexual Potentiality

In her 2015 ethnography of tango, sociologist Kathy Davis writes, "The matter-of-factness and consensuality of queer tango made it seem strangely chaste." Granted, Davis does admit that, "perhaps I had missed the undercurrents that were there but unavailable to me as a heterosexual woman" (2015:129). Had she stayed in the water just a bit longer, I suspect she would have been swept away not just by queer tango's sexual undercurrents but by the force of its crashing waves. Tango is about sex. Not exclusively. Tango is about intimacy, sadness, community, and commerce, among other things. But sexual tension within the dance, even when neither partner intends to act on it, is commonly recognized as a defining feature of tango. I am not suggesting that tango dancing necessarily or even frequently leads to sexual activity, but that the potentiality of sexual excitement is a key aspect of tango culture. It is evident in tango fashion, for example, which favors high heels and form-fitting dresses that emphasize the shape of women's hips, buttocks, legs, and breasts, presenting women for sexualized visual consumption. Slang used in tango communities, where friends will regularly ask each other about their latest "tango crush" or declare they've just had a "tangasm" after a particularly satisfying dance, similarly reveals the conflation of romance and sexuality with tango dancing. Davis herself devotes an entire chapter of her ethnography to passion, which she argues emerges through a precarious balance of sexual desire and restraint.

I am not the only one to have taken objection to Davis's evaluation of queer tango as chaste. Queer tango activist Ray Batchelor writes in his otherwise glowing review of Davis's book "Davis's understanding of queer tango does not correspond to my own [...] My main issue is with the suggestion that queer tango, in eradicating differences, becomes less passionate and less erotic" (Batchelor 2015). Like Batchelor, I counter that queer tango is just as passionate and erotic as straight tango. Especially in Buenos Aires where tango and sex tourism are so closely

conflated, I witnessed and experienced sexual tension, flirtation, and hookups in both straight and queer tango contexts. Whether or not sexual desires are consummated, the sexual potentiality of tango is one of its most appealing features. Tango stretches to 12 minutes (the length of a *tanda*) the moments just before a first kiss, when every possibility for the almost-but-not-yet love affair still exists.

Queer tango spaces offer gay tango dancers, who often have difficulty accessing sexual potentiality in mainstream tango, a space in which they feel welcome to indulge in flirtation and courtship on the dance floor. An American lesbian dancer, Anna, explained,

ANNA: When straight people go to a milonga to dance, they are looking for the full expression of their being. They want to mate, either briefly on the floor, or in their heads as a possibility, or in the back alley, or at home later tonight with the old man. That's a huge element in social dancing—huge. And the heterosexual community takes it for granted. So much so that they don't have to talk about it. [...] We gather together to mate. And why not, it's fine. A queer tango festival is a place where I can walk in and feel that everyone here is okay with me mating if I want to. And it's okay for me to flirt with somebody if I want to, and it's okay for me to have sex in the alley if I want to.

Not only does Anna feel more welcome to nurture sexual energetic exchange with other women in queer tango contexts because of the nonjudgmental environment, but the high concentration of lesbians at queer tango events makes flirtation more likely. She continues,

ANNA: In this dance, you need to make yourself available, and that includes the possibility that you could be seduced. You have to give that to your partner. Straight women don't often go there with other women, they just don't. That's sort of the definition of who they are. Unless they think about it, or have some aspect of bisexuality that they accept. There is the occasional straight woman who can do that.

Because she rarely finds that straight women make their sexual energy available to other women while dancing, Anna prefers queer tango events where she is more likely to access tango's sexual dimension. Similarly, American lesbian dancer Tanya explains that at queer tango festivals, “you can dance with person after person that you want to dance with and they're just as excited to dance with you. And you can have that sensual sex energy that's really fun that you can't have with straight women.” The freedom to engage in sexual flirtation through the dance is one of many ways that queer-designated tango spaces serve LGBTQ tango dancers in ways that mainstream or hetero tango fails to do.

Queer tango was never, however, conceived as an exclusively gay space. The dream of queer tango, like queer theory, was that it could help to destabilize and ultimately dismantle heteronormative categories of gender and sexuality, making way for an expanded spectrum of gender and sexual expression untethered from biological sex. Thus queer tango spaces are usually open and welcoming to a full range of gender and sexual identities, including heterosexuals. Many straight women attend queer tango events, in part, I suggest, because same-sex tango offers them a way of exploring sensual and sexual intimacy with other women without pressure to identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer. When asked to recall their first experience dancing with another woman, most straight-identifying women described the shock of feeling another woman's breasts against theirs. American dancer Sonia, who leads and follows with equal skill and frequency, recalled with clarity her first breast-to-breast dance 10 years prior: “I remember the first time I danced with a woman in close embrace, and I'm pretty sure she wasn't wearing a bra, and there was like these couple moments of massive embarrassment as our boobs touched.” The vividness with which she remembers her first contact with another woman's chest points to how uncommon it is for straight women to engage in such extended physical intimacy with other women. Same-sex tango offers women a play zone of sensual, maybe sexual, physical contact with other women. Sonia, who identifies as “totally straight,” regularly teases, “I make sweet, sweet love to all the women I dance with,” when she is complimented by a female partner. Her

flirtatious use of language reveals the way same-sex dancing can offer women a liminal space to explore ways of relating to other women that fall in a space between straight and gay. American dancer Lisa, who identifies as straight and primarily dances in the role of follower, was more explicit in linking her experience dancing with other women to sexuality: “There is a certain amount of thrill about having someone’s breast up against you. And I think we all [straight women learning to lead] on some level questioned our sexual identity.”

Even if they did not describe the experience as sensual or sexual, many straight women are able to access a new kind of intimacy with women through the physicality of the dance. Sasha, a European woman who learned to dance in the United States but started following other women while living in Argentina explains:

SASHA: Before coming to Buenos Aires, I wasn’t really comfortable dancing with women. I always thought you should dance tango with a man. I’ve danced before with other women in San Francisco or at festivals, but I thought they were just trying to see how I moved or practice or teach me something. And it was not for enjoyment of dancing. And then when E\_\_\_\_ asked me, I was like “Does E\_\_\_\_ really want to dance with *me*? Why does she want to dance with me?” And I’m like “okay, why not?” And then I actually got that energy—like really good energy exchange with all kinds of different women I’ve danced with here. I really don’t even think it’s so weird and I actually like it. I think it’s not necessarily a sexual energy, but there is this very pleasant...like I want to be next to this person and I want to groove to the music.

Believing sexual tension to be a fundamental aspect of tango, Sasha had not even considered the possibility that she could enjoy dancing with women prior to making friends with several female leaders. Although Sasha doesn’t identify the energy she feels dancing with women as sexual, she enjoys expanded physical intimacy with women. As Lisa explained, “Doing both roles has allowed me to cultivate some of my closest female friends. Because we practiced together, and that’s how we became friends.” Luanne, an American dancer who began dancing with other women in Seattle, related cradling other women to her breast in tango to the experience of breastfeeding her daughter. Like Sasha, she stressed that the experience was not sexual, but she cherished the intimate and nurturing bond that could be created with other women through the physicality of tango. Whether they identify their experience as sexual, sensual, or an enjoyable energy exchange, for many straight women, the physicality of boob-on-boob dancing is a means of discovering new kinds of kinesthetic relationships with other women. Because same-sex dancing among women has to a large extent become acceptable and in some locales commonplace, women are able to explore the edges of same-sex desire inside a structure that is sexually charged but not marked as homosexual.

My own experience speaks to a more conscious engagement with sexual desire. I am a straight woman, mostly. My appearance is quite feminine. I wear dresses, lace, high heels, makeup, and rhinestones in my long hair. I have mostly dated men, but I am also attracted to women. Very feminine women. Women whose appearance and energy is even more feminine than mine. Tango offers me a means of holding a woman in my arms while she is expressing archetypal feminine qualities of receptivity, softness, and flexibility. Furthermore, my role as leader in this exchange is to entertain and protect her, invoking an archetypal masculine-feminine dynamic that I find strangely satisfying, especially if she is dainty, pretty, and performs her pleasure with coy eyes. I am not saying I feel sexual attraction to every woman I lead in tango, just as I don’t feel sexual attraction to every man I follow. Nor am I suggesting that my experience is necessarily common. I offer it here as another example of how same-sex tango offers a zone to test out and play with same-sex desire within the structure of a dance that both invokes passion and controls its expression.

Whereas most queer-identifying women find tango’s sexual potentiality easier to access at queer tango events, most straight women did not mention such preference and engaged in

same-sex dancing at mainstream milongas, attending queer milongas only occasionally, if at all. One could argue that these women are not practicing queer tango, and indeed many accomplished female leaders claimed little to no alliance with the queer tango movement. I would still argue that queer tango offers straight women the opportunity for exploring same-sex desire even if they never attend queer milongas. The growth of queer tango and the resulting presence of queer tango dancers engaging in same-sex dancing at mainstream milongas has helped to normalize female-female dancing at any milonga, so women don't need to go to a queer-identified tango space to enjoy dancing together. Thus, straight women can enjoy dancing with other women in a very sensual manner at a mainstream milonga without being marked as gay. In other words, the knowledge that there is a queer tango space specifically designed to cultivate same-sex desire allows some straight women to feel safe exploring same-sex desire in straight tango contexts where there is little expectation or risk of sensual energy exchange between women in the dance leading to a sexual encounter. Straight women who do attend queer tango events are able to pass as gay, bisexual, or queer without needing to label themselves as such, because to ask someone to declare their sexual orientation at a queer tango event is considered counter to the queer project itself.

It is a Tuesday evening two years after my virgin experience at Tango Queer when I am seated at the same table near the DJ's corner. A tanda of Pugliese—the most romantically dramatic of the classic composers—begins and, having mastered the art of initiating the cabeceo, I easily catch the eye of my partner of choice. Her flowing red dress captures the combination of boldness and softness she exudes. After our second song, we begin the standard introductory banter. “Where are you from?” “Sweden.” “Seattle.” “Do you know so-and-so?” By the next break between songs, she is encouraging me to attend the Berlin queer tango festival, which is where a mutual acquaintance met her wife, prompting a cross-Atlantic move from Sweden to San Francisco. “Who knows,” my dance partner chides without any hint of irony, “you might come home with a Swedish wife.” Then she slides her arm around my bare back and launches into a cross-system walk. As the driving force of Pugliese's bandoneóns carry us, her words linger like the refrain of a newly discovered song. A wife. I had never before considered the possibility. I am thrilled both at her apparent assumption that I am gay and by the fantasy of coming home to a Swedish wife. In one sentence, she has doubled my future prospects in love. My internal sense of my own sexual identity momentarily shifts in response to the way I am perceived and treated by those around me, queer tango space extending into my own psyche.

While my reevaluation of my own sexual identity was short-lived, other participants credited the queer tango environment as a key factor in enabling an enduring transformation of their own gender or sexual identity. For example, American dancer Ali, who came to Buenos Aires with her boyfriend, explains how being surrounded by gay women in the sexually charged queer tango environment gave her the confidence and the opportunity to more openly embrace her own same-sex desire:



*Figure 4. Author Juliet McMains leading Doris Bartha at the Seattle Tango Marathon in 2016. (Photo by Shelley Rose)*



ALI: Before it was always a secret thing. I cheated on guys with girls. I just couldn't own it. I couldn't even say I was bi for a long time. I was just like, 'I don't know why I did that. It was just for fun.' Eventually, when I was in Buenos Aires, I was surrounded by that. It was almost like I knew, this is where I'm going to COME OUT.

Through queer tango, she met several women with whom she had sexual encounters, seduction on the dance floor providing a convenient entre to its horizontal expression. Within a year of her extended stay in Argentina, she had stopped dating men and began to identify as a lesbian. Similarly, German dancer Alex Gastel, who identifies as genderqueer (nonbinary gender) and uses the pronouns they/them, credits moving to Argentina and immersing themselves in the queer tango subculture as that which enabled the shift from she to they. Alex explains,

I started to identify as neither woman nor man. I experimented with androgynous clothes, with a new name and haircut. And I loved it. Now, what has queer tango to do with that? Dancing the leading role was my first big break with gender norms on a more bodily level [...] I discovered that I like to mix traditionally "male" and "female" movements, in both roles. That gave me the curiosity and the courage to start playing with gender norms on the physical level outside of dancing, too. (Gastel 2015:34)

For Alex, the opportunity to embody traditionally masculine *and* feminine movements and to fluidly switch between performance of such markers of gender identity on the dance floor was a catalyst for assuming more fluid ways of expressing gender identity off the dance floor. For both Alex and Ali, queer tango provided a safe space in which to experiment with new gender and sexual identities, giving each the confidence to assume new queer identities in their daily lives.

## Segregation or Integration?

For the majority of queer or gay-identified women I interviewed, the labeling of a space specifically for queer tango was essential for their entry into the dance. European dancer Emma explained: "When I first got introduced to the idea of tango, I resisted because I couldn't see myself as this person following a man. So at first I was not interested at all, but then I was introduced to the concept of queer tango and the idea of me leading another woman—that perspective totally changed my mind." Even though she began dancing precisely because she was able to dance with other queer women, she soon felt restricted by her partner choices in the queer community.

EMMA: Back home, I couldn't anymore find any queer women who were at the level I am now. Not that I'm that good at all, but I'm not a beginner anymore, so I need to dance with someone who's not a beginner either. There is only one other woman who dances queer tango who is good, but she wants to lead too. So I cannot dance with her. So I realized that I simply had to start looking for women who were interested in dancing with me no matter if they were queer or straight. In the beginning it was very important to me that they were queer, but now I realized that's not important. I moved from the category of having a queer experience to having a tango experience. Simply focusing on the dance no matter who I'm dancing with.

Even though identifying with a queer tango movement was initially the most important factor in her tango practice, interest in the dance itself and connecting with people who had a similar passion for tango soon took precedence over her need for queer community.

Likewise, Jamie, a dancer from San Francisco responded to my question of whether she would have started tango without access to queer tango classes: "Definitely not. It never would have occurred to me." However within her first year, she ventured to her first straight milonga. "I remember walking into Cell Space and being like, oh my god, *this* is what tango looks like? Because I had been dancing eight months with essentially beginners, people who had been dancing for less than three years." She became a regular patron of the milonga and classes

offered beforehand, despite being one of the only female leaders in the space. Due to the youth of the queer tango movement and its frequent segregation from mainstream tango where dancers with decades of bodily knowledge are concentrated, the skill level in queer tango tends to be significantly lower than in other tango contexts. In fact, high-level straight female dancers who enjoyed leading other women commonly cited the low skill level as the primary reason why they didn't attend queer tango events.

Queer tango proponents are split as to whether or not the ultimate goal of the queer tango movement is integration with mainstream tango. Many insist that there is only one tango and that the definitive success of the queer tango movement would be for it to become obsolete due to general and widespread practice of same-sex and open-role tango. In cities such as Stockholm or Seattle, with government policies and cultural practices supporting LGBTQ rights, there is less pressure to sustain a queer-specific tango scene because queer dancers are more easily folded into the general tango community than somewhere like St. Petersburg, Russia, where the absence of legal protection against sexual discrimination leads to blatant harassment and violence for LGBTQ populations in tango (and elsewhere). One of the drawbacks of Buenos Aires's thriving queer tango scene is that queer tango remains segregated from straight tango, meaning that neither community benefits from interaction with the other. Queer tango dancers aren't able to profit from the bodily knowledge of dancers who only attend mainstream tango venues, who in turn aren't being influenced by the more open and egalitarian proposals of queer tango. High-level queer tango dancers are not satisfied to stay in queer-only environments, and frequently integrate themselves into broader tango communities. As queer dancer Jamie explained, "Once you get to a certain level of tango crazy, everyone who wants to be tango high should be in the same room together. I just don't see the reason for it to be separated at that level." However, she adds, "I still think it's important to have queer tango because of how I entered it and how many people enter it and how many people will enter it. Which is, they will start in queer tango because that's a safe place to dance. And if they become tango enthusiasts, they will probably expand out into the larger community."

Queer tango, like any social dance practice, is both a reflection of and an intervention into the society in which it is practiced. As Argentine Yuyú Herrera stated in a personal interview, "El tango no es machista. La sociedad es machista. Y el tango es un actividad que está dentro de la sociedad. Y está determinado por estas relaciones" (Tango is not sexist. Society is sexist. And tango is an activity within society. And it is determined by these relations). Each of the cities in which queer tango spaces are located—including Buenos Aires, Seattle, San Francisco, Berlin, Paris, St. Petersburg—has a specific cultural and political history around issues of gender and sexuality. Thus, the meaning and impact of queer tango space is distinct in each locale, determined by the needs and experiences of its community members. Despite the malleability and variability of queer tango, queer tango spaces share key ideals. Queer tango space enables both a theoretical vision of a utopic future where fluid nonbinary gender roles and forms of sexual expression are normalized as well as a series of practical interventions into the current social order through the practice of tango.

### ***Intercambio* as Gender Utopia**

Not only does queer tango offer any individual the possibility of taking either role, it actually attempts to deconstruct the lead/follow binary itself. For many queer tango advocates, the epitome of queer tango is the practice of *intercambio*, exchanging roles within a single song. According to queer tango activist Birthe Havmoeller, "in Queer Tango intercambio (changing of roles) holds the status as the main grid or model for the improvisation of a 'Queer Tango.' The changing of roles, i.e., the shared leadership (and followership) and the mutual responsibility for the musical improvisations, is the core principle of this dance style" (2015a:56). Likewise, Kathy Davis concludes, "The switching of roles is the *raison d'être* of queer tango" (2015:154). In classes taught by Mariana Docampo before the weekly Tango Queer



Figure 5. *The close proximity often produces moments of visible sexual tension at Tango Queer, Buenos Aires, 2012. (Photo by Léa Hamoignon)*

milonga, all patrons are encouraged to alternate roles. With a switch of the embrace, either partner can signal a relinquishing or taking of the lead at any moment in the dance, enabling a fluid flow of control within the partnership. Some also categorize moments when followers initiate movement without changing the embrace (“active following”) as *intercambio*. Regardless of whether or not the embrace is changed, the practice of *intercambio* is significant for queer tango dancers because the blurring of gender roles on the dance floor is a model for dissolution of gender itself. If the gender binary in tango can be disrupted through the free-

style exchange of roles and responsibilities, queer tango becomes a test case for how to create a nonbinary gendered society. In other words, if gender comes into being through its own performance as Judith Butler has argued (1990), then queer tango performances that interchange roles so frequently as to make their distinction obsolete also perform the dissolution of gender itself (Fitch 2015:94–98; Davis 2015:150–54; Cecconi 2009).

The ideal of *intercambio* is a seductive theory, but in practice, it is only realized in a small minority of queer tango encounters. Even Docampo admits that there are very few partners with whom she is able to nonverbally exchange roles during a single song. “No es fácil” (it is not easy), she explained to me when I asked her why it is so uncommon. To effectively engage in *intercambio* requires that both partners have well-developed skills in both leading and following. In addition, both must have keenly refined kinesthetic sensitivity as well as the ability to rapidly change their mindset, or, in the language of some teachers, “change the chip.” Leading requires planning ahead, anticipating where other couples will travel to avoid them and predicting how the music will progress in order to choose steps to complement it. In contrast, following is only successful when the follower reacts to each moment as it unfolds, relinquishing attachment to how any movement will resolve. It is a rare combination of dancers who can seamlessly flow between leading and following multiple times in a single song, something Argentine ethnographer Mercedes Liska has likewise noted happens infrequently in queer tango (2017:145–46). Personally, some of my favorite moments dancing tango have been in such cases where the shape of the embrace that signals who is leading has dissolved and the new shape has not yet been established, when we are not yet sure who is controlling the movement and we are hovering in a space of total surrender to our mutual cooperation. However, I experience these moments less than one percent of my time dancing at queer tango venues. Most queer tango dancers find it easier to “change the chip” in between songs, and the most common practice at Tango Queer is to alternate roles every other song. Thus, *intercambio* remains more of a theoretical ideal rather than a widespread practice in queer tango. Furthermore, many dancers voice a preference for staying in one role throughout the duration of a song. As American dancer Cindy, who leads and follows with equal frequency explained, “I have a preference for staying in one role through the whole song, because I think it takes a song to develop the comfort and the conversation and the dialogue. And with the song, you can build towards a climax. It’s like telling a story within three minutes or two and a half minutes.” Cindy finds

it more emotionally rewarding to stay in one role for the duration of a song because switching interrupts the story the leader is constructing.

Despite the frequency with which *intercambio* is celebrated in queer tango literature, most queer dancers don't identify *intercambio* as crucial for queer tango's political efficacy in disrupting gender binaries. For most, this is accomplished through the diversity of gender expressions displayed at queer tango events, where gender stereotypes are being challenged at every giro as, for example, a petite woman in heels leads a stocky man in a suit, who then leads a bearded man wearing heels for the next tanda. I was reminded of the work such diversity in gender expression can do when Seattle's 2013 Queer Tango Festival held their Saturday evening dance in conjunction with the city's longstanding traditional milonga. Many of the regular patrons were visibly unsettled by not being able to predict what role someone would dance by their dress or perceived gender. Halfway into the evening, one of my straight male friends, who appeared somewhat flustered by the new social ambiance, turned to me and said, "it's so exciting not knowing who is going to dance with whom at any given moment." His use of the word "exciting" also implied, "confusing" and "disturbing," and became the entry-point for a frank discussion around our own anxieties when we couldn't categorize people according to our own gender or sexuality matrices. Although a small step in the larger project to expand social conceptions of gender, this event helped expose and relax gender stereotyping some patrons didn't even realize they had.

Such important work notwithstanding, I still can't help wondering if queer tango merely enables people to alternate between masculine and feminine roles rather than actually dissolve the binary itself. Reflecting on what I personally enjoy about attending queer tango, I admit I most relish the opportunity to take on the quintessential male role. In identifying a woman I desire, plotting out my means of seducing her into accepting a *cabeceo*, and constructing a dance that makes her feel beautiful, sexy, protected, and cherished, I can taste the power available to men at mainstream milongas. But does expanding the range of who has access to male power work towards dismantling male privilege? Is queer tango a feminist project? Does giving anyone the opportunity to perform either archetypal masculine or feminine behaviors do more to reinforce a gender dichotomy than it does to promote a spectrum of gender expression and identity? Is queer tango really queer?

These questions cannot be answered in the absolute, as each expression of queer tango in each queer tango space will have an effect specific to the history and culture of the community in which it is situated. Many queer tango participants are aware that for queer tango to be an effective political intervention, their approach needs to be malleable in response to their environment. For example, European dancer Emma, who primarily leads, explains how she came to realize that following could also be a queer act.

EMMA: [Leading] is for me a political action. For a long time I really liked the idea that I also could say that I cannot follow. I know I am a woman or I look like a woman, but I cannot follow. I can lead. Trying to just push the norms of people's expectations of how we as men and women and gendered people in general are supposed to do a thing. So from that queer perspective, or that political perspective, I liked the idea, besides the satisfaction I have with leading on a more personal level. But then I went to this queer tango festival, and then I realized I was in a space where of course society's rules were not the same. Because it was a queer space. So I didn't need to be political in the same way there. And suddenly I realized that it was actually a lack of something, not being able to follow. Being there in the milonga and someone wants to dance with you and then suddenly I realized, wait, I can only lead. And suddenly it was not just cool. Suddenly it was not enough. And then I started following a little bit.

For Emma, challenging people's expectations about what role she could or should dance based on her perceived gender was key in her strategy as a politically engaged queer dancer. However,

moving from predominantly straight to predominantly gay contexts meant that people's assumptions about her shifted, instigating a change in her own strategy to thwart them. Initially, she enjoyed disrupting people's expectations by telling them that she could only dance the leader's role. Now, even though she prefers dancing the leader's role, she also enjoys following. While the theory of queer tango insists that no assumptions are made about what role someone will dance based on their appearance, Emma is still able to unsettle expectations by following since her tall stature, short hair, and pants signal to many a preference for the (assumed male) role of leading.

During my fieldwork in Buenos Aires, I met five other ethnographers from four different countries (Brazil, Argentina, Italy, Germany) researching queer tango. There were evenings at Tango Queer when the ethnographer-to-participant ratio was one to five. I also met a French film crew creating a television segment about an American lesbian couple attending Tango Queer as part of their wedding week activities in Buenos Aires. Queer tango is a popular subject for journalists from a variety of news outlets (Harss 2015; Kitson 2014; Linthicum 2013). As I struggled to make sense of the international media and scholarly attention queer tango was receiving, which seemed disproportionate to the number of practitioners it attracted (between 40 and 100 attendees each week in a city with thousands of tango dancers), I began to wonder if queer tango is important as much for what it reveals about global desires and anxieties around gender as for what sense queer tango dancers themselves make out of its practice. Is the fascination with queer tango a reflection of a collective desire to theorize our way out of a gender binary world? Even if queer tango's rhetoric of intercambio as model for the dissolution of gender binaries is not realized on the dance floor, perhaps fostering belief in that utopic future is the central work of queer tango space. Taking inspiration from performance studies scholar José Muñoz's proposal that "we are not yet queer" and that "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present [...] to think and feel a *then and there*" (2009:1) perhaps queer tango's unrealized gender utopia is the then and there that gives us hope in the here and now. Maybe it is not necessary to believe that a gender-free society is a realistic or even possible goal in order for the ideal of such a gender-free utopia to be useful.

After spending several months in queer tango spaces, physical as well as cyber and psychic, I can now guess what might have motivated the mischievous smiles of friends who insisted that queer milongas are different from common milongas. Even taking into consideration their limitations due to the smaller population of queer tango dancers and their lower overall skill level, queer tango spaces meet certain needs of many patrons in ways that straight milongas fail to do. Queer tango space offers queer dancers relief from minority stress. Queer tango spaces produce opportunities for gay and straight dancers to enjoy same-sex sexual potentiality. And queer tango space encourages experiments in furthering new tango techniques that are more dialogic and less dictatorial, giving women in particular more voice in the partnership. And perhaps most crucial of all, queer tango spaces are vital for testing out, wrestling with, and theorizing gender utopias.

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